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UNITED IN GOVERNANCE

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOVEREIGN GRACE POLITY

Rob Flood

Elder, Covenant Fellowship Church (Glen Mills, PA)

Believers throughout Sovereign Grace—throughout the world—rally around the central mission of the church: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). This is the Great Commission of the church local, denominational, and universal. It unites believers across cultures, languages, and ages. It is the central “why” behind everything that we do, and it must never be displaced.

In light of the glorious calling and central focus of the Great Commission, nothing ought to supplant it. In the life of church partnership, we must be diligent not to allow topics such as polity to take center stage. “United in governance” is a lousy denominational mission statement. We need to be about mission, not structure. We need to be about Jesus, not governance. May God protect us locally and denominationally should our *Book of Church Order* ever become the main thing around which we unite.

Yet, this does not mean that polity does not matter. As we remain on mission, always on mission, we do so in the context of relationships. Some of those relationships are with other members of our local church. Some are with churches throughout Sovereign Grace. (This is what is in view here.) Relationships matter, *especially* while on mission.

Relationships get strained. We don’t often get to choose when they will be strained nor do we get to choose how this occurs. And, while I hope there is deep affection in the relationships you have with other Christians and with other churches, we cannot count on the strength of our affections to get us through relational strain.

Consider wedding vows. At the altar, we promise that we will always stay together, always be *for* one another, in good times and bad, etc. However, at least in western culture, the euphoria of that moment, the sheer depth of love and affection, often blinds us to the possibility that hard times will come. We recognize it in the abstract, but our affections assure us: “It could never happen to a couple like us. We love each other too much.” So why do we make promises about our commitment to one another for those “bad times?” We promise these things because bad times do come, regardless of love or affection, and we need those promises to teach and remind us how to behave in those bad times.

Our vows do more for us than protect us when times are hard. Vows are a reminder, a motivator, a governor for us as a couple. Why do we promise to lead or to follow? Why do we commit to build a home focused on the glory of Christ? We make these promises because our marriages need purposeful mission as much as they need the protection of vows. In marriage, we are partnering together to build a home upon the Rock and to raise children who seek after and follow Christ. We purpose to reach the lost, to entertain the sojourner, and to foster an atmosphere of grace.

The vows we make define who and what we are. They facilitate our mission rather than impede it. They tether us to the mission rather than distract us from it. They protect us from wandering rather than unhelpfully constrain us. Vows don’t trump affection; they bolster it. In many respects marriage vows, properly constructed and made in faith, form the polity of marriage. And this, oddly, takes us to Paul’s letter to Titus.

The Absence of Polity

Titus was a young pastor in Crete, and Crete was messy (see Titus 1). “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5).

Why did he leave Titus in Crete? To put into order what remained ... to step into the mess that was there and set it straight ... to address the messy relationships that were brewing and bring order. And how was Titus to do this? By appointing elders. After detailing the kind of men to look for (Titus 1:5-9),

Paul gets to the root of the problem. “For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced.” (v.10-11)

The situation in this Cretan church is dicey and needs to be brought to order. Among the items needing to be addressed is the teaching of those who are insubordinate and divisive. These include but are not limited to those from “the circumcision party.” These are the men who essentially distorted Paul’s gospel of grace with the requirements of legalism.

The issue troubling the church was not the opposition of the culture, where we so often (perhaps too often) look. The real problem Paul wants to address is the legalists within the church opposing his teaching of grace. They are asserting their own direction, their own teaching, and their own gospel. And he says flatly, “They must be silenced” (v.11).

Crete is not the only church or only city to have known such chaos. It has occurred in the church from the beginning and it continues in the congregations of churches even today...and SG is not exempt. The Enemy is delighted to introduce a little leaven of division into the congregations of Bible preaching churches and turn them against one another.

The Answer of Polity

Paul provides an answer for congregational chaos, for family in-fighting, and for God-honoring order. He provides clear direction for what to do in times like this. What they needed was clear leadership, clear authority, and clear definition for how to live. Paul exhorts Timothy to provide for the structure and the function of the church. Paul’s answer was polity.

Local church polity is not a necessary evil that developed over the evolution of the church. Its necessity has been recognized since the beginning of the church. Early in the Book of Acts, the congregation gathered underneath apostolic polity. There was organization, there was authority, and when a problem arose (Acts 6) it was clear whose job it was to address it—the problem came to the Apostles.

As the gospel pushed the church beyond Jerusalem, apostolic polity gave way to local polity. The Apostles used their God-given authority to establish what we now know as local eldership. The answer of polity was the same though the form of polity changed due to the mere number of leaders needed and the geographical area that leadership needed to cover.

Why does solid, biblical polity work? It works because it provides clarity, definition, and authority structures. And each only works when the authority structures are under the guidance and authority of Christ and the Scriptures.

To be clear, eldership is not the mission of the church, but the mission is carried out through the leadership elders provide. It is protected by the oversight and teaching that comes through the eldership. When Paul tells Titus to rebuke the troublemakers sharply, it is a direction for those *in* authority to rebuke those who are *opposed* to authority. It is a direction that will protect the mission of the church in Crete.

When Paul gets to Chapter 2, his command is to “teach what accords with sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1). Why? Is that just a random non-sequitur? No, it is a direct command that flows from Chapter 1. These people in the church need to be rebuked “that they may be sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13). But that is going to take more than rebuking. It is going to take teaching that equips them in sound doctrine. It will take discipleship, which is precisely what follows in Titus 2.

The Bridge to the Book of Church Order

We’ve established that polity ought not be the mission of the church or of a denomination. We’ve also established that no church or denomination can long exist without it. With the Scriptures forever in the primary governing position, we come now to our *Book of Church Order* (BCO).

Our BCO was designed to cover all the various facets of our partnership. The kind of robust local polity we’ve been discussing is defined, outlined, and described in sections two through five. Because our churches are joined together for mission, we’ve also developed extra-local polity that is equally robust in its definition and description. Our extra-local polity is defined, outlined, and

described in sections six through nineteen. Both local and extra-local polity are needed since healthy partnership thrives with healthy local churches, and local churches thrive with healthy extra-local partnership.

Local and extra-local polity are similar in function and structure. However, they are not identical, and the differences are important to understand, identify, and acknowledge. Let's look at just a few of those differences.

Local / Extra-Local Differences

These differences between local and extra-local polity are key to properly understanding and applying our polity in Sovereign Grace Churches.

Clarity of Biblical Definition

First of all, local polity is explicitly directed by the Scriptures. The pastoral letters both instruct us toward it and presume upon it. Our biblical grounds for our local polity are solid, even authoritative.

Extra-local partnership is not as neatly defined. At times, it almost has the appearance of being pragmatic and ad hoc. It is present in the New Testament, without a doubt. But the nuts and bolts of extra-local polity are not spelled out for us. There is a strong presence of apostolic discernment that belies formal structures. So, when we turn our attention to the use and deployment of extra-local polity, we must realize our biblical grounds are not as clear or sound as they are in local polity. This does not mean we ought not define it. Far from it, we actually must define it. But it does mean that the strength with which we biblically defend our extra-local convictions needs to be less than the strength with which we biblically defend our local polity.

Authority of the Polity

In God's Word, there is authority that is placed in the office of elder. There is ample instruction and exhortation given to elders not to abuse that authority, lording it over a congregation (1 Pet. 5). The authority held by elders is delegated authority granted by the Lord of the Universe and the God who created all things. This delegated authority is very real and ought not be trifled with.

The authority found in extra-local polity is different. It is granted by the church in partnership, not assigned by God himself. It carries the weight of partnership, but not the weight of the Scriptures as though it came from the Almighty God. In extra-local polity, biblical principles shape our practice, even if they do not clearly or specifically define it.

For example, the roles of Regional Leaders and Regional or National Committees are quite different from the roles of Elders and Deacons. When it comes to biblical authority or clarity, there is no real comparison. The local roles are more biblically explicit than the extra-local roles.

However, the difference in biblical clarity does not mean the extra-local roles lack utility. We still need clear definition of these roles and structures for partnership between churches to thrive. We must recognize the importance of having those roles and structures. Partnership cannot helpfully exist if we don't all agree on what a region is and what a region does. To that end, let's look at some similarities between Local and Extra-Local Polity.

Local / Extra-Local Similarities

While we cannot and should not equate local and extra-local polity, many useful principles are transferable between them. Even though some of these principles are not explicitly stated in Scripture, they nonetheless apply biblical wisdom and have been fruitful for millennia. Those similarities, while they don't come with biblical authority, apply biblical wisdom and have been doing so for millennia.

Polity Organizes What is Not in Order

Extra-local polity helps define what partnership is and isn't. It takes something ill-defined and nebulous and brings clarity so that everyone involved knows exactly what they're involved in. If a Pastoral Team was to drift into heresy, who has the right and responsibility to address that? And who governs whether they can remain in the denomination or not? If a solo pastor is brought up on charges, who hears and weighs those charges and who has any authority to make a decision on what should happen next? If the Executive Director or Leadership Team of SGC provides direction, how are we to relate to it? Is the opinion or counsel of a Regional Leader direction or suggestion?

Does partnership require full compliance or just careful consideration?

These and other questions hang over partner churches in the absence of clear extra-local polity. Without documented and mutually agreed-upon language, there is too much room for misunderstanding and confusion. It only works as long as it works. But when it stops working, partner churches are left with the aftermath of their assumptions and all suffer. Yet, in the presence of clear and documented extra-local polity, these questions are answered. What has been accomplished? We've "put what remains in order." Clear extra-local polity brings clarity, which simultaneously protects partnership.

Polity Facilitates our Mutual Mission

Just as elderships equip the saints for the work of ministry, position them in their gifting, and leverage kingdom resources for maximum kingdom impact, regional and national roles do this for our partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. Their extra-local polity facilitates the very purposes for which we partner together.

Through Regional Leaders, we facilitate the care that is needed for each church, each eldership. Under the leadership of that role, we see regional committees envisioning the planting of churches and the raising up of new men for deployment in the church. Through our Leadership Team, we are all able to play a role in serving the churches throughout our denomination, to reach around the globe as we partner with churches in other countries, and to reach the lost through mission works.

Through our Council of Elders, we jointly lead our denomination. And the committees that function under its authority do the work the Council is called to do on the whole. Our Executive Committee serves and represents the whole Council of Elders, cooperating with our Leadership Team while ensuring that team focuses on the task set out for it by the Council itself. The clarity of function helps us all stay on mission.

Each partner church in Sovereign Grace Churches benefits from participation in this partnership. We are able to do far more together than any one of our churches could do on its own.

Doctrine and Polity

We left Titus in chapter 2 as discipleship is spelled out to all in the church. By the time you're halfway into Titus 2, it feels like Paul has moved past polity. It seems he's gone from polity to the gospel. But the condition of the church and the problem that must be solved hasn't left his gaze. He's still fixed on righting what has been wrong.

Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you. Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people (Titus 2:15-3:2).

He returns to the authority granted to the elders over this church. He returns to instruction, exhortation, and rebukes. He returns to leadership. He returns to polity. Leadership will not be the force that changes them. Such power is reserved for the Spirit of God through the work the gospel does in their lives. But the leadership, the authority, the polity protects the church while the gospel changes lives and directs the hearts of each member back to the same, life-changing gospel. It does more than hold its place until the gospel changes hearts. Polity is an active means of grace that facilitates the very gospel ministry that is needed, in Crete and in our churches today.

The Heart and Function of Our Polity

2 Samuel captures an historical moment when Israel is being attacked from both sides: one by the Ammonites and one by the Syrians. The battle is great and their resources are few. So Joab devises a plan. He divides the army into two halves, he in charge of one half and his brother Abishai in charge of the other. He then gives instruction: "If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me, but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will come and help you (2 Sam.10:11).

Now, admittedly, the context of this passage is warfare and we are talking about gospel partnership. There are certainly differences, but there is more

than a little overlap when it comes to application. And that overlap is where we will close.

Look at the hope that Joab derives from knowing someone has his back. And look at his unwavering commitment to protect Abishai's back when the need arises. In this one verse, we see just how much safer and stronger we are when we work together in partnership. This value is at the heart of our *Book of Church Order*.

No local church is omniscient or self-sufficient to carry out the mission which Christ has entrusted to the entire church (Matt. 28:19-20). Each local body stands in need of other local bodies in a relationship of interdependence (BCO-1.6).

Each local church has endured hardship for the sake of the gospel. And for those who partner with Sovereign Grace Churches, each church is lifting a portion of the weight of our mission in our denomination. But this articulation of partnership, of interdependence, is of particular importance when you look at 2 Samuel 10:12.

“Be of good courage, and let us be courageous for our people, and for the cities of our God, and may the Lord do what seems good to him” (2 Samuel 10:12).

May we, with similar courage, strive for our people and for the churches in Sovereign Grace. May we, with hearts fixed on the hope that Christ has called us to the task, strive for the health of each of our partner churches. And may we carry one another on our hearts, eager to serve one another should the battle become too great in any one area.

The churches of Sovereign Grace are all about Jesus: who he is and what he's done. May that be true in all future generations of our family of churches. It is precisely because we want this to be true that we embrace with joy and conviction the polity we have in our shared partnership. Our polity serves us as we seek to serve Christ.