

State of the Union

Sovereign Grace Churches Pastors Conference 2022

Mark Prater

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Open your Bibles to Proverbs Ch. 4:1.

I have so looked forward to this Council of Elders meeting and I have so looked forward to this particular State of the Union for a couple of different reasons.

First, to thank you men. So, on behalf of every member of the leadership team, we thank God for you. We thank God for how you have pastored and led your churches through the past years. This past year, that has been filled with both joys and challenges. We thank God for your earnest participation in our partnership through just the many ways that you serve extra-locally outside of your church, and for your very generous giving to our family of churches.

Each of the men on the leadership team and I, we count it a real joy. We use this term a lot - privilege. But it is a real privilege that we have to labor alongside each of you for the cause of Christ. I've looked forward to this particular week because we are going to celebrate, as JT mentioned, 40 years of God's grace as a denomination, as a family of churches.

I've looked forward to this particular State of the Union because we're going to dream a bit today, and we're going to talk about the next 40 years and what that might look like.

What I do know is this: God has been good to protect and preserve and strengthen and, I believe, equip us for the next 40 years as a family of churches - should his sovereign will allow that and should the Lord tarry in his return.

So, I want to give you some thoughts today about our future as a family of churches and, in doing so, I really want to admit my limitations, either in my gifting or my ability to see clearly what the future holds for Sovereign Grace. I also don't want to sound presumptuous.

I don't have any idea what God's good sovereign plan is for us in the future. What I do know is this: God has been faithful - hasn't he? God has been faithful! and He has been good to Sovereign Grace. We, in faith, can expect, we

can be expectant, that he will be faithful to us yet again in the future, as we rely upon His grace to do all that He's called us to do.

So, as we look to the future, I want us to ponder the path that we are going to take. If you were here last year in the State of the Union, I called us to take faith-filled risks for Christ. And, as we ponder the path that is before us, we will need to take faith-filled risks for Christ, all the while relying upon the grace that He will supply.

The title of this State of the Union is: The Sure and Righteous Path

We're going to read just two verses here in Proverbs - Proverbs 4:26 and 27.

“26

Ponder the path of your feet;

then all your ways will be sure.

27

Do not swerve to the right or to the left;

turn your foot away from evil.”

May God bless the preaching of his word.

Robert Frost ends his well-known poem entitled *The Road Not Taken* with these words:

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.”

Robert Frost is right. Choosing the right path - It does make all the difference. Proverbs says as much. The author of Proverbs, as you know, uses the word path or the plural form paths 23 times to contrast two different kinds of paths that we can take.

There is a wrong path and there is a righteous path and choosing the right path, it makes all the difference. So, as I've prayed about our future as a family of churches, I believe that there are before us two distinctly different paths. Today, choosing the right path will make all the difference for our future.

One of those paths is marked by the compromise of truth, an accommodation of unbiblical views, a desire to make everyone happy - regardless of the cost. And that path leads to a weak, joyless, stagnant family of churches.

The other one, the other path, is marked by a fidelity to God's Word, a God-inspired courage for us and our churches to stand for our convictions, a grace-infused pursuit of holiness, regardless of the cost. That path leads to a happy, growing, fruitful family of churches.

See, that first path produces churches that don't resemble the church that Christ came to build, and therefore they are not the compelling witness they are called to be.

The second path, the one I want us to go down, produces happy, holy, healthy, growing churches that, despite challenges and despite persecution, we make much of Christ in all that we do and we keep our compelling witness in this dying world.

I put this quote in your outline - Carl Trueman wrote an article in May published in "First Things" entitled "Is God a Therapist?" and this is what he says:

"I would anticipate that within five years we will witness a significant disruption across all the major representatives of the Christian faith. The fault lines will run between those who find a way to accommodate to the world's terms of good citizenship and those whose fidelity to Christ will lead to varying degrees of internal exile within this earthly city. The former will ultimately accept the collapse of biblical anthropology, repudiating its implications for sexual morality, for human identity, and for addressing the various socially constructed problems we now face, such as those of race and gender. The latter will maintain Christian teaching and be decried as being at best naive and at worst, bigoted." - Carl Trueman

Brothers, I want Sovereign Grace to be a part of that latter group - that latter group of churches that continue to lead our churches down the path of building, again, happy, holy, gospel-centered, theologically sound churches that are fruitful and growing. And we must do this not only to bring God glory, but it's also those kind of churches, I'm learning, that people want to be a part of.

As I've traveled over the last year and a half, especially since the pandemic, there's a profile of certain kind of people that is coming to our churches. People are looking for churches that not only bring God glory, they're looking for churches that have an unwavering commitment to God's word and, as a result, they want to be in churches who know they will be faithful to preach God's word and it's there that those churches are dependable and safe, and it's there that they can raise their family with like-minded people. That's what we're seeing in Sovereign Grace. People like that are coming into our churches.

So, for us to be those kind of churches, it will require courage. It will require risk and faith in God for His sustaining grace.

As I look into the future, these are the six things that I see.

1. A holy family of churches that contrasts the culture.

Now, much is said today about fighting the culture wars and fighting the culture wars we must do. However, I think the most effective way that we can counter the post-Christian culture is to pursue holiness in our churches and continue down the path of righteousness.

Peter said as much when he wrote to his churches that were facing cultural pressures in their day. He says in 1 Peter 1:13-16:

“13 Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. **14** As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, **15** but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, **16** since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.””

So, what did Peter do in calling his people to action? He preached a grand and great and Holy God. That's what he did. Then he called them to be holy as he is holy. And he reminded them in that pursuit of holiness of the grace that is

theirs in the Gospel of Jesus Christ which allowed them to progressively grow in Christ, and it allowed them to keep their compelling witness for Christ.

Alan Kreider has written a book entitled *“The Patient Ferment of the Early Church - The Probable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire”*. He was writing about the churches Peter wrote to and he begins his introduction in the book by saying this:

“The growth of the Christian Church in the Roman Empire is mysterious. Scholars who spend their entire lives studying this phenomenon continue to find it surprising. Why did this minor mystery religion from the eastern Mediterranean - marginal, despised, discriminated against, grow substantially, eventually supplanting the well-endowed, respectable cults that were supported by the Empire? What enabled Christianity to be so successful that, by the fifth century, it was the established religion of the Empire?” - Alan Kreider

He then summarizes a number of scholars who've wrestled with this and gives their thoughts.

And then Kreider, he adds his four observations, his four thoughts. I'm just going to give you two here. The first - what marked them was patience. He says, “Christians believe that God is patient and that Jesus embodied patience and they concluded that they, trusting in God, should be patient - not controlling events, not anxious or in a hurry, and never using force to achieve their ends.”

And the second observation is what he calls habitus. It means “habitual, Christlike behavior”. He says this, “The sources rarely indicate that the early Christians grew in number because they won arguments. Instead, they grew because their habitual behavior, rooted in patience, was distinctive and intriguing. Their behavior said what they believed. It was an enactment of their message and the sources indicate that it was their habitus more than their ideas that appealed to the majority of non-Christians who came to join them.”

Brothers, let us build holy churches by calling our people to live holy lives so that the holiness we are progressively growing in reflects what we believe, and it tells people we know this God who is grand and holy. And, as we do that, may holiness mark the witness of our church. Now, to do that, brothers, what you must do is you must preach a grand and great and holy God.

You must do that consistently. Hold out a grand and holy God before your people. Not only to contrast the culture, but I believe it's the means of grace that we will use to resist the culture.

Again, Truman says this. "That great God, the one I just mentioned about, the one that Peter writes about, that great God is in short supply among those who profess to be Christians today. The anthropomorphic "godlet" of so much modern evangelicalism is a sad substitute for the Christian God of the Nicene Fathers. Even more damaging is "God the Therapist", a function of the modern cult of victimhood that has deprived us of the ability to distinguish the real suffering epitomized by the true martyrs from the trivial discomforts that the social media generation now routinely parades as martyrdom. Both approaches, approaches that ultimately make man the measure of all things must be repudiated."

See, we counter the modern cult of victimhood by preaching a holy God who doesn't exist to serve us, but we exist to serve him. Amen?!

And when we call our churches to live holy lives in humble submission to God's Word, we will will encounter the culture by living lives that are distinctly different, because it tells people that we really, really know this God and we believe in this God of the Bible.

And it's churches like that, more and more, that are showing a contrast and people are making choices and it's churches like that that they want to go to. See, in fighting the culture wars, may holiness be our main weapon. Amen?!

And when we must fight the culture wars with our words, and we will need to do that, we will need to stand for truth, may we not sound like the world that is full of angst and has all this finger pointing going on.

Kevin DeYoung wrote an article in June entitled "Seven Principles for Cultivating a Christian Posture toward the World". He had this pithy little sentence that I think captures what we're aiming for in tone so well.

He says this: "Courtesy, wherever possible. Clarity at all costs."

What I like about that is that he does not compromise on truth. We will be clear about truth at all costs, but where possible, we will communicate that truth with courtesy and with charity and with graciousness. Because we are different than the world.

I would also be remiss in wrapping up this point if I didn't remind each of us of our call to live holy lives. We must lead by example. We must, by the grace of God and with the help of the Spirit, we must be men who are growing in Christ's likeness so that our churches will follow our example and so that our churches will be churches that contrast the culture. And, in resisting the culture, may holiness be our main weapon.

2. A theologically sound family of churches that contrasts theological liberalism.

Now, to avoid any of us misunderstanding, this is what I mean by theological liberalism:

Theological liberalism means compromising the orthodox theology found in God's Word for the sake of accommodating unbiblical views in the church.

By the way, those cultural pressures, they come from both the cultural left and they come from the cultural right.

You know that.

And pastors and churches today are facing pressures to concede on issues like gender ideology, like sexual orientation, the definition of marriage, and so much more. And all of those issues, you know this, they are rooted in sound orthodox theology.

See, here's what we've got to be clear about: If we as pastors give in to the secular pressures that upon our churches and if we concede even a millimeter of our sound doctrine, it will never be enough.

Carl Trueman says it so well about these secular pressures:

“The changing morality of the secular elite is a fickle mistress. Conceding too much is never enough for Christianity's enemies.” - Carl Trueman

Trueman's right - Conceding too much will never be enough. And so, on this day, I want us to be clear as pastors, on this day, we commit together that you and I, we will not concede.

We will not concede our theological foundations that are found in God's Word and in our Statement of Faith, because we know that if we concede, it will never be enough.

So let's commit to that today.

You're seeing this happening in the Southern Baptist world right now.

I don't want to speak disparagingly about them, you know that, but I think there's a lesson to learn from them. In deciding to do an independent investigation of their executive committee, I believe they conceded on issues of biblical justice and, in doing so, in conceding on those issues of biblical justice, what we're seeing play out is that it's not enough, that there's much more that has to be done. And so, there they are, in turmoil, because I believe they conceded on a theological issue.

Now conceding too much not only weakens our churches, you know what, it does?

It makes them stagnant.

Kevin Young wrote another article in June - He had a good month in June, by the way.

He wrote an article entitled "Lessons from Mainline Decline" and it was about the PC (USA). And this is what he said:

"In its recently released demographic report, the Presbyterian Church USA, PC (USA) announced it's lost another almost 52,000 members. From a membership peak of 4.25 million in 1965, the PC (USA) rolls are now down to 1.19 million and that membership decline hardly conveys the severity of the situation. In the last reporting year, the denomination dissolved 104 congregations and dropped four presbyteries and more than 40% of the congregations have fewer than 50 members. Almost a third of the denomination is more than 70 years old, and another 26% are older than 55 - keep in mind that only 16% of Americans are 65 and older. The PC (USA) is literally dying." - Kevin DeYoung

Now, DeYoung gives two factors in his article that make mainline decline, as he says, a cautionary tale. For the sake of time. I'm just going to just mention one of the factors - and that is theological liberalism.

"Theological liberalism is supposed to be attuned to our times and therefore relevant for people today. But actually the path of accommodating theology on our theological convictions, accommodating theologically has led to not the growth of the PC (USA), it has led to their decline.

Relevant Christianity doesn't stay relevant for long. Reinterpreted Christianity may appeal to the deconstructing, but it does not win the hearts and minds of the lost. We have no guarantee that faithful churches will thrive. After almost 60 years of constant mainline decline, we have a pretty good idea of how churches die.” - Kevin DeYoung

Choosing the right path. It makes all the difference. The challenge before us is not to give in to the pressures, but to remain on the theologically sound path that we are on.

As Proverbs 4 says,

“On that path, all your ways will be sure.”

And that's a path that is marked by a lot of work.

And so I want to thank Jeff Purswell, who's here, who has led us so well theologically as our Director of Theology.

Thank you, Jeff.

And so much work went into our Statement of Faith.

For those of you that have served or are serving on the Theology Committee, we want to thank you for your work on the Statement of Faith. Thank you, guys. Thank you so much.

Now, I'm not concerned about Sovereign Grace pastors making big theological compromises. I don't think the men in this room will make compromises on things like substitutionary atonement or our Trinitarian theology. I am concerned, we are concerned, as a leadership team, about the potential of making small compromises that would weaken your church. So let me just give you a category - our complementarian theology.

And I say that because more and more, it seems like in evangelicalism, we're the only complementarians remaining. Right? I don't think that's true, but it feels that way at times. And that can be pressure for us to compromise. And, in particular, what we're seeing in evangelicalism is that this pressure of women teaching.

Now, I want to be clear, women teaching women we are all for. You should deploy gifted women who can teach in your church to teach other women.

We're talking about women teaching men and women in the gathered setting. You can't compromise there.

Again, we're seeing that play out in the SBC our way related to what's happening at Saddleback and Rick Warren and them ordaining elders and them teaching and the SBC at their last convention in the summer, they chose not to censure them or remove them from the convention. Rather they kicked the can down the road to study it.

That's not a good sign and we don't want to go down that particular road.

See, as pastors we must remain vigilant for small theological compromises and resist any pressure to make those compromises by standing on our Statement of Faith and, most importantly, standing on Scripture itself.

See, building theologically sound churches will provide a stark contrast to the progressive Christianity that we're seeing more and more in evangelicalism and, as a result, people are going to notice and they're going to see the path that Sovereign Grace has chosen. And, because of the path that we are choosing - a theologically sound path - people are going to say, "I'm going to go there because I think that church is going to be a safe haven where where I can raise my family."

It was this summer I was talking with Darrel Schiel about the new people that are just moving into the Houston area. Darrel, if you don't know, is a senior pastor of Sovereign Grace Church in Pearland, Texas, which is on the south side of Houston. We were talking, and he was saying that these new folks that are coming in from outside of the Houston area, outside of Texas, really, they're coming back.

"And I've asked them, why are you coming back to our church? And they're saying, 'you preach God's word, you're not compromising God's word. You call us to apply God's word, and we can't find that in other churches, not even in this area of Houston. And so that's where we want to be'."

That's the kind of people that we want in our churches, right?

And that's the kind of people that will come to our churches.

Brothers, let us be courageous to build theologically sound churches.

3. A unified family of churches that keeps our witness.

God is not only preserved and protected Sovereign Grace, He's also given us - I'm using three words very intentionally here - He's given us theological, ecclesiological, and relational unity that we've had to fight for. We had to fight for that.

I believe that the troubles we've walked through have made us stronger and more united for such a time as this and, I believe, for our future as well.

You know this.

Our world is more fractured. Evangelicalism is more divided. And yet, little Sovereign Grace is more happy and more united. It's amazing, isn't it - what God has done?

And the theologically stable path that we must stay on means that, in the future, we may have less friends, we may have less brothers who agree...

But you know what? We will have one another and that will be a joy and that will be good and pleasant, as Psalm 133 says.

See, our unity as a family of churches is not just something that we are given by God to enjoy - It is given to us to keep our witness for Christ in a dying world.

Jesus said as much in John 17 in his prayer.

“20 I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, **21** that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

God uses the unity of the church to convince unbelievers that God is real. People feel the division. You know this. You're talking to people that are coming to your churches. They feel the division and the polarization each and every day in our culture. And what they're looking for is a community that is united and loves one another and loves one another even when they disagree.

Which gives me an opportunity to thank Jon Payne, our Director of Church Development, for leading us in taking that elder health evaluation tool and helping our elderships be healthy and united first.

John, thank you for doing that. Thank you Jared and Mickey and Jon, who wrote that a couple of years ago. Jon is moving that forward.

Can we thank Jon for that particular work? Thank you. You use that tool, brothers, because your unity as an eldership directly affects your unity as a church.

United, loving, community in the local church. It is this now in our world, it is a respite to a world of division. May people see that kind of witness in our churches.

Additionally, you're talking to pastors in your area. Pastors feel the divisions in evangelicalism. Pastors feel a division even in their denominations that some of them are a part of. And they're sort of wondering - what are they going to do? They're looking for a compelling alternative.

There's a well-loved pastor in our area that we know and I won't use his name or denomination. He'll never be a part of Sovereign Grace given his theological convictions, but he's watching what's happening as denomination and he's really perplexed. He doesn't know what he's going to do. When he looks at Sovereign Grace, he sees - he may not agree with us in all this theology - but he sees us remain committed to our theology and he sees us happy and he sees us united in moving forward.

So brothers, our hard fought for unity is not something just for us to enjoy. It will shine even brighter. It will keep our witness in a dying world.

4. A growing family of churches.

So, choosing the path of holiness and theological fidelity and unity is the path that leads us there. It leads someplace. It goes somewhere. It leads to growth and fruitfulness.

So the fourth observation that Alan Kreider gives about the growth of the early church is what he calls ferment.

“Early Christians did not write explicitly about ferment, but I find it a useful metaphor to describe the way their patient growth occurred. It operated reticently, by what theologian Origen called God’s ‘invisible power.’ It was not susceptible to human control, and its pace could not be sped up. But in the ferment, there was a bubbling energy-a bottom-up inner life-that had immense potential.” - Alan Kreider

And that's what we've seen, brothers, in the last seven or eight years in Sovereign Grace - Opportunities to partner with and to plant churches throughout the world that were not subject to human control whatsoever.

Rather, they are a reflection of the invisible power of God. And because of that bubbling energy, because of that ferment, because of that invisible power, I believe that we are about to enjoy a wave of growth in Sovereign Grace - a wave of growth in three particular ways.

First, I see that growth coming to us in the form of adopting more churches, both in and outside of the United States we currently have, and this number is actually wrong.

It should be higher.

Presently we have at least 75 churches (and it's higher) outside of the United States asking to be adopted into Sovereign Grace and we believe that we will adopt about 60 of those in the next 2 to 3 years.

You take those numbers and you just thank God for his invisible power and we thank God for Dave Taylor, our Director of Global Missions.

We just changed his title, by the way, to Director of Global Missions. Dave, we thank God for you and all the travel that you are doing throughout the world.

Can we thank Dave for what he's doing?

We also thank God for Rick Richardson and all that he is doing in Latin America and Mexico in particular. But not just Rich. Joselo, you are the best ambassador for Sovereign Grace. We have Carlos, Helman, Manolo, Abelardo. We thank God for all of your work in Mexico and throughout Latin America. Can we thank our our brothers what they're doing?

It was just two or three weeks ago that Dave Taylor and Dave York and Lynne Baird and Tony Walsh and Riley Spring were in the Philippines and it was quite a ten days that they had in the Philippines - Many stories on that trip. On the front end of the trip, they ordained Jeffrey Jo on the church's 30th anniversary, and they ordained the next week in Nilo, a man who has at least 30 years of pastoral ministry experience.

It was wonderful for both churches.

The week in between those two wonderful events, those men did 15 oral ordination exams. Yeah, they worked hard. If you see Dave look a little tired, you know why... Or Dave York. Or Lynn. Or Tony. Or Riley. Now, the result of those 15 ordination oral exams, ten passed and five did not pass.

Now, that tells you a couple of things. First of all, for those that did not pass, it tells you that our ordination standards are being evenly applied throughout the world. That's the door through which full partnership happens. The guys aren't afraid to fail them if we don't believe they're ready to join us theologically - that's important as we build.

It also tells us and, by the way, those men that didn't pass, we will work with them because they represent five different churches. And if they want to give it another go, we're going to do all we can to help them. Those other ten pastors that passed represent ten different churches. And so by the spring of next year, we will move from two partner churches in the Philippines to 12 full partner churches in the Philippines.

It's amazing.

It's that ferment and it's God's invisible power.

Now we can hear all these statistics about what's happening outside the States and, for the guys in the States, we can think all that growth is happening out there. Brothers, get ready because I think we're going to have pastors who want to be adopted into Sovereign Grace here in the States.

They're going to see our theological convictions, they're going to see the road that we are going down, and they're going to see the compromises the other denominations are making. They're going to say, "I think our choice is clear, I think we need to join Sovereign Grace". Just a few months ago, I did a Zoom meeting at the request of my friend Michael Granger to talk with his friend Dylan Budd, who leads Roots Church in Costa Mesa, California, a guy that Eric had already known.

But I wanted to honor Michael's request.

And so, Dylan, his church is 15 years old, and he said "We've just been tracking you for a number of years. We've watched what you're doing. We've read your Statement of Faith. I think we're in a place where this just feels like home to us and I want to lead my elders and my church potentially into Sovereign Grace."

I connected him with Eric and asked Eric to help him.

There are going to be more churches, there are going to be more pastors like him because they're aware of the theological compromises that some denominations are making. And you know what? They're looking for a home. They're looking for a theological home. They're looking for a gospel centered home and they're looking for a home where they can build relationally and we just want to adopt them and love them and do ministry along side of them.

There are pastors out there that are tired of the arguing and they want to get on with mission. That's what Dylan told me. "We're just looking for a home where we can get on with mission."

Let us do that with them. Amen.

Second wave of growth that I see is in the area of church planting. I see a wave of growth we're about to enjoy in the planting of new churches as evangelicalism makes compromises and continues to fracture, people are going to watch Sovereign Grace, I believe, and they're going to say, "I want a Sovereign Grace in my city".

Additionally, there seems to be this ferment, there seems to be this work of God's invisible power through the Spirit where He is stirring some young men in our churches who have a heart to plant churches.

We had a regional conference for our region in the Northeast, a Life Together conference and a 20 year old man came up to me and said, "Mr. Prater, I want you to know I really want to plant a Sovereign Grace Church."

And I said, "I'm so glad you do. We're going to help you make that happen."

There are more and more guys out there that are like that.

Additionally, six of the seven summer internships that we financially supported, six of those seven were men in their twenties.

So we've got young men who are wanting to be in pastoral ministry. And when you talk with them about pastoral ministry, don't be afraid. It's too early to ask them to consider church planting. In addition to that, in the next two years and I put these stats in your outline in the next two years alone, we had 20 church plants, five in Africa, two in Latin America, one in Europe, eight in the Asia Pacific part of the world, and four in the United States.

Those four in the states: Warren, Pennsylvania, Charleston, South Carolina (where we pray that Perry Wang plants a Sovereign Grace Chinese speaking

church), Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and Yuma, Arizona where Ramon Flores is going to plant a Sovereign Grace Spanish speaking church.

So, four churches being planted in three different languages. That's amazing, isn't it? That's God's invisible power. And I can't move on from here without thanking Eric Turdbesky, who's just finishing up his role as our director of church planning while remaining on the leadership team.

Eric, you have inspired us, you've really done a great job of inspiring us to plant churches and we thank God for you. Can we thank Eric for how he has served us? Thank you. And there was a lot of work done.

I thank God for Mike Seaver and all of the guys in the Church Planting Group - Andy Farmer, Jeremy Oddy, Ricky Alcantar, Greg Dirnberger, everybody, all those guys.

You guys have done an amazing job in seeing churches planted. Can we thank God for Mike and all the guys in the Church Planting Group as well? Really well done. Really well done.

Now listen to this - if in the next two years through adoptions and church planting, if we were to add 80 churches, Sovereign Grace would move from 85 churches in 2022 to 165 churches in 2024.

And conservatively, if we grow at half that rate from 2025 to 2027, Sovereign Grace will expand from 85 churches now to 270 by 2027. That is God's invisible power. That is not human control. It is the Lord's doing and is marvelous in our eyes.

Now, some of you might read those numbers and you might be asking, isn't that growth too fast? And isn't that going to cause all kinds of problems? My answer to both those questions is yes and yes.

It's fast and we're going to have problems, but this is where we must respond to these God-given opportunities with a risky faith in God - believing that He will give us grace to steward the growth that He's given us.

In addition to that, because of our polity and because of the Global Partnership Plan BCO amendments that you passed last year, we now have an ecclesiastical structure and a clear process for churches to be adopted into Sovereign Grace to accommodate that growth that we're having throughout the world.

So think about this...Here's what God's been doing in the last decade - What God has been doing during some of our trials is prepare us to respond to the growth that he's given us. Not only by giving us these opportunities, but by giving us an ecclesiastical structure and a clear process to accommodate those those particular opportunities. Now, will there be issues? Yes, of course there will be issues. But I believe and you believe that God's grace will sustain us and God's grace will be greater.

By the way, I want to put this under the growth point. One of the things that I'm seeing and I'm keenly aware of that I see as we grow and many of your churches have grown since the pandemic, the issue I'm seeing has to do with a church's physical meeting space. More and more that is becoming more of an issue.

Churches that don't have a building or permanent meeting space. You're looking at existing structures that you want to remodel or you're looking at land and looking to build. And it costs a lot of money, right? I'm aware of that need and I'm working with Tommy Hill and a major donor to see how to financially address that need through maybe a loan program or maybe a fund that donors could give to, or maybe both, at least as an attempt to try to serve you so that you can have permanent homes in your community.

Third, I see a wave of growth coming in the form of conversions.

Since I've traveled throughout Sovereign Grace Churches, not in the States, but outside the States, throughout the pandemic and after the pandemic, I'm meeting more and more people who are not Christians. More unbelievers are coming to our churches and I believe they're seeing that we've chosen the right path.

I believe they realize that choosing the right path makes all the difference for them and they realize that we have kept our witness for Christ. And for that reason, I believe our witness for Christ is strong and we are poised for growth.

I was in Guadalajara, Mexico, I think it was in June or July - that church has doubled in size since the pandemic. They've had to move to two services to accommodate that growth. And now they're running out of room and they're not sure exactly what they're going to do.

On this particular Sunday, I had preached from Colossians 1:3-8..

Clearly the gospel is there and I preached the gospel and after the second service, I stepped away from the pulpit and a man came up to me with tears just streaming down his face. I can still see his face.

He said, "This is the first time I've ever been in a Christian church. And what you just said, it spoke to me."

And he just continued to weep.

It's people like that, brothers.

They're going to come to our churches and I want you to believe that. I want you to pray for that. I want you to warmly welcome them.

Here's why: Because the path we will choose makes all the difference. It leads to a lush, well-watered field that is filled with gospel growth and fruitfulness.

5. A globally diverse family of churches.

As I ponder the future in front of us, I see a global family of churches - churches led by Filipinos and Australians, Iranians, Indians, Nepalese, Koreans, Africans, Germans, Brits, Italians, Belarusians, Jamaicans, Mexicans, Costa Ricans, Colombians, Bolivians, Brazilians, Canadians and Americans. In fact, if you're here at this Council of Elders meeting and you do ministry, you have a church outside of the United States, would you guys just stand for just a moment? I want a visual of that. You guys, please stand. Can we just welcome these guys? Thank you, guys.

Imagine a pastor's conference that is globally diverse. We're going to have that this week. Twenty different nations are represented here this week at our conference. We currently have 19 partner churches outside of the United States and 35 candidate churches outside of the United States.

I put that little number 66 there because we have 66 partner churches in the States. So, a total 85 partner churches and 35 candidate churches is what marks Sovereign Grace. I believe this number will continue to grow with churches outside of the States because they're finding this - they're finding a theological compatibility. They're finding a gospel centered culture. And then, when they learn and experience that we build relationally, they're all in.

I was in at the Fieles conference in August. There were like 400 pastors there from 23 states and Mexico. They're also pastors from other parts of Latin America. Rich Richardson and Joselo and I, we led a lunch meeting for those that were there from Costa Rica.

Presently, we have a partner church in Costa Rica and we have two churches that are candidate churches - those pastors will be here this week - but there were 15 pastors at this lunch. I think we were all surprised! And they just began to interact with us. Some of those men at that lunch followed up and they have interest in pursuing Sovereign Grace.

Jeff and I were just in Germany last month and we led the first Sovereign Grace Europe Pastors Fellowship gathering.

Some of you were there and it was wonderful.

We had three pastors there from Belarus who are part of two churches in Minsk and they just experienced relationships and they went back home and they talked to other pastors in Belarus and Kyle Huber, who has been traveling to Belarus for over 20 years and is our point for us there, he emailed Dave and I this week and said, "Those guys went back home and they talked to their friends and the list of churches that are interested in joining Sovereign Grace in Belarus just grew from 2 to 8."

Because they experienced, not just theological compatibility and gospel centrality (which they enjoyed during the conference), they experienced rich relationships.

Here's what the Lord's doing. The Lord is giving us good, godly who can lead their nations throughout the world. Jeffrey Jo in the Philippines - a wonderful leader. Dyonah Thomas in West Africa. Michael Granger in East Africa. Carlos Contreras in Mexico - for 30 plus years. What Joselo does in traveling for us. Ed Omara, obviously, in Italy. Christian Wegert in Germany. We could go on and on.

I share that because I want to stop for a moment.

Look what God has done. Look what God has done!

He has given us an ecclesiastical structure and he has given us good leaders who will lead Sovereign Grace in their respective nations so that, there is a day coming soon, very soon, where we may - change the world may to will - we WILL have more churches outside the United States than we have inside the

United States. That would be wonderful in so many ways. And, in the next 5 to 10 years, we will have ecclesiastical nations in Mexico, the Philippines, Australia, Central America, South America and on the continent of Africa. And, as we expand globally, this is really what we're aiming for:

I want to say it very, very succinctly.

We want to build self-sustaining, interdependent churches and ecclesiastical nations.

Did you hear that? We want to build self-sustaining, interdependent churches and ecclesiastical nations. Now, we're not there yet. We're not close to being there yet, which means that has implications for the pastors here in the United States. We're in a place where we need to be generous. We need to be generous with our time and with our travel and with our money and with our resources and with our relational support - supporting our brothers outside the States as they all move towards self-sustainability.

And there may be some, given the economic conditions, where a complete self-sustainability may not be possible. But we want all of our churches moving towards self-sustainability and interdependence upon one another.

So, my American brothers, what I've learned is that we have much to learn from our brothers outside the United States. We have much to learn from them - So let us be learners, let us be servants, and let us be generous to our brothers outside the United States.

Because brothers, we are becoming a globally diverse family of churches. Amen.

6. A happy family of churches.

As I ponder the path that takes us into the future, I see a happy, joy-filled family of churches.

Scripture makes this connection between pursuing holiness and possessing happiness.

Psalm 119:35

35 Lead me in the path of your commandments,

for I delight in it.

Building theologically sound churches puts us on a path where, as Proverbs 4 says, “All your ways they will be sure and they will produce stability, and they will engender trust and joy in our churches.”

As I think about that, I thank God for Jared Mellinger on our leadership team who has worked really hard the last couple of years producing the Sovereign Grace Journal, intended to be written for you and mostly for the members of your church to help them grow and their love for Christ and to help them grow in their Christ likeness.

It is a tool you must use.

There are some of you that are using it now. The most recent one on Our Shared Values, you're giving it to every potential new member. You're saying, “You want to know what Sovereign Grace is? Read this.”

So, Jared, your work has strengthened us and we thank God for you. Could we thank Jared, just the work that he has done?

This happy, holy, theologically sound path? It is a good path because we're going to go down it together, united.. And it is good and pleasing when brothers dwell together and churches dwell together in unity.

As we celebrate 40 years of God's grace this week as a family of churches, we can rejoice and we can be thankful for C.J., our founder, who built a family of churches on the gospel, and through his leadership and preaching, cultivated a gospel centrality that continues to mark us and I believe will mark us as we head down this sure and righteous path.

It is that path, that holy, theologically sound, happy path that makes all the difference. And that's the path that we want to go down because it leads to wonderful gospel fruitfulness and gospel growth. And you know what that means? We will find our greatest delight in seeing Christ receive all the glory for the work that He has done.

Let me close with this.

Alan Kreider says:

“The key to expansion of the early Christian church and I believe it's a key to ours, was ordinary Christians. God used, not influential or powerful people,

but ordinary Christians to achieve a huge end. The churches grew in many places, taking varied forms. They proliferated because of the faith that ordinary Christians embodied was attractive to people who were dissatisfied and encountered Christians who embodied a new manner of life that pulled them toward what the Christians called “rebirth” into a new life.”

Choosing the right path makes all the difference.

So as we choose that path together today for our future, a holy, happy, theologically sound group of churches comprised of ordinary pastors like us and comprised of ordinary Christians that fill our churches, we can have faith that our manner of life, it will be not only different, it will be even today attractive to those all around us who are dissatisfied.

As I think about our 40 years and look back with gratitude, I look also forward in the next 40 years and I think about this day and what I'm calling us to this day and I pray that 40 years from now, ordinary Christians in our churches and ordinary pastors leading those churches, they look back and they say this about us:

Two roads diverged in a chaotic world and they, the pastors of Sovereign Grace, they took the one less traveled by and that made all the difference.

Amen.