

WATCH YOUR DOCTRINE

A Call to Theological Fidelity

Jeff Purswell

Watch Your Doctrine: A Call to Theological Fidelity

© 2024 by Sovereign Grace® Churches

12914 Shelbyville Road

Louisville, KY 40243

www.sovereigngrace.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Sovereign Grace® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover Design: Dan Lee

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The ESV® Bible* (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001, Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



I want to begin with a question.¹ A question specifically for pastors and for everyone in our union of churches: *If there were one factor, humanly speaking, most essential to the faithful longevity of Sovereign Grace, what would it be?*

One factor. Not the sovereign mercy of God—that's a given. Not Christ's commitment to build his church—that's our hope. But humanly speaking, in terms of what we do and give ourselves to individually, and in our partnership, what one factor will be most essential to our faithful longevity in Sovereign Grace?

What is needed, not just to prolong our bare existence, or perpetuate our denomination—not just to survive, but to survive *faithfully*? What one factor will be most essential to our faithful longevity in Sovereign Grace?

1. This sermon was preached on November 15, 2023 in Orlando, Florida, at the 2023 Sovereign Grace Pastors Conference.

Sovereign Grace Sermons

If there is a single text that I think crystallizes the answer to that question and the burden behind this message, surely it is 1 Timothy 4. Amidst the various instructions contained in this chapter, there is embedded a great reality. It is a reality that we must not assume, that we must never tire of reflecting upon and applying to our lives, to our pastoral teams, and to our churches in Sovereign Grace.

Listen to 1 Timothy 4:6–16:

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.

Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

The context here is vital. Paul is writing to Timothy, his child in the faith. Timothy was converted on Paul's first missionary journey and joined Paul on his second missionary journey. He became not only a loyal friend and a child in the faith, but a trusted coworker as well. "For I have no one like him," Paul wrote of Timothy to the Christians in Philippi, "who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare" (Phil. 2:20).

Paul loved Timothy. He trusted Timothy. This letter is personal and affectionate. But the letter is more than this, which heightens its relevance for us. The situation in Paul's Aegean ministry had changed.

Congregations had multiplied—there are now churches in Crete and Miletus and Nicopolis. But there are storm clouds on the horizon, in the form of false teaching. There are even signs of a counter mission, which we see evidence of in all three Pastoral Epistles—1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus.

To make matters worse, this apparently included church leaders and former coworkers—in other words, normal pastoral ministry. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul says that ". . . all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom were Phygelus and Hermogenes" (2 Tim. 1:15). In 2 Timothy 2 he speaks of Hymenaeus and Philetus who "swerved from the truth" (v. 18). In Titus, he warns of divisive people who are warped, sinful, and self-condemned (Titus 3:10–11).

Laboring for the Future

The Paul of the Pastorals is a man burdened by threats to the church and to the mission of the gospel. His discerning gaze is fixed, not on his personal sacrifices, but on the future

of the church. This to me is one of the fascinating and often overlooked aspects of the Pastorals. Paul is envisioning a time when he is off the scene, when the generation of the apostles is gone. At this stage of life, he could have backed off, or coasted, or even thrown in the towel, but he didn't.

In this season of his life—a sort of “second career” for Paul—he adopts a different strategy. Instead of writing letters to churches sent by coworkers, he now writes to the coworkers themselves—like Timothy in Ephesus, Titus in Crete—to instruct them, to encourage them, and to equip them to secure a future that Paul would not see. As Paul contemplates what church leadership and pastoral ministry will look like then, when he's gone and for generations to come, he lays out battle plans. In these letters, he takes pains to describe and define how elders are to lead the church.

1. THE IMPERATIVE OF SOUND DOCTRINE

Especially vital for our context, Paul specifies the priorities of a pastor. There is perhaps no more succinct description of those priorities than Paul's imperative in the familiar verse 16. This is a summary of the prior ten verses and it's also the concluding stroke in the core of this letter. Chapter 4 essentially concludes the body of this letter, with paraenesis—ethical teaching—making up the final two chapters.

So here is the concluding stroke of the core of this letter; here is the summary: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.” As the NIV famously puts it, “Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them.” The circumstances of ministry change daily, but the responsibilities of

ministry never do. “Persist in this, for by so doing”—a most sobering *if*, reminding us that ministry faithfulness is not inevitable—“for by doing so you will save both yourself and your hearers.” Here is Paul’s crystalized definition of pastoral success. And note what he does not mention: He doesn’t mention the numerical size of Timothy’s church. He doesn’t evaluate the extent of Timothy’s public gifting. There’s nothing here to capture the imagination of the blogosphere or cultural commentators or church growth theorists. Two things: Watch your life closely, and watch your doctrine closely. Watch yourself and the teaching.

A Permanent Preoccupation

The single imperative here is *watch*. It’s not the normal “look” word. It’s a “grip” word—“hold fast.” And so he’s using it figuratively: *Hold this in your unswerving gaze. Give this your unchanging, scrupulous attention.* And that imperative, like all the imperatives in this paragraph, suggests a continual, ongoing activity: *Continually* watch your life and doctrine. *Relentlessly* watch your life and doctrine. *Never cease* to watch your life and doctrine.

This imperative “to watch” is insulated by a whole web of exhortations to strenuous exertion. Look at verse 15: “practice”—in other words, be diligent in these things. Verse 15b says, “immerse yourself”—be absorbed in them, give yourself wholly to them. Verse 16 says, “persist”—persevere in them. Don’t stop, don’t relent, don’t coast. Let them be your permanent preoccupation. *Why?*

Verse 16b explains: “. . . for by so doing you will you will save both yourself and your hearers.” In other words, because your very life—your life, the life of the church, and the mission of the gospel is at stake. The cause could not be more serious. Eternal destinies are in the balance. Yes, we’re Reformed and God is sovereign and we rest in that. But according to Paul, eternal destinies depend upon our vigilance concerning the integrity of our lives and the faithfulness of our doctrine.

Now, my goal here is to consider the second category, and to give a simple yet urgent reminder to watch our doctrine—to keep a close watch on “the teaching.”

A Body of Truth

Paul uses this word “teaching” (*didaskalia*) 19 times, and 15 of those times are in the Pastorals—1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus. It’s the same word that we began with in verse 6, the “good doctrine” Timothy follows. What’s in view here is not simply the gospel—although, Paul makes clear elsewhere the gospel is its core. The reference is to “the teaching”—to doctrine, to authoritative apostolic instruction.

Unlike the plural “doctrines” of demons in 4:1, Paul always uses this word with this sense in the singular. What he has in mind is not multiple random teachings, but a *body of truth*. It is an organic, internally consistent, rightly proportioned presentation of God’s revelation that is to be the source and standard of everything—it is the source of all our teaching, and the standard by which all of our teaching and all of our ministry is to be measured.

Paul provides another, very allusive description of this in 2 Timothy 1:13. There Paul writes: “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.”

“Sound words,” healthy words, refer to the teaching that Timothy received from Paul and is to pass on to others. And note the phrase: these words—this teaching—they have a pattern to them. They are self-consistent. They form a framework. They are complimentary and mutually reinforcing. Here, actually, in a nutshell, is the imperative for systematic theology. God’s words form a coherent framework. They have a pattern, and that pattern is meant to be discerned. We’re commanded to grasp it, and teach it, and follow it. It provides a standard. The word for “pattern” in 2 Timothy 1:13 is *hupotupōsis*—a standard by which things are to be measured.

Our Call as Pastors

Here’s our call as pastors. Here is faithfulness: We are to allow the truth of God’s Word in all of its content and dimensions and connections to guide us and to govern us as we teach, as we set ministry priorities, as we go on pastoral retreats or we sit in elders meetings, as we make ministry decisions, as we create ministry structures, as we evaluate other teachings and ideas and blogs and cultural trends to which our people are exposed.

It’s a vividly suggestive picture Paul gives. It’s God’s Word that we are to “watch closely.” We are to be absorbed with it personally. We are to faithfully teach it publicly. We are to measure all that we are and do and teach and build by it.

While Paul is addressing Timothy personally, this command is not merely personal. This is a corporate and universal pastoral obligation. It addresses not just Timothy, but all of those that Timothy sets in office, and all to whom those men would pass it on. It addresses other “faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). Paul, his eyes always on the future, has in view there four generations. He is envisioning a future day and future pastors and future church networks and future denominations. He is setting forth priorities for those pastors, for those churches, for those denominations.

In other words, friends, Paul is talking to us. And as he does, these letters are filled with exhortations to a particular obligation, a particular task. This is what is weighing on Paul’s mind and occupying his heart. We would do well to ask: Is it weighing on *our* minds and occupying *our* hearts? What will ensure the successful continuity of the gospel mission? Taking into consideration the larger context of the Pastorals and what was facing the church: what is critical in leadership that will establish the truth, and vanquish heresy, and nurture believers, and sustain churches, and protect the ministry of the gospel? What is it?

I encourage you to read these three letters with this question in mind. The focus, repetition, and emphasis of Paul’s answer to that question is almost numbingly striking. A quick survey of the Pastoral Epistles puts in stark relief what those of us who are called to pastoral ministry are charged to do.

1 Timothy: Devote Yourself to Teaching

At the very beginning of the Pastorals, 1 Timothy 1:3 says, “As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine.” The very first charge in the Pastoral Epistles is to correct false doctrine. Remarkable.

He goes on to mention in verse 4, myths and speculations. Don’t relegate that phrase to first-century phenomena. He’s talking about other ideas, and innovations, and cultural preoccupations that contradict or distract from biblical truth and the gospel to which it testifies. As Paul says in 1:10–11b, Timothy is to avoid and correct, “whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted.”

Here is our charge. Timothy is called—we are called—to be alert for and discerning of any current of thought, any idea, that is distracting our people from Christ or undermining their faith in Christ or displacing Christ in their affections or that is contrary to scriptural teaching.

Paul goes on. In 1 Timothy 3:2, the one qualification of the elder that is not obligatory for every Christian is that he must be “able to teach.” A better translation would be, “skillful in teaching.” It is the pastor’s peculiar responsibility to teach and pass on the gospel and sound doctrine.

We’ve already looked at Chapter 4, but note again 1 Timothy 4:6: “If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine [same word] you have followed.” Verse 11, “Command and teach [related word:

didaskō] these things.” Verse 13, “Until I come, devote yourself to”—three things—“the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching.” That’s actually not a verb—again, it’s “the teaching”—it’s the passing on of authoritative doctrine. Verse 16, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching.” *Good grief, Paul! Is this all we’re supposed to do?!*

1 Timothy 5:17 says, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” 1 Timothy 6:2b–3 says, “Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.”

Titus: Hold Firm the Trustworthy Word

Titus, in his version of the elder qualifications, is actually a bit more full on this point. Titus 1:9 says, “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”

Here the elder’s teaching gift is filled out. It’s not simply public speaking ability, and it’s certainly not just the conceptual knowledge of a lecturer or a professor. It is a *discerning functional knowledge of sound doctrine so that he can impart it to others and refute those who teach falsehood*. In other words, the elder is set apart and is to be given to the spiritual nurture of the people of God, the doctrinal maturation of the people of God, and the protection of the people of God from false and deadly teaching and ideas.

Pay attention to Paul's warnings. I fear we don't pay attention enough. He gives one warning after another. The cumulative effect is meant to land on us. There is danger! Your people are walking around every day breathing toxic fumes—immersed in worldviews that deny Christ, that deny God's claim on them, that absolutize the world and minimize the eternal. Pay attention to Paul's warnings. Like Timothy, we're called to be alert to false teaching in the church and unbiblical, deceptive, seductive ideas and worldviews in the culture.

I don't recall in my lifetime a time when the pressure on the church to conform to the culture, to make room for the culture, to accommodate the culture, to allow the culture to shape our perspective and our presentation, has ever been greater. Thus Paul's warnings have never been more relevant.

So he continues. Titus 1:13, "Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith." Titus 2:1, "But as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine." Titus 2:15, "Declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority."

2 Timothy: Rightly Handle the Word of Truth

Finally, 2 Timothy. We looked at 2 Timothy 1:13, now look at 1:14. "By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you." The "good deposit" is the truth of the gospel. It's actually emphatic in this verse. We could render it, "It is the good deposit you are to guard,"—meaning the gospel and all that it entails for our lives, and Christ's church, and the world. That, pastor, is what you are to guard.

2 Timothy 2:2, “and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses *entrust* to faithful men, who will be able to *teach* others also.”

2 Timothy 2:15 begins, “Do your best”—that is a zeal word. It means “Be zealous about, take pains with, make your greatest efforts in this area.” It continues, “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed”—meaning you might have reason to be ashamed if you don’t heed this. The verse concludes with, “a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

Rightly handling it! Approaching it reverently, studying it assiduously, proclaiming it passionately. Rightly handle it, brothers. We don’t want to be ashamed. Oh, Lord, don’t let us be ashamed.

2 Timothy 2:24–25, “And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness.”

2 Timothy 3:10, “You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness . . . ”

2 Timothy 3:14–17, “But as for you, continue”—remain, abide—“in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings . . . ” The sacred writings are the *grammata*. It’s the only time that word appears in the New Testament, but it’s a very common word in non-Biblical Greek. It’s the Old Testament, the sacred writings. “. . . you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in

Christ Jesus.” The contrast is stark: “evil people and imposters will go on from bad to worse” (v. 13)—but you, Timothy, *continue*—stay put, remain—in the Scriptures.

Paul then launches into reflection on just what these writings are in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is breathed out by God . . .” And with that metaphor comes rushing to mind the mighty, creating, reality-shaping Word of God. What else do you have to give people? What’s breathed out by you? No, we give—we must give—what is breathed out by God.

And therefore, 2 Timothy 4:2, “preach the word; be ready in season and out of season”—even when you are afflicted and perplexed and persecuted and struck down—“in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

The Weight of These Imperatives

Now, in reading these letters we’re meant to feel the cumulative weight of these pastoral imperatives. Among all that we do as pastors, besides the godliness of our personal lives, this priority is to receive our greatest attention. To *hold* and *teach* and be *guided by*, and *proclaim* and *urge upon* others and *guard* sound biblical doctrine and the truth it establishes and the gospel to which it testifies, and the life implications that flow from it—all for the health and strength and protection of those for whom Christ died.

That’s my introduction! But its length was intentional. To survey the Pastoral Epistles is to encounter the weight of this biblical vision, and the pastoral priorities it establishes, and the mandate it places upon us, and, brothers, the clarity and

the hope it gives us—which is vital for the future of Sovereign Grace.

Paul is not just issuing commands. He's not seeking to load up weary pastors with more stuff to do. He's not like the voices—many well-meaning—which flood your in-box every day with things you should be doing and issues you as a good pastor are supposed to care about and give time to.

Paul had no interest in weighing Timothy down with obligations. Behind these imperatives are great and glorious realities. These words we're to teach and the truth they contain are God-breathed. They are the product of his own, all-powerful creative breath. They impart life. They structure reality. They're living and active. They penetrate and they convict and they transform and they give hope. They bring God to us; they mediate his presence. Christ shines forth from his Word, and he shines forth from sound doctrine. We simply want to position ourselves to be instruments through which Christ can shine forth from his Word to our people, which is what they need most.

The Key Factor for Faithful Longevity

Given all the freight Paul delivers in these letters, this is how I believe he would answer the question we began with. Humanly speaking, apart from our love for and utter dependence upon Christ, the key factor for Sovereign Grace's faithful longevity will be our *doctrinal fidelity*. For Sovereign Grace to persevere faithfully, to remain faithful in our mission and fruitful in our labors, we simply must maintain and guard and transfer our biblical convictions, our theological integrity, and—as

God continues to join us with partners across the globe—our doctrinal consistency across our churches around the world.

There are other vital elements to being a Sovereign Grace church—or any faithful church. Absolutely. Our gospel centrality, our gospel values—that culture that the gospel produces, captured in our *Shaping Virtues*²—our relationships. We thank God for all of these things. But all of these things will be lost, or distorted, or squandered, if they are untethered from our theological convictions.

It's hard to keep up with all that is happening now in Sovereign Grace. There's so much activity and so many marks of God's blessing. This week Mexico became our first "ecclesiastical nation" with its own leadership and polity and Book of Church Order. There is the maturing and expansion of our other global partnerships; all of the church planting activity being fostered by the National Church Planting Group and the Antioch Project; relationships and gospel partnership among our Regional Assemblies of Elders; the sharpening of our polity and refining of our Book of Church Order; youth camps; and Sovereign Grace Music; and the Pastors College; and a thousand things you are doing in your local churches.

It's all wonderful! But none of it is sufficient to sustain us or to preserve our faithful longevity. And all of it must be informed and shaped by and consistent with and anchored to our theology.

That's the burden for this message.

It's not a new burden. We've been led this way from the beginning by C. J. Mahaney and some of the gray heads in

2. <https://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues>

this room. In recent years, it's only been strengthened with the formulation of our *Statement of Faith*³—in fact, not just strengthened, but *codified* as we took the radical, audacious, countercultural step of becoming confessional as a family of churches. That's not staid, that's not just traditional—that's radical. That's remarkable. That's a miracle.

So the burden is not new, but I believe it's never been more urgent for us. It simply must not be assumed. And the landscape is filled with cautionary tales for when it is assumed—or worse, neglected.

I think of networks and churches that were once models of vibrancy and influence and mission that downgraded theologically and now they're shells of what they used to be.

Who would've imagined what has happened in just the past ten years? As fast as the New Calvinism, "Young, Restless, and Reformed" movement emerged, it fragmented. Who would've imagined the turmoil in orthodox denominations over issues as fundamental, as biblically explicit, as gender and sexuality? They're being ripped apart. It's only accelerating.

But here's what we need to discern: *it rarely, if ever, occurs all at once*. Know this: *there's always a process of incremental neglect or compromise*.

The Disappearance of Theology

Thirty years ago, David Wells described this process—the disappearance of theology from the church. And if anything, this is more relevant today than when he wrote it. Listen to what he said:

3. <https://webelieve.sovereigngrace.com/>

The disappearance of which I am speaking is not the same as the abduction of a child who is happily playing at home one minute and then is no longer to be found the next. No one has abducted theology in this sense. The disappearance is closer to what happens in homes where the children are ignored and, to all intents and purposes, abandoned. They remain in the home, but they have no place in the family. So it is with theology in the Church. It remains on the edges of evangelical life, but it has been dislodged from its center.⁴

Wells's discernment is a critical capsule for us to consume—the danger of our theology remaining on the edges but dislodged from the center. This can happen in a number of different ways.

Incrementalism. It can happen incrementally, by small compromises. Earlier this year, the bishops of the Church of England—and I have good friends in the Church of England, faithful friends in the Church of England—they announced that while they will not allow clergy to perform same-sex marriages, they will allow them to bless same-sex unions after a civil marriage.

In that same statement, they apologized—they actually repented—for “homophobic responses” in their churches, presupposing but not defining “homophobic.” They won’t perform, but they will bless. Incremental compromise. And the world watches to see what’s next.

4. David F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 106.

Ambiguity. Theology can be dislodged from the center through ambiguity. The same week of that announcement, a video surfaced of a prominent pastor teaching at a recent conference at his church on homosexuality. Attempting to walk on a razor's edge, he did not explicitly affirm homosexuality, but he did speak of Christians who have much to learn from gay men and women "who love Jesus." He spoke of one homosexual friend whose faith in God "dwarfs" his.

"There's not just room in the church for such people," he said, "there's plenty of room for them in the church." Where he's not clear is this: Are they converted? Have they repented? The most generous interpretation is that it was ambiguous. But recent weeks have removed even some of that ambiguity.

Theological minimalism. It can happen and often happens through theological minimalism. It's not uncommon for church groupings and church networks to minimize their theological requirements in order to remain together.

I think of one network involving many godly people that has borne much fruit. But at one point, they lowered their theological standards to two things: The Lausanne Covenant for World Evangelization and a list of five theological distinctives. I remember thinking, "Lausanne was about uniting Christians worldwide in evangelism. It was *never* meant to be a confessional statement to govern and discipline a communion of churches."

It may be that networks are able to remain together by minimizing theological distinctives, but such a course is glaringly shortsighted. If those churches aren't led by pastors governed by God's Word, and those churches aren't nurtured

with God's Word, and their mission is not shaped by God's Word, weaknesses will inevitably appear.

That is not the path we've chosen, because we're convinced—Scripture convinces us and church history confirms this for us—that *theological definition strengthens us*. It doesn't weaken us. Our goal is not to find out how little we can believe. We want to taste and embrace and teach and exult in and apply and thrive in the treasure that is the whole council of God, as the Lord enables us to understand. Sound doctrine is not constricting, it's liberating. It's clarifying. "Theology" should not elicit yawns—it should excite joy.

Here's the hope and here's the main burden of this message: If, by God's grace, we do remain doctrinally faithful—if we do hold fast to the truth of God's Word, and not just affirm it but treasure it as that which gives life and makes wise and is sweeter than honey and is more precious than gold; and if we esteem it and submit to it and allow it to govern and shape us and give us poise and courage—we can expect, not an easy future, not a trouble-free future, but a Christ-exalting future, a joy-sustaining future, a fruit-bearing future, because that's what God's Word promises.

2. THE PROMISE OF SOUND DOCTRINE

We've looked at *the biblical imperative* of maintaining theological fidelity. Now we will look more quickly at our *need* for theological fidelity. In other words, *the promise of sound doctrine*—what it does for us and the promise it holds, both as individuals and as a family of churches.

First, sound doctrine defines our identity. It reminds us of who we are. Sound doctrine locates us in reality and in history with respect to God and to others. Without the certainties of sound doctrine, we don't know who we are.

That's one of the things that was so significant about the adoption of our new *Statement of Faith*. On November 10th, 2020, after a season of turmoil and pruning, and in the wake of a thorough reworking of our polity, the elders of our churches together planted a definitional flag, both honoring our past and resolving for the future. As pastors we said to ourselves, each other, and the world, "This, by the grace of God, is who we are."

It was an act of glad submission to the God who created us, and saves us, and defines us, and exercises his authority over us by his Word. That's what confessions do. That's what doctrine does. Doctrine structures our identities, and biblical truth preserves our identities.

David Wells writes,

Authoritative truth lies at the heart of Christian life and practice, for this is what it means to live under the authority of Scripture. It is in this core of confession that the Church's identity is preserved across the ages. This is the watchword by which it is known. Without this knowledge, it is bereft of what defines the Church as the people of God, bereft of the means of belief, worship, sustenance, proclamation, and service.⁵

5. Ibid., 99.

If our doctrine is marginalized or minimized or ceases to function, we won't know who we are. Then it will soon be the culture that tells us who we are. The culture will define us. And at that moment, Sovereign Grace will become irrelevant. Worse than irrelevant, a stain on the history of God's faithful ones. We don't want to be a stain.

This leads to another benefit of theological integrity.

Second, sound doctrine unifies us. At the end of the day, it's the only thing that can provide enduring unity. There's much we celebrate and have in common—a common history, which gives rise to common values, common worship styles, even in some ways common ministry methodologies. *But nothing binds us together like our doctrine, and our common theological commitments.*

This is especially important to remember in our current moment, as leadership in many of our churches is transitioning to a rising generation. As our history fades, and our expansion continues, and our ethnic, cultural, and geographic diversity increases, the only thing that will be able to unify us is actually the most important thing—the gospel we cherish and the biblical doctrine we jointly confess and proclaim.

Third, sound doctrine protects us. The protection of sound doctrine is another benefit so vital to our future. Our concern for theological integrity is not a desire simply to be right. We're not trying to congratulate ourselves on our doctrinal purity. Nonsense. Errors in doctrine—false doctrine—is the opposite of what Paul calls seven times in the Pastorals, “healthy” or “sound” doctrine. It is destructive.

You can never think wrongly about God without consequence. No matter how sincere you are, wrong thinking about

God, and the actions and choices that flow from it, will always bear bad fruit in our lives and in our churches. Theological definition protects us. It guards our boundaries from the incursions of culture all around us.

The orthodoxies of our respective cultures are competing for the minds and hearts of our people. Error—"arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:5)—is like a battering ram smashing against the souls of our people. We need walls of immovable truth that repel those assaults. We need clarity and certainty and a rock to stand on—the discernment that truth wielded in dependence upon the Spirit provides.

There's another important aspect to this point. It's not just error that sound doctrine protects us against. Clear doctrinal formulations like historic creeds and confessions, and our own *Statement of Faith*, highlight what's most important. They keep us from drifting into secondary or trivial concerns.

I rented a car this week. At home I drive older cars, so when I get into a new rental car I'm often confused by the complex dashboard and the array of buttons and dials and gadgets. It's dangerous for me to drive this car. As I was pulling out of the airport, I was temporarily alarmed by something I'd actually experienced before. If you start to drift out of your lane, all of a sudden the car jerks back in the center. Welcome to lane-assist technology. If you drift, it jerks you back.

That's what sound doctrine does. If we drift, it jerks us back to the center. It keeps us focused on what's most important, on what is preeminent. It keeps us focused on what saves and sanctifies and gives joy and honors Christ.

Carl Trueman comments on this exact idea. He says this,

A church with a creed or a confession has a built-in gospel reality check. It is unlikely to become sidetracked by the peripheral issues of the passing moment; rather it will focus instead on the great theological categories that touch on matters of eternal significance.⁶

When the world, or even our own souls are tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine, we desperately need “built-in gospel reality checks” to keep us steady and stable. That’s what sound doctrine provides.

Fourth, sound doctrine nourishes our souls. This is another sermon, and every one of you pastors have already preached this sermon. But the burden of this message is not that we become numbered among the “smart guys,” or known for punctilious purity. No, sound doctrine is not simply conceptual, it’s *combustible*. It generates faith and provokes conviction and dissipates doubts and heals wounds and produces affections and strengthens resolve. That’s why it’s the key to “faithful longevity.”

That’s why Paul is so adamant that pastors teach and transfer and urge upon people *doctrine*. *Everything* depends on it! Lives and marriages and parenting and relationships and worship—they’re all informed and shaped and strengthened by sound doctrine. That’s Paul’s logic in Colossians 2:6–7: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”

6. Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 168.

Our people in our churches are going to thrive to the extent that they inhabit the Bible's world. In other words, to the extent that they live within the doctrinal framework that Scripture shapes for us. What a beautiful world we get to live in—the world of the truth of God's Word.

Fifth, sound doctrine guides and fuels our worship.

I'm so grateful for Bob Kauflin and all those involved in Sovereign Grace Music who equip us to worship God based on the truth of God's Word. Far more is at stake than simply attractive music that moves our hearts and doesn't repel visitors. Without sound doctrine, we will soon be simply emoting, or pursuing experiences. Worse, we may end up worshipping a God of our own imagination. Theology ensures we are worshipping the right God, and worshipping him the right way.

Sixth, sound doctrine shapes and sustains and protects our mission. I won't expand on this point except to say, if our doctrine doesn't ground and govern our mission, prioritizing the supremacy of Christ and the transforming power of the gospel and the formation and strengthening of disciples into local churches under the teaching of God's Word, our mission will eventually change.

This is one reason, historically, that mission departments have sometimes been the back door to heresy in seminaries. Why? Not for a lack of sincerity, but because so much focus is placed on the target audience—issues of cultural anthropology and linguistics and all that involves the setting into which the gospel is brought. All of that is important, all of that has a place, but when our focus on the target audience itself begins to eclipse what we're bringing *to* that audience—the message of the gospel—that message begins to change. It

becomes vulnerable to adaptation or manipulation, all in order to penetrate a culture or reach an audience. Without sound doctrine, our mission will be distorted, if not lost altogether.

Finally, seventh—and most importantly—sound doctrine and only sound doctrine preserves the gospel.

Here is a burden I have long carried in this regard and it has to do with something precious to us: our gospel centrality. It's not just one shared value among many, is it? It's in our DNA. It has defined us and made us who we are. We cherish it. We want to stay there. But for all its biblical currency and its hermeneutical importance—again, we never want to lose it—but remaining merely gospel-centered will not preserve us.

Recall our opening question—what factor is most important to our faithful longevity? If your answer was “Hold onto the gospel,” you were wrong. Maintaining gospel centrality *by itself* will not preserve us. What will preserve us, by the grace of God, is what lies *under* the gospel: biblical authority and theological integrity. What will sustain us is what defines the gospel and gives shape to the gospel and the realities that make sense of the gospel.

When we say gospel, we assume a whole array of massive realities. We have in mind a particular kind of God. We have in mind the setting of created reality as made by God and ruled by God. We have in mind the nature of man created in the image of God but fallen—and because of that fall, he has a particular predicament—a hopeless predicament apart from Christ. We have in mind a gospel with particular content, and a particular way of receiving the gospel. We have in mind an understanding of the effects of the gospel, and the life implications of the gospel.

If you lose those things, you lose everything that defines the gospel. Then you're left reconfiguring the gospel. That's the lesson of Christian liberalism. That's the lesson of the social gospel movement. The social gospel was gospel-centered—gospel is there in the name!—but drained of scriptural authority, drained of a supernatural worldview, drained of theological orthodoxy, it became a different gospel.

In our cultural moment, there's no shortage of fresh examples even in evangelicalism. Some are quick to affirm the gospel, but reject the doctrines that make sense of the gospel, or dismiss the ethical entailments of the gospel, which results in a false gospel with no power to save.

A Hope for the Future

Here's our hope: with the truth of God's Word, with sound doctrine, with a biblical vision of a sovereign God and a mighty Savior, and a sin-atoning cross, and a glorious gospel that is the power of salvation for all who believe, and a risen Christ who will build his church, *we have everything necessary for faithful ministry*. Our mission will be sustained and protected and fueled and fruitful. We can, by God's grace, experience faithful longevity as we "watch our doctrine."

Part of watching our doctrine, brothers, part of our theological fidelity, is not merely affirming the truth of God's Word but also its value. Not just declaring it but delighting in it.

Let's do *that*. Let's resolve, day by day, in season and out, to taste and treasure and exult in and draw strength from and bank our lives and our ministries and our partnership on the truth of God's Word and the gospel that it reveals.

Watch Your Doctrine

Ultimately, this is not about our theological stability. It's not about prolonging Sovereign Grace. This is ultimately about pleasing God and bringing glory to our Savior.

Over the long term—15 years, 30 years, 50 years, beyond—I believe that together we will bring him the most glory and bear the most fruit, not by planting the most churches, not by entering the most countries, not by publishing the most materials, not by training the most pastors, not by having the largest conferences, but through our faithfulness to God's Word and the doctrine it delivers, and the gospel it proclaims, and above all, the Christ it magnifies.

Lord, we tremble, that we have been entrusted with such a treasure. Truth, abiding truth, eternal truth, that gives life and transforms lives and brings you to us, through which Christ shines forth. You've given us this truth. And as pastors, you give us the consummate privilege of giving ourselves to study, to teach, to lead with it, to be governed by it, to be protected with it, to set it loose among your people. We ask—I ask—that you would grant us faithful longevity by holding to and treasuring and proclaiming your truth in the Christ who shines forth from it for your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.



We plant and strengthen
CHURCHES
for the glory of God.

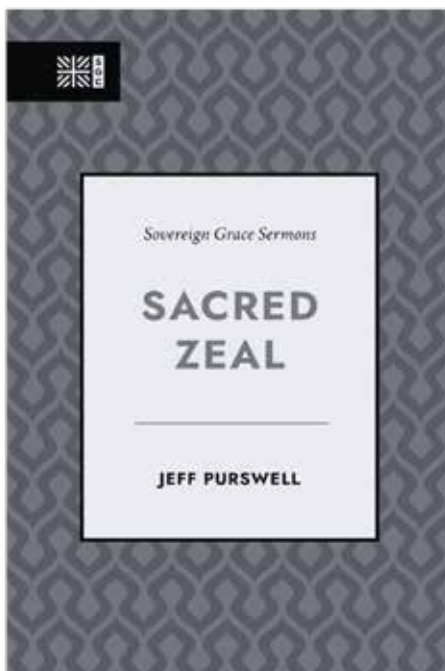
Sovereign Grace Churches is a confessional community of congregations, united in theology, fellowship, and mission. We treasure the sovereign grace of God in Christ, and we are committed to gospel-centered doctrine, preaching, and living.

Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation, to relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness.

We are continuationist in our pursuit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts, complementarian in convictions on gender, and elder-governed in our polity, with some carefully delineated areas of shared governance. Our passion is to see churches planted and nurtured throughout the world.

To learn more about our churches, including our *Statement of Faith* and how to join us, visit sovereigngrace.com.

Also available in this series:



Sacred Zeal:
Maintaining a Passion for Christ in Pastoral Ministry

Also available in this series:



*The Grace of Partnership:
Why Churches are Stronger Together*

