

Aiming for Restoration, Comfort and Agreement: Why It's a Great Idea to Stay in SGM¹

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"I confess I would rather, much rather, spend all my days...healing the ...schisms that are among Christians than one hour in justifying our divisions, even [when they may be valid]. But who is sufficient [to try it]? The closing of differences among Christians is like opening the book in the Revelation, – there is none able or worthy to do it, in heaven or in earth, but the Lamb: [and it will not happen until he exerts his great power to do it]. In the meantime...reconciliation among all [believers] is our duty...When men have labored as [hard to apply] the principle of forbearance as they have...to subdue other men to their opinions, religion will have another appearance in the world."²

Caveats and Qualifiers

In a season of controversy, nuance matters. As I begin this paper please know that I am very aware that there is a valid but mostly unwritten counter-balance to every point I make in it. I loathe simplistic remedies that lack nuance; in the end these remedy not a thing at all.

However, I cannot qualify every thought in a paper like this or it will become a book. I hope instead to insert enough comments to let you know that the times are challenging and the remedies are complicated—and I know it. Hopefully there will be adequate nuance to help you know that I know—and to keep you reading to the end.

A Turbulent Time

The *Sovereign Grace Ministries* family has a history marked by uncommon blessing. If my calculations are correct SGM has planted 70+ churches, adopted 20+ more, trained many dozens of pastors, had a meaningful

¹ This is the first of two papers written to address the current disagreements and divisions within *Sovereign Grace Ministries*. The second is called: *United Division: How to Separate to the Glory of God*.

² *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. 13, *Banner of Truth* 1991. p 95, text modernized and brackets added by TMS.

impact on ministries in 20-30 countries, produced a vast reservoir of worship music that has helped to quench the worship thirst of thousands, published books and materials that have served to bring the gospel back into the center where it belongs, and provided worship and leadership training for many over three decades. These are no small things—and they are the fruit of deeply intentional, God-anointed partnership.

But a season of turbulence has come upon us. Ours is a sad moment in Sovereign Grace's history—one marked by significant disagreements, accompanied by temptations to equally significant sins. My prayer is that we will hear our Savior's call to practice an over-matching grace that will render these disagreements and temptations powerless before us.

The Happier Side of Conflict

Through the years a number of studies have been done in which couples who have experienced marriage crisis have been researched long after the crisis. One report reads like this:

"Conducted by a team of leading family scholars headed by University of Chicago sociologist Linda Waite, the study found no evidence that unhappily married adults who divorced were typically any happier than unhappily married people who stayed married.

"Even more dramatically, the researchers also found that two-thirds of unhappily married spouses who stayed married reported that their marriages were happy five years later. In addition, the most unhappy marriages reported the most dramatic turnarounds: among those who rated their marriages as very unhappy, almost eight out of 10 who avoided divorce were happily married five years later..."

"...To avoid divorce, many assume, marriages must [first] become happier. But it is at least equally true that in order to get happier, unhappy couples...must first avoid divorce."³

I am not ready to equate the sacred marriage bond with the partnership of churches. While they are similar they are not the same. Marriage is inviolable in ways church affiliations are not. But I think there's a human principle (not to mention a divine one) revealed in these marriage studies: *there is a happier side of conflict*—a side that is reached, not by leaving

³ For a report on the study, "Does Divorce Make people Happy?" see http://www.americanvalues.org/html/r-unhappy_ii.html

conflict but by enduring through it. Joy comes, not by escaping or even resolving every relational dispute, but by *outlasting* it.⁴

I think this is a word to all of us in all our relationships—in family, in friendship, in church, and in our family of churches. There is something profoundly biblical, deeply strengthening, and ultimately joy-giving in working through conflict all the way to the other side—something that can never be experienced by those who leave while it’s still going on.

In this paper I plead the value—the great virtue and surpassing benefit—of church members and churches staying put in their varying ecclesiastical relationships if it is at all possible. In *Sovereign Grace Ministries*, I believe there is a joy, a strength, a mission-blessing, and a sweet delight that awaits us on the other side of our present controversy—if we will ride out the storm together.

Fighting for Unity

I should begin by saying that I do not know what efforts each SGM-related man has exerted for the sake of unity. My voice really is sounded from the cheap seats. I don’t know how many conversations each of you has had, how many confessions you have made, how many true offences you have experienced, how much gracious forgiveness you have given. You may have already demonstrated more grace than I ever will. God knows. God smiles. And God will remember.

But can I share what I think I see? What I *think* I see is pastors and churches leaving—in some cases prematurely. I *think* I see pastors and churches so battle-fatigued over the efforts to reconcile that they are anxious to move on. This certainly is understandable and it may even be valid—for again I do not know how hard you (or anyone else) has pursued peace and unity.

But on the other hand, in this paper I’d like to offer a number of reasons why continuing the fight to stay together may make sense, and can lead to joy. My hope is that if any are on the way out the door, they will pause long enough to consider what follows.⁵

Some may have already made up their minds to leave. If so I mean it with all my heart: you have my prayers for an unprecedented abundance of joy

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ If at the end of the day, your conscience tells you to go—if you really believe that you must leave—can I ask that you read my second paper?

and blessing in your life, ministry and church! I know that the Lord our God is going to smile on you with a favor you simply cannot measure or imagine. I know this because he has said he would (Ephesians 3:20)!

But with that said with a full and affectionate heart, here is my two-fold goal in this paper: (1) to call my brothers to the kind of unity-restoring effort to which God calls us, and (2) to present some reasons why fighting to stay together is worth the effort.

Aiming for Restoration

I do believe that there is such a thing as *united division*—separating when it serves the mission and peace of the church (I have written another paper about that). But at the moment, I wonder if all who are contemplating departure (or who have decided to stay) have tried hard enough to keep us all together.

Before we accept departures as a *fait accompli* we need to ask if we've devoted due energy to remain intact in united love. God calls us to *aim for restoration*. Here is the Voice of God:

"Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss" (2 Corinthians 13:11-12).

The disposition commanded in this text stirs my depths. These imperatives provoke me to ask: *"Have I in this present SGM moment lived out what this inspired text demands?"* Brother: have you?⁶

Aim for Restoration

The Greek commands us to aim for healing, a mending of hearts and affections; a restoration to wholeness in our relationships. It is used of setting a broken bone, mending nets (Mark 1:19), restoring the fallen (Galatians 6:1), filling what is lacking (1 Thessalonians 3:10), and framing out what is to be built (Hebrews 11:3).

That Paul has in mind the re-setting, repairing, restoring, replenishing, and rebuilding of broken relationships is clear from his use of the same word in 1 Corinthians 1:10:

⁶ This paper will contain lots of questions like this. They are not meant to condemn but to provide fuel for self-reflection leading to self-awareness and the work of the Spirit in us all.

"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united [i.e.-mended, restored, healed, filled up, and rebuilt] in the same mind and the same judgment."

So Paul begins (1 Corinthians 1) and ends (2 Corinthians 13) his Corinthian correspondence with an appeal for restored, rebuilt, and healed relationships—not a bad model to emulate.

Has restoration been the *beginning* and the *end*, our first concern and our last thought in all we have said and done in recent time? Is our priority to mend the wounds that have ripped open our *Sovereign Grace Ministries* family? Is my present passion to heal my brother—even the one who has wounded me?

For some dear brothers who have labored and loved tirelessly for reconciliation it clearly has been so. As for me I'm left to wonder: Has restoration been my conscious burden and priority intention in all things?

Comfort One Another

This could be translated, *be comforted*. However, in the Corinthian context in which there were so many relational issues and so much suffering inflicted by one brother upon another, it appears more likely that Paul is calling these folks to comfort each other.

In conflict our aim must be to comfort our brothers, not to correct or conquer them. We have SGM brothers—some have led or left or lingered—who are hurting. Has comfort played a prominent role in all our prayers and words and deeds?

I know it has to be more nuanced than this. Comfort and confrontation are not mutually exclusive. We truly can desire another's comfort by addressing another's sins—and I am eager to believe this has been the intention even of some of our harshest critics (even if expressed in less than godly and Christ-like ways). But I am aiming here at actual words and choices. Which has dominated our words and deeds: to address perceived wrongs or comfort real sorrows? Are we more concerned for the care that others need or for the crisis they may have caused?

Agree with One Another

Paul's Greek commands us to *be of one mind*. The New Testament calls us to one-minded unity time and again (Romans 12:16; 15:5; Philippians 2:2; 3:15, 16; 4:2). It is similar to the "one accord" refrain repeated throughout the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25; see also Romans 15:6).

As I argue in my second paper, this cannot mean that we are to agree on everything. What it must mean that we are to agree on all the main things, and to keep those main things main. We are to be of one mind in and on what matters most, and then we are to agree to show grace in everything else.

Live in Peace

In this text and in many others like it we are called to seek, cultivate, establish, and preserve peace. Here is a sampling:

- *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"* (Matthew 5:9).
- *"...Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another"* (Mark 9:50).
- *"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all"* (Romans 12:18).
- *"For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding"* (Romans 14:17-19).
- *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility..."* (Ephesians 2:13-14).
- *"And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful..."* (Colossians 3:14-15).
- *"Be at peace among yourselves"* (1 Thessalonians 5:13).
- *"Strive for peace with everyone..."* (Hebrews 12:14).
- *"But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace"* (James 3:17-18).
- *"Whoever desires to love life and see good days...let him seek peace and pursue it"* (1 Peter 3:10, 11).

I don't know about you, but the sheer number of these *peace* texts together with the aggressive action verbs connected to them (pursue, strive, seek, make) are enough to grab my attention, convict my conscience, and redouble my efforts. Do you feel their force?

Greet One Another with a Holy Kiss

This isn't a meaningless tag line; it's a call to expressive welcome and visible affection. It reveals how we are to feel about all our brothers and how we are to demonstrate that affection to each another. You can imagine how tough this would have seemed to the Corinthians if you review the litany of their inter-personal offences in Paul's first letter to them.

They were told to embrace and kiss brothers that had done some pretty rough stuff to them. Slander, bigotry, mistreatment of the poor by the rich, litigiousness, pride over gifts, disdain of others and their roles, abuse of liberty on the one hand and legalistic taboos on the other, bad leadership—it's all there in Corinth. Yet these brothers were called to greet each other with a kiss of affection and welcome. Their affection was to be real and visible.

A Simple Test Question

I have a simple question at this point: have we all pursued a 2 Corinthians 13 spirit toward all our brothers in *Sovereign Grace*? I ask myself, I ask our leaders, I ask our pastors, I ask our critics: *Has our single-minded aim been restoration with a longing to comfort, with a fierce determination to agree on everything as much as is humanly possible this side of glory, in order to live in real and abiding peace with an affectionate love that greets with a kiss, a strong hearty handshake, an embrace of love?*

Is that how we viewed and greeted all we met at our recent conference? I was so grateful for—and quite frankly proud of—so many who I knew disagreed with each other, yet showed such affection. But it is reasonable and necessary to ask: is that how we have approached our every conversation, confrontation, and criticism in recent time? If not then departing brothers: it may be premature to leave. And remaining brothers: it may be premature to let folks leave without pressing forward in the pursuit of restoration and love.

Complete Effort

I need to ask one more text to inform us. It is a passage that tells us what to do and how to do it. Here it is:

"I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Have we been *sufficiently* "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (4:3)? *Sufficiently* is the operative word here brothers. The ESV's "eager" doesn't do justice to the Greek. It's variously translated as "make every effort", "give diligence", and "endeavor". We get a sense of the meaning if we couple terms like *eager* with *diligence* and *effort* and *labor*.

What Paul has in view here is something more than vague desire, passing interest, token effort. I'm not accusing anyone of any of these. I'm just saying that what Paul is commanding is something more than what I've put into the preservation of SGM unity. I know that some have labored mightily—and o what a debt we owe them!—but I'm not one of them. These papers are a small effort, but I must be willing to do more. Are you?

Reflection Questions: If I believe that I need to depart, can I say that I have done everything possible not to? Do I see departure as a measure of last resort—realizing that *last* resort is the resort that comes after all other reasonable alternatives have been tried? Am I able to say with all integrity that my departure is my final and only option? And if I am staying what have I done—and have I done enough—to help others stay too?

Why It's a Great Idea to Stay Together in SGM

It is worth making every effort to stay together. I want to offer several reasons why fighting to stay together makes good sense, and will add self-reflection questions to each, to help us think deeply enough about them.

1. *Staying together in unity is something for which Jesus both prayed and died* (John 17:20, 21; Ephesians 2:13-22).

- *Reflection Questions:* Have the implications of these texts weighed on my heart enough? Am I sure that my possible departure—or my current efforts to reconcile with those departing—have given due thought to the fact that I may be separating from a brother that Jesus prayed and died for, to reconcile him both to God and to me?

2. *Staying together in behalf of others, no matter what the personal cost, honors the cost which Christ paid for them (Romans 14:15; 1 Corinthians 8:11).*

- When I put personal interest, opinion, or preference over a brother I harm one for whom Christ died, rather than lay my life down for him, as Jesus did.
- *Reflection Questions:* Have I laid down my life for the unity of the churches? What have my efforts for unity cost me? Have I dug in my heels over any matter, making it more important than a brother for whom Jesus shed his blood?

3. *Staying together in love, partnership and one-minded purpose is the overwhelming call of the Word of God—so much so that it should be the Christian’s default mode.*

- Calls to unity are so loud and frequent in the Scriptures that staying together should be our instinctive prevailing instinct; with separation being a true last resort, an *only-if-there’s-no-way-to-avoid-it* option. I do believe that on occasion division can lead to unity, but that option is to be chosen only with fear and trembling before God.
- *Reflection Question:* Does the strong biblical insistence on unity and staying together make us tremble over departing—or being the possible cause of others departing?

4. *Staying together will allow us to experience more of the pronounced blessing upon countless lives that being together has produced.*

- Our past partnership has been wonderfully blessed (re-read Page 2, Paragraph 1 for some details).
- *Reflection Questions:* Why would we choose to risk such blessing for the future? If God has so blessed our partnership in the past, shouldn’t we be absolutely sure God intends for us to dissolve it?

5. *Staying together will enable us to finish the mission we have begun.*

- Churches are being planted. New gospel frontiers are being explored. Global partnerships are developing. Our combined resources—under the blessing of God—have led to unprecedented expansion, and the work has only just begun. How wonderful it would be to finish together what we have started together, or—more accurately—what God has started in us together (Philippians 1:3-6)!

- In my second paper I make a plea for those departing to consider whether they can cooperate in our mission even if they are convinced they cannot remain formally in the SGM partnership.
- *Reflection Questions:* Can we find a way to stay together or at least to stay cooperating in order to finish the wonderful work God has begun through us? With so much yet to be done—and so much history and success in doing it together—do we really need to accept a reduction or complete cessation of our cooperative efforts?

6. *Staying together will afford us time to heal the hurts and mend the angry and bitter wounds that honesty will confess now exist.*

- Brothers: I see anger on faces and hear it in voices. While separation sometimes needs to happen due to convictions, it is never permitted due to unreconciled personal grievances. It is never right to separate over offences or hurts.
- *Reflection Questions:* Is my thought about departing, or about letting others depart without more effort to preserve unity, rooted in real convictions or personal hurts? Can I create a real list of clear objective theological reasons why I believe that separation must happen—or will the effort yield more emotion than conviction?
- At one point we all promised to be a part of this family of churches. I would hope that we would stay a part—at least until we have done everything we can to heal our wounds. Premature departure will delay if not destroy any meaningful hope of reconciliation in the near future.
- *Reflection Questions:* Am I willing to stick around to give reconciliation a chance? Am I willing to get mediation to reconcile? Will I refuse to leave at least until I am in such a state that I can look into the face of Jesus and say with judgment day honesty: “My departure has absolutely nothing to do with hurt or anger or bitter feeling”?

7. *Staying together makes sense because we own a virtually complete one-mindedness in theology and practice.*

- Think about all we have in common. Even if we differ on polity and leadership style and practice, do these negate our vast commonalities? If you feel they do, then I’d ask that an alternative other than complete separation be considered—as I argue in *United Division*.
- *Reflection Questions:* How much do we agree on and what are the specifics? What do we really disagree on—and does this really matter?

8. *Staying together makes sense because we all need meaningful connectedness to a family of churches, and most of us are unlikely to find a more compatible match anywhere.*

- I have spent most of my ministry life without the kind of partnership that I've enjoyed in SGM. In part this is because I was foolish enough not to look for it; in part it was because I wasn't sure where to find something that fits. There are not many truly Reformed, charismatic, complementarian, elder-led, expressive-in-worship, extra-local care providing, mission-focused, expository preaching families of churches out there.
- I knew then and believe still today—that I need to be a part of a family of churches, and I knew it was highly unlikely I'd find another anywhere with which I can partner with such single-minded unity and wholehearted affection as with SGM.
- Please do not misread this. I am not pretending that *Sovereign Grace* is *better* than any other fellowship of churches. It is not. I am only saying that SG is the family of churches *that fits me best*. I'm a big guy—a 44-Long sized man; I don't fit well in a 42-Short or 52-Long jacket. The same goes with theology and partnerships.
- *Reflection Questions*: Where will I fit if not here? Have I given due thought to the question of my future affiliation and partnership? If not—and if I leave—might it be possible that I'm going to have to squeeze my 44-Long theology into a 38-Short partnership?

9. *Staying together will force us to learn how to disagree with grace; something we clearly do not do well now.*

- I see our present strong differences as an opportunity not a curse; here's our chance to learn how to get along even when we differ. When a watching Christian world warns us time and again—as it has in these recent months—that we are overly worked up over the issues that divide us, it ought to tell us something: not that these matters don't matter, but that they don't matter in the way and to the degree we think they do.
- We clearly are novices in the art of disagreement. Our immaturity is obvious—from top to bottom. When, in disputes over matters that are not at all the "main things", leaders fail to invite dissent on the one hand, or dissenters are angry and ready to leave on the other, profound immaturity is exposed.
- Ironically, this is a good reason to stay together. Never has SGM been better positioned to learn the wonderful humility lessons that only disagreement can teach. Staying together with men we love

and with whom we have history gives us a chance to mature in this most critical area in the context of proven relationships.

- I have much more to say about disagreeing with humility and love in my *United Division* paper. For now, I would argue simply that if we part company *now* we lose out on a chance to learn how to work through differences and come out on the other side stronger rather than weaker; more united rather than divided.
- *Reflection Questions:* Have I seen enough in my SGM brothers, and in the present Board, Polity Committee, and Leadership Team to gain faith for this process; to believe that we really are learning how to disagree and love each other more deeply in the experience? Will I step out in faith and lean into this challenge by choosing not to leave but to stay and talk it through to the end?

10. *Staying together provides an iron sharpens iron context for growth.*

- Differing opinions are iron on which other iron may be sharpened. When one of us believes in strong pastoral authority and another believes in a strong congregational voice, these are not *necessarily* mutually exclusive voices. It depends on how they are held and practiced. For this reason it is good that both speak, that both have a say. If humbly expressed and received, they might complement each other and provide a mutually sharpening effect. The same can be said about varying leadership styles and pastoral decision-making processes.
- *Reflection Question:* If we part over such matters how will we ever really sharpen each other's thinking, and refine each other's lives. How will we maintain the balance in theology and symmetry in practice that differing points of view produce?

11. *Staying together makes sense because of our increased polity-based accountability, and will strengthen that accountability in the process.*

- There are aspects of the new polity proposal that I would like to see done differently. I have preferences and even convictions that are not represented as strongly as I might wish. But I believe this proposal presents a foundation for a strong SGM future—if God wills and enables.
- The proposal—if approved—will provide new structures for care and accountability for every single man in *Sovereign Grace*. If SGM pastors fulfill their new role well, with wisdom, courage and conviction, SGM will move effectively from a founder led to a broad pastor and Board led movement. It will answer the concerns of those who feel SG has been too much dominated by the influence

of just one man or small group of men, and will set us on a trajectory of decentralized leadership with strong missional and pastoral care components.

- *Reflection Questions:* I may have real reasons, but am I sure that now is the time to leave when we are on the verge of the kind of real change for which so many have been calling? Why not stick around and be a part of the solution by keeping my support and voice in the mix, thereby helping to establish what has been started?

12. Staying together is an appropriate way to show indebted gratitude for how God has blessed and prospered us through SGM, and its leaders.

- Paul was not averse to appealing to the debt owed to him by others to argue for their right responses toward him and those he loved (Philemon 17-19; 2 Corinthians 6:11-13; 7:2; 12:11, 15). Paul uses similar logic in arguing for children to care for their parents in their old age (1 Timothy 5:3, 4). Those cared for and loved by leaders owe a debt to them.
- I am more than sure that our SGM leaders would be reticent to argue like Paul argued, but I need not be. I know I am indebted to SGM and its leaders in ways I can never repay, but I want to devote myself to trying. Staying together in the hard times is one way I can repay a few shekels worth of debt.
- *Reflection Questions:* Have my recent attitudes and actions reflected adequate gratitude for my SGM partnership and leaders? How long of a list of “things to be thankful for in my SGM experience” can I come up with—and who should I thank for them?

13. Staying together is an expression of faithful and loyal brotherhood—a distinctive mark of Christian love.

Leaving SGM does not necessarily imply the sin of disloyalty; it may imply the virtue of strong conviction. I would never presume to judge the loyalty of others for I do not know the precise convictions and opinions factoring into their decisions to leave SGM. Nevertheless, I do want to call attention to loyalty in this present hour. A few texts come to mind:

- Proverbs 17:17—“A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”
- Proverbs 18:24—“A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.”
- Hebrews 10:32, 33—“But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings,

- sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners [koinonos: fellowshippers, sharers, partakers] with those so treated."*
- 2 Timothy 4:16—"At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them!"
 - In this season several of our SGM leaders and friends have been accused of much. Some of it has been fair; much hasn't. Add in legal actions and movement-wide reputation-slaying assault, and I think it is a time to draw in and close—not in blind or slavish loyalty—but in true friendship and steadfast love. We need to identify and partner with those being ill-treated (Hebrews 10:32, 33) and make sure that we are not deserting brothers when they need our friendship and defense (2 Timothy 4:16). Yes—even our critics need our steadfast love.
 - I am not arguing for blind loyalty, but there is such a thing as loyalty and a debt of love. I have been a part of SGM for seven years, in fellowship for 13. This is family. Family members don't jump ship—and parents in families don't let kids go without a pleading attempt to get them to stay. Christ-like friends stick closer than biological brothers.
 - *Reflection Questions:* Have any of us—SGM leader or pastor, pastor or church member, movement or church—been guilty of disloyalty, betrayal, or desertion? Have I left when my brother(s) needs me most?

14. Staying together is needed when pressured by increasing theological compromise, cultural hostility and moral decay.

- Brothers: the pressure to buy into fashionable theological trends of dubious orthodoxy is huge; we need the accountability of a faithful theologically true family of churches. In addition, the day of persecution and costly faith has returned to American Christians. The lines that divide us from our culture are bigger and darker and bolder than ever. We need those we love in Christ. We need a faithful band of brothers and sister to stand with and for in the battle before us.
- The persecuted church would give anything to have what we have. Christians under fire in other countries would swim oceans and crawl over mountains to enjoy our kind of fellowship. And they'd weep rivers over our inability to stay together because of our differences. We dishonor them and show ourselves blind to our real need if we throw away too hastily what others would die to have.
- *Reflection Questions:* If I lived in communist China or some other persecution-ravaged country, and if I had this measure of

agreement with my brothers there, would I part ways over these present issues—or would I make peace and find a way to make it work? If willing and *desperate* to do it there, why not here?

Conclusion

I do not mean to suggest that none of these concerns can be met in other contexts or associations. God forbid. *Sovereign Grace Ministries* is simply one tiny pebble sending out barely discernible ripples in the vast ocean of God's eternal purposes.

Nor do I mean to suggest—as we heard at the conference—that anyone is going to go off a cliff if they leave SGM (or stay in)! Each and every man of God will be useful and pleasing to God in precisely the way God intends and plans.

My point is that we are already together. We have existing gospel, theological, relational and missional history that can keep us together—and I think it's worth fighting for. I know that some of us are weary of conversations and mediation and listening and confessing and all that goes with the fight for unity, and some may have reason to think they have done all that they can—that as much as is possible they have been at peace with all men (Romans 12:18). If so that is between them and God—and I mean that with sincere love and faith.

They don't answer to me, and may God be with them if they part or if they feel they need not engage in any further reconciliation and peace-preserving efforts. But I wonder how many of us can claim sincerely—with circumspect integrity—that we have done all we can. Brothers, we have great reasons to stay together; have we made a sufficiently great effort to do so?

If at the end of the day, your conscience says that you must leave SGM, then please know that you will go with my prayers for your great blessing and joy. May your heart be blessed! May your family be blessed! May your church and witness and vision and convictions and associations be blessed! May everything to which you put your hand be touched by the abounding grace of God—and if I can help let me know! That's my benediction for you—and I mean every word of it with deep affection and faith.

But if it comes to that, can I simply ask you to do two things: (1) Will you consider the question: What are my specific reasons for leaving—and do they outweigh all these reasons for staying; and (2) Will you read my second

paper: *United Division: How to Separate to the Glory of God*. In that paper I plead that if your conscience says "*I cannot stay*", it will also determine to leave in a way that pleases God, enhances unity, and advances mission.

But just so you know: I—with a whole lot of your fellow *Sovereign Grace* brothers and leaders at my side—am hoping that it doesn't come to that!

*"Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, [and he will, whether we remain in SGM or not] working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
(Hebrews 13:20-21)*