

# SOVEREIGN GRACE OVER THE YEARS

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*Editors' Note: In exploring the theme of partnership, it's important to remember that there is a rich history of God's grace that brought Sovereign Grace into being and has shaped our partnership over the years. We asked Mickey Connolly, a pastor and member of Sovereign Grace Churches with decades of experience, to share some of his memories of God's work in our midst. What follows is not an exhaustive history of Sovereign Grace, but a reflection upon some of what the Lord has done to shape our family of churches. It is our hope that present and future generations remember God's kindness to us over the years and thank God for his faithfulness to us throughout our history.*

**S**ex, drugs, and rock and roll. Okay, now that I've got your attention... Many believe, and I would agree, that America experienced a genuine revival in the 1960s and 70s. As young people were falling into a culture of rebellion marked by, yes, sex, drugs and rock and roll, God simultaneously began saving young men and women and renewing an understanding of the Holy Spirit's vital role in building the church. Those men and women began to read their Bibles and hunger to experience what they read there, especially to see a restoration of the church to its biblical glory.

Acts 2:42-47 became a model for how to build local churches as those first century believers "devoted themselves to" (v. 42) teaching, worship, prayer, fellowship, the breaking of bread, mutual care and hospitality, doing it all with "glad and generous hearts" (v. 46). The hope and prayer was that like those first believers we would find "favor" (v. 47) and that God would add to us "those who were being saved" (v. 47).

As someone who has been around for most of our history, it's a joy to reflect upon Sovereign Grace's history as I've observed it. There is no way to fully capture 40 years in a brief article. But I do hope to convey some of the main facets of the Lord's faithful work among us.

### ***Our Early Days***

Coming out of early days of revival were two young men, C.J. Mahaney and Larry Tomczak. At the height of popularity of a mid-week meeting, change came as they continued studying the Scriptures. Through that study, especially Acts and Ephesians, they developed a conviction that the church was and always had been at the heart of God's plan to make and mature disciples from every nation. So, in 1977, the Gathering of Believers (later to become Covenant Life Church) was born in Gaithersburg, Maryland. It was a church that featured expressive, affectionate worship, biblical preaching, spiritual gifts, small group ministry, and more. It was a church that emphasized community, servanthood, evangelism, member care and accountability, and shared leadership. It became the model for what many of us wanted to plant and build.

But the New Testament talked about more than local church practice; it talked about a mission to the world spurred by extra-local ministry, evangelism, and planting new churches. The book of Acts, and Paul's missionary journeys in particular, painted a picture of this kind of gospel expansion. So in 1982, C.J. and Larry, along with some other gifted men, founded People of Destiny International (PDI), formed an "apostolic team" to lead us in a broader mission, and got about the business of extra-local ministry to plant and care for local churches.

The first church was planted in Cleveland, Ohio, and other church plants soon followed. In addition, unaffiliated churches requested to be adopted into the ministry. Because we not only wanted to plant but to care for local churches and because we wanted to build relationally, we tended to grow slowly, but that was fine. Rapid expansion was never the goal.

We started calling ourselves a "family of churches" to express the fact that we were more than just an organization or an institution. Rather, we wanted to build strong personal relationships both locally and extra-locally with mutual

love, care, and fellowship at the heart of our ministry together. Strong personal relationships, coupled with a first-importance commitment to Scripture and theology are values that we have retained to this day.

### ***Our Conferences***

Conferences became a big part of how we incorporated those two priorities over the years. Our Pastors Conferences were critical times for envisioning, equipping, and uniting our churches, and were also like family reunions where it was a delight to be able to fellowship together. They remain so today.

Celebration Conferences served the same purpose, as churches gathered in Indiana, Pennsylvania (the first was held there in 1984), Lynchburg, Virginia; Flagstaff, Arizona; Las Cruces, New Mexico; and Nottingham, England for days of worship, teaching, and fellowship. Our children and teens enjoyed ministry designed especially for them. Those times, especially through teaching, united us in heart and mind and built strong connections—not just among our pastors but between our churches and members. Even years later, I still hear folks bring up Celebration and the life-changing effect of the teaching and the life-long relationships that were formed.

Our Small Group Leaders Conferences served the men and women who led our small groups and other ministries. We can never thank our small group leaders enough for their selfless and sacrificial service in this critical aspect of our church-building theology.

In 1999 we held the first of several New Attitude conferences (later followed by Next and Transfer) that were designed to serve young college and 20-something men and women to grow in their love for God and commitment to mission. One of our hopes from the very beginning was to not be a single-generation movement. Very early on, C.J. cautioned us about the generational faltering that occurred historically when God was doing an unusual reviving work among a people. Typically, the first generation of men and women were so busy with ministry, that they regrettably neglected to disciple the next generation adequately and thus the work of God faded away. From day one we've purposed to "pass the baton" to a second and third generation (and, hopefully, many more), to ensure that God's work in the founding generation gets passed on to future generations.

## ***Our Writings***

In 1983 we started a magazine! People of Destiny Magazine's first issue featured articles on "Restoration of the Church." The magazine became another vehicle through which our apostolic team and other gifted men could communicate our vision and values to members in our growing family of churches. In 1992 we began publishing study books on topics like small groups, meeting with God, sanctification, parent/teen relationships, single life, and more. The conferences, magazines, and books reflected the value we placed on preaching and teaching God's word as absolutely foundational for all we were doing and ever hoped to do.

## ***From People of Destiny to PDI***

During that time we also experienced the first of our name changes from People of Destiny to PDI. The letters PDI no longer stood for People of Destiny International—it became an acronym that stood for Proclaiming God's grace, Developing local churches, and Influencing the world with the gospel. The new name rightly shifted to a more God-centered focus and better reflected our mission to plant and care for churches.

During these years, we moved from a building/creating/initiating phase to a refining phase. C.J. was placed in the primary leadership role in 1991 and began to implement some important changes. We publicly identified as reformed in theology, especially in our understanding of God's initiative in salvation. We became known for the combination of being both reformed and charismatic—a mix of theological understanding that in those days seemed an oxymoron to some but intriguing to others.

## ***Shaped by Books Then and Now***

In the mid-1980s C.J. started teaching on the difference between legalism and grace, leading us to live motivated by grace. This emphasis became an important hallmark for how we wanted to build our churches. In the 90s C.J. wisely began connecting us to church history, which helped us avoid the "reinventing-the-wheel." and tethered us to historic Christianity which strengthened and preserved us in many ways.

We were introduced to the Puritans and men like Charles Spurgeon. John Owen's *Sin and Temptation* set a trajectory for the pursuit of holiness. We further benefited from men like David Powlison and Paul Tripp of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF) who helped us build a strong, biblical foundation for our counseling. Likewise, C.J.'s friendships with men like Wayne Grudem (whose *Systematic Theology* became a key text for our pastors), John Piper, Jerry Bridges, R.C. Sproul, and Kevin DeYoung among many others broadened our horizons.

Unquestionably, the most important teaching that came out of those days was C.J.'s emphasis on the cross of Christ and living gospel-centered lives. Soon followed Sovereign Grace books that have long-shaped us: *The Cross Centered Life*, *Christ our Mediator*, and *Living the Cross Centered Life*. With an eye toward equipping the women in our churches, C.J.'s wife Carolyn and daughter Nicole published *Feminine Appeal*, unpacking Titus 2. That was followed by *Girl Talk* and *True Beauty* which helped us define our complementarian values and envisioned women in their walk with Jesus.

### ***Our Music and Pastors College***

And then the music! From the very beginning God has gifted us with song-writers and musicians that led worship served us with songs that were great musically and also rich theologically. Songs became another means to get biblical truth into our minds and hearts. Thanks to the gift of Bob Kauflin and others, we have been able to write and produce many songs and albums to serve not only our churches but also the body of Christ, nationally and internationally. Our first album, *The Nations Are Waiting*, was released in 1986. Since then, we have produced 56 albums and 650 songs including albums for kids and albums in languages other than English.

In the early 90s we began the School of Ministry to help train pastors and church planters, which in 1997 became a permanent, full-time program called the Pastors College (PC). In 1998 Jeff Purswell began leading the PC, which offered a new generation of our pastors and planters a theological and pastoral education that many of the founding generation only imagined. Initially most of the ten months of weekly classes were taught by our pastors who brought a rich pastoral focus to their biblical/theological content, helping the

students to connect theology to everyday pastoral ministry. These courses were supplemented by a variety of world-class visiting instructors whose expertise further enriched the PC experience.

Oh yeah—there was also another name change in 2002 that better captured who we truly were: Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM). We landed upon a name that reflected our greatest passion: the grace of God that has come freely to us in the gospel.

### ***Difficult Years and Lessons Learned***

Our first 29 years were not without troubles and mistakes—after all we remain justified sinners—but for the most part they were happy and prosperous years. But in June 2011 things took a turn, when false accusations from a former leader in Sovereign Grace ushered us into several years of trouble and turmoil. The reputations of good men were damaged, and some churches left Sovereign Grace.

Then in 2012 a group brought a civil lawsuit against parties in Sovereign Grace. Though we rightly denied the accusations and fought to clear our name, again suspicion was sown, damage was done, and churches and members left.

But crisis wasn't the end of the story; indeed we can look back and see God using it for our good. While those events were painful, they were instructive. They awakened us to the enemy's strategies to work through the evil of slander and false accusation. They taught us that leadership requires courage and the need to defend those under attack. They reminded us of the importance of creating a church culture of genuine humility, a quickness to forgive, a commitment to justice for the vulnerable, theological discernment, relational unity, and more. They reminded us that suffering, though painful and often mysterious, is one of God's intended means to mature his people.

### ***Structures for Future Growth***

The trials we faced also reinforced the need to establish a polity that clarifies authority and accountability, and provides just processes to handle charges against pastors and potential division. Just prior to the start of those difficult years, Sovereign Grace was rethinking our polity—our understanding of church government, and how to define the relationships among our churches

and pastors to better serve our mission. That process continued into those difficult years.

In 2013 we adopted our *Book of Church Order* (BCO) that did several important things:

- It established a Council of Elders whereby every Sovereign Grace church was represented in our decision making processes.
- It established an Executive Director who, along with a Leadership Team, would seek to serve our churches and lead us in our overall mission.
- It established an Executive Committee that would serve as a liaison between the Council of Elders and the Leadership Team to facilitate and coordinate responsibilities.
- It created a formal process for adjudicating charges within Sovereign Grace churches.
- We changed our name to Sovereign Grace Churches to better reflect our ecclesiastical identity.

In short, our new polity honored the integrity of our local churches, and formalized structures of shared governance that would protect us theologically, ethically, and missionally.

It was also in 2013 that we elected Mark Prater as our first Executive Director. Mark brought the perfect mix of character, courage, vision, and administration to lead us into our future. The Leadership Team he appointed has served our denomination well. (Yes, we accept that we are a denomination, but we are still a family!)

Our BCO called for creation of a Theology Committee composed of men uniquely gifted to define and protect our biblical and theological understanding. In 2013 this committee began to review and reformulate our *Statement of Faith*, which was a seven year process that involved our elderships as well. Very importantly, this was all a part of SGC becoming formally confessional; each SGC elder would affirm the new *Statement of Faith* and agree to be accountable to it. In 2020, the Council of Elders ratified a statement that will richly serve and, Lord willing, protect our churches for years to come.

In this process we also formalized our “Seven Shared Values,” key convictions that apply our doctrine and shape our practices as churches (see June 2022 Sovereign Grace Journal): (1) reformed theology; (2) gospel-centered doctrine and preaching; (3) continuationist pneumatology; (4) complementarian leadership in the home and church; (5) elder governed and led local churches; (6) church planting, outreach and global mission; and (7) our unity in mission, fellowship, and governance. Defining those biblically-derived values is key to our partnering together on gospel mission.

Recently we featured “Seven Shaping Virtues” (see October 2022 Sovereign Grace Journal): (1) humility; (2) joy; (3) gratitude; (4) encouragement; (5) generosity; (6) servanthood; and (7) grace-motivated godliness. These character qualities are specific fruits of the gospel we want to cultivate in believers and churches throughout Sovereign Grace. Our *Statement of Faith*, shared values, and shaping virtues work together to define us for others and help our pastors and churches stay on track with our key convictions when they are challenged with an avalanche of information and ideas that, if not guarded against, can distract and derail our gospel mission.

Even with all of these changes, Sovereign Grace Music continues to produce songs and albums. WorshipGod conferences served not only our churches but also a broad spectrum of churches, musicians, and songwriters in thinking musically theologically to better serve their congregations. And our Pastors College continued to be blessed with class after class of fine young men to pastor churches and plant with us.

One of the most encouraging things we’ve seen are answers to our early prayers. A second generation of Sovereign Grace pastors are being raised up and taking over key pastoral and leadership positions in local churches as well as extra-locally throughout Sovereign Grace.

### ***Global Fruit***

Among the many ways God has been at work in us is a happy expansion of our global reach. Back in the day when we called ourselves People of Destiny International, except a wonderful partnership in Mexico, there wasn’t much “international” about us. But by God’s grace we increasingly have the privilege



of working with churches throughout the world who share our doctrine, values, and, above all, our passion for the gospel. Here are some highlights.

- We are presently serving in 46 countries on every continent except Antarctica.
- In 2002 Covenant Mercies was birthed in one of our churches to care for young men and women in Africa through individual sponsorships and public works projects.
- In 2016 we sent our first missionaries to an unreached people group in Asia.
- In 2021 we created a clear process for partnering with churches throughout the world in a way that maintains both theological and ecclesiological unity. In the last two years this process has allowed us to plant 8 churches and adopt another 14.
- We had pastors from global churches go through the Sovereign Grace ordination process and we officially adopted them and their churches into Sovereign Grace.
- We have started or supported Pastors Colleges in several countries.

### ***Grateful Beyond Words***

Throughout writing this article, tears were never far from my eyes. It's hard to review this history without being overwhelmed by all kinds of emotions. Despite our weakness and shortcomings, I'm amazed at "what God hath wrought" in and through our small denomination. I'm filled with joy in seeing local churches experiencing daily grace. I overflow with gratitude for deep and genuine partnership and friendships. I love and respect our faithful members—men and women who have sacrificed and served, often unnoticed, and yet without whom there would be no Sovereign Grace. Most of all, I am filled with wonder and awe that God would save a sinner like me and let me join together with fellow imperfect, yet sincere and godly saints, to play a small part in what God is doing in the world today.

Psalm 115:1 says, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory." In the early 1990s we sang that truth together. Looking back on 40 years of Sovereign Grace, the hope expressed in that verse remains our hope today. And it remains our testimony. Our story is one of ordinary men and women, ordinary pastors and teachers who, by God's abundant and lavish grace have

tried to plant and care for local churches in keeping with God's will and for God's glory.

What does the future hold? Who knows? God has kindly strengthened, shifted, and surprised us over the years. He has strengthened the theology, practices, and values that, by his great grace, we got right. He has shifted those things needing refining or changing. He has surprised us with new directions and opportunities along the way. One thing is sure: we have been the recipients of God's sovereign grace for 40 years, and all because of his faithfulness. Therefore, we have a firm hope for his continued grace in the future.