

THE ENDURING CENTRALITY OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

WARREN BOETTCHER

"As an expression of Christ's universal church, the local church is the focal point of God's plan to mature his people and save sinners."

(The Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith, "The Church of Christ")

1985 proved to be a pivotal year in my life as a Christian. It was my first visit to Covenant Fellowship Church—a Sovereign Grace Church near Philadelphia, PA—and my first foray into a "charismatic" church (We now prefer the "continuationist" designation).

Coming from a Presbyterian background, this came as quite a culture shock: singing for 40 minutes with people raising their hands, sharing "prophetic words" during the singing, hour-long messages, and services that were two hours or more. However, sound doctrine, Gospel-centered preaching, and practical application kept me intrigued. This was worth further investigation.

It was there that I also learned of the centrality of the local church to the purposes of God. I had never seen church commitment like I saw in those early days. Some 36 years later, our messages have become a bit more con-

cise, our services not quite so long, and God's Word is featured even more prominently in all we do. However, the intrigue that captured me in 1985 has turned into biblically-informed convictions, personally precious and deeply held.

An Unchanging Commitment to the Church

The early days of my journey saw a family of churches identified as People of Destiny International. The name seemed like a good idea in the early 1980s, even though we started with only a few churches, and they were all located in the U.S. (Vision often surpasses reality!)

We later changed our name to Sovereign Grace Ministries to stress God's initiating, gracious activity over anything we do. Then, with establishing a new polity, we became "Sovereign Grace Churches." This final change is most appropriate since, throughout our history, our commitment to the church and church planting has never wavered. While popular methods and "hot" new trends come and go, this enduring vision continues with the same passion because of its firm grounding in Scripture.

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As I reflect on our history, I marvel at the clarity God gave our young leaders at the beginning on truths we still hold precious. For example, we've always believed that Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her (Eph. 5:25) and that the church is a cosmic display of the wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). God wants Christians to be like living stones, built up as a spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5), sharing his devotion to the church.

This vision led me to a career change from teaching in a Christian school (a job I loved) to go on staff at Covenant Fellowship. This led to an eventual church plant in South Jersey in 1993. Since that time, we've had the privilege of planting two more local churches that are affecting their areas with the gospel—we have seen people come to know the salvation that is in Christ and continue to be transformed by the grace of God in Christian community. In addition, we have seen over the decades the enduring centrality of the local church to the purposes of God.

One of the striking features of Sovereign Grace Churches' commitment to the priority of the local church is how much the leadership of SGC and all of "SG central" (the men and women who work for SG) have served the local church rather than have the local churches serve the central leadership. It was, and always has been, my experience that we received far more than we gave. This was generously expressed in financial investment, conferences designed to strengthen our churches, relational connections, pastoral counsel, and personal care. The health and biblical success of the local church marked and still marks the leadership culture of our family of churches.

Challenges to the Priority of the Local Church

However, keeping this priority and centrality is not without its challenges. It seems to me that even now, there are additional challenges to this vision. I see them in four primary areas.

First, *the challenge of the new.* In my early days, everyone seemed on the same page regarding the priority of the church—the vision was compelling, and the commitment was infectious. However, this centrality of the church was a new concept to me and had all the excitement of something new.

While I grew up never missing church, even when on vacation (so I could get another perfect attendance pin to wear), I didn't understand the centrality of the church to the mission of God to mature his people and reach others with the gospel. I grew up in more of a parachurch culture. The church was something believers should go to, but parachurch ministries made a difference in the world. My own experience with Christian discipleship was more driven by the Christian school I attended than my local church. Coming to Covenant Fellowship opened my eyes to see something I hadn't seen before: God's plan for the church.

However, to a culture obsessed with novelty and innovation, the priority of the local church seems ancient, if not altogether irrelevant. And for those who have labored in Sovereign Grace for decades, the idea of prioritizing the church doesn't have all the excitement of something new. It seems to me that all of us who love the local church and see its priority are called to help people not chase the new but develop deep convictions for what God has ordained (the local church) and what is biblical. Biblical conviction about the glory of the local church in God's plans will be far more fruitful than reminiscing about the "good old days."

Second, the challenge of distraction. Cultural issues, political issues, and trends can all seem so big, important, and time-consuming. They can exhaust our mental focus, time, and emotional energy. We can fall into thinking that the nation's future is so much bigger and more urgent than the message of the gospel.

Even noble endeavors can become ignoble if they call us away from biblical priorities. Cultural issues are not the only distraction. Kids' schedules, for example, can easily drive family priorities more than biblical priorities. There are more opportunities for kids' activities than ever before, and it takes discernment and courage for parents to navigate. Gifting and opportunity should not mean an automatic "yes" if they compete with higher spiritual priorities. Parents need to not only believe in the priority of the local church—they need to show the beauty of that priority in their lives.

Third, the challenge of crisis. The coronavirus pandemic presented a massive challenge to the local church. Many churches were unable to meet in person for months. Livestream became the new normal. Even regathering brought polarizing and sometimes divisive issues—wear masks or don't wear masks, vaccinate or don't vaccinate, continue to Livestream or stop making the virtual option available.

While we may never come to a consensus on all those issues, one thing we know—the church is called to meet personally and regularly. There is simply no other biblical pattern. While this particular crisis has been unique in our lifetime, crisis is not unique in church history, and this certainly won't be the last crisis we face. May the Spirit of God help us to learn through this one.

Finally, the challenge of disappointment. In our early days of partnering together, everything seemed great. People were getting saved, the church was growing, everyone was committed, and we had broad favor from others. However, we were a young movement. With growth and time, harsh realities replace some of the romance of zealous youthfulness. Over time, church life brings new realities and new challenges, revealing weakness, limitations, and mistakes, even in our leaders.

These inherent issues can lead to disappointment, and disappointment can lead to criticalness, distance, and even disillusionment. Pastorally, this requires honest humility and sincere contrition. Congregationally, this requires biblical maturity that neither overvalues nor undervalues pastors. While

respecting pastors, mature congregations also see their pastors as fellow saints—called to serve God's people, yes, but also sheep who are flawed and needy like the rest of us.

Recognition of this and the desperate need for grace we all have will protect and strengthen our commitment to the church, even when inevitable disappointment occurs. We'll have big-hearted love for one another and practice biblically-informed loyalty in our churches. This will bring glory to the Savior, not self-congratulation to us for the strength and health of our churches. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness!" (Ps. 115:1)

"I Will Build My Church"

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While these challenges are not small, our confidence that the church will endure comes from God's Word and his Spirit. "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." These words spoken by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 were true then and remain true today.

When we consider church history, we see the church endure persecution, pandemics, famine, war, internal struggles, abuse of power, cultural attack, division, heresy, apostasy, and more. When we consider our history, we don't see all the same challenges, but we do experience the same faithfulness of God and his power.

As our *Statement of Faith* says, "Even true churches are imperfect: they often contain a mixture of unbelievers hidden among the true flock and are vulnerable to theological error and moral failure. Yet Christ is unwavering in his commitment to build his church and will surely bring it to maturity."

The Lord is with us! He is unwavering in his commitment! The church will endure because Christ created it and ordained it to achieve his purposes. The unstoppable gospel will continue to go out from the church Christ

purchased with His blood and for his glory.

I am so grateful for these great and precious promises. And I remain grateful for the joy of experiencing them with the brothers and sisters in our dear family of churches.

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