

United Division: How to Separate to the Glory of God
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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."¹

Introducing "Bill"

I have a friend whom I will call "Bill". Even though we pastored different churches we were partners in ministry for over twenty years. We knew it. We felt it. We expressed it. And he started it.

"Bill" let our homeless church use his building when needed. He sent greetings to us and invited us to his events, and occasionally showed up at ours. He supported all my kids annually in a pregnancy center *Walk for Life*. And more than once he encouraged people to attend our church instead of his when he realized that they would fit our theology better than his. You read that right: "Bill" encouraged people to attend our church *instead of his*.

Unlikely Partners

My friend helped teach me the grace of partnership despite our many differences. You see: "Bill" and I are not alike. It is fair to say that "Bill" is strongly fundamentalist in his convictions. His shirt is always tucked in. He always wears a tie—even at kids' events. He is a sincere and humble tea-

¹ *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. 13, *Banner of Truth* 1991. p 95, text modernized and brackets added by TMS.

totaling, KJV-preferring, taboo-honoring, and drum and guitar-disapproving brother with a decidedly non-charismatic, non-Calvinistic bent.

But he welcomed me and my flock into his building, and sent folks he cared about in our direction because he thought they would benefit more from our ministry than from his. He turned me—a shirt-*untucking*, liberty-enjoying, wine-tasting, hand-raising, drum-endorsing, foot-tapping, *ESV*-toting, and *TULIP*-planting charismatic—into his friend, and our churches into partners.

Why and how did he pull that off and draw me in? I think it was because despite all our differences we had too much in common *not* to be friends. We knew that we *both* loved Jesus, proclaimed the gospel of free justification by faith alone, cherished grace, preached the Word, worshiped a big God, and longed to be authentically holy. And that was enough to build on.

Don't get me wrong: neither he nor I would say we could do in-depth church life together or be formally linked in partnership, except at a very modest level. It just wouldn't work. Our unity—and we really do have and enjoy authentic unity, despite our divergence in theology and practice—is best served by staying divided. Together, "Bill" and I learned the grace of united division.

A Blessed History and a Sad Moment

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 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 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 Ministries'* 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.

In 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul commands that "*there be no divisions among*" us. The full challenge Paul issues goes like this:

"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 in the same mind and the same judgment"
(1 Corinthians 1:10).

That is an appeal that stretches faith to the limit.

Agree? On Everything?

It goes without saying that Paul cannot be commanding us *all* to agree on *everything*. Such a feat would require that all of us have an absolutely equal measure of knowledge, capacity and application; something impossible this side of heaven.

Besides, Paul talks elsewhere about various matters over which Christians will disagree, and gives them permission to do so (see 1 Corinthians 8-10; Romans 14:1-15:7). We are even told to hold our differences *firmly*—"*each one should be fully convinced in his own mind*" (Romans 14:5). So we not only are permitted to have different opinions; we are exhorted to solidify them in our own hearts before God. Contrary to calling us unrealistically to an agreement on everything, God wants us to have strong personal convictions upon which we base our personal decisions in life.

The challenge contained in Romans 14:1 is that we are not to *quarrel* over these "opinions" (disputable matters). Regarding controversies about which the Bible gives no final definitive word, Paul's concern is not that we have only one opinion (14:5), but that we not *quarrel* over the opinions we have (see also 2 Timothy 2:22-24). It is permissible to disagree; it is not permissible to argue.

Who Gets the Final Word?

There are, of course, relationships in which divinely ordered roles give leader-authorities the final word in decision-making. Governing officials, husbands, parents, employers, and pastors all are given leadership roles which sometimes require that their convictions will establish the final say in a controversy.

Rightly handled, most disagreements between leaders and followers can be discussed, prayed over, patiently worked through, and eventually brought to a mutually satisfying resolution; but not all. When agreement cannot be

reached decisions have to be made, anointed with much grace in leader and follower alike.

But this is not what Paul has in mind here. Paul's concern is that brothers and sisters in the Lord learn how to handle their settled differences. In such cases he wants us to live in the humility that does not need to be proven right or win an argument or have the last word.

Twenty centuries ago Paul dealt with the issue of the last word. Two centuries ago a noted pastor observed the same problem: "*I believe scarcely any thing has [contributed] so much to perpetuate disputes and dissensions in the professing church as the ambition of having the last word.*"² And the fact that just yesterday in a disagreement with Gayline I had to put a stranglehold on my tongue to keep it from saying "just one more thing" reveals that at least for me (a veteran believer, 39 years in the faith), the seduction of the last word has not weakened with time. From what I've seen in others, I'm guessing that I'm not alone in the struggle.

God Gets the Last Word

We gain a bit of traction against this sin when we understand that God alone gets and *will have* the last word. This is Paul's emphasis in Romans 14. Each of us will give an account of himself to God (14:10-12). We are to be willing to let our disagreeing brothers stand or fall on their own before the only Judge that counts (14:4), being confident that they will stand in the same grace of God in which we stand (14:4).

Knowing God has the final word helps us not to insist on it ourselves. It helps us to know when to drop a disagreement and move on in grace. It helps us to grasp when it is right to say our piece, and when, on the other hand, it is time to keep the peace.

Current Concerns and Disputable Matters

All this impinges on the present disturbance in our *Sovereign Grace Ministries* family. Given how differently serious-minded Christians view the issues we currently face—issues such as polity and ecclesiastical procedure—it seems safe to conclude that at least in some measure we are in the realm of disputable *opinion*. What matters in such a climate is not that we agree fully, but that we pursue *righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit*

² John Newton, *Wise Counsel*, p.251, bracket update added.

(14:17). What matters is that we seek mutual *peace and upbuilding in the faith* (14:19). What matters is that we glorify God in our disagreement.

Agree On and In What Matters Most

With that said, it pays to ask what it is to which Paul is calling us in 1 Corinthians. There's a two-fold answer. First, he *is calling us to agree on and in what matters most*. Things like: (1) Christ Jesus and him crucified (2:2); (2) The atoning death and victorious resurrection of Christ (15:1-5); (3) Love as the most excellent way—defined and practiced according to 1 Corinthians 12:31-14:1; (4) The mission to reach the world for Christ (Philippians 1:27-2:5); (5) Our shared "one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, and one Father of all" status³—all these and more are to knit us as one in common conviction and passion.

Grace in Everything Else

Second, *Paul is calling us to handle disagreements on lesser issues with non-divisive grace and love*. In 1 Corinthians Paul forbids schisms that are partisan (1:11, 12), proud (4:7, 18, 19; 13:4), pig-headed ("I know!"—8:1, 2; 13:5); pugnacious ("contentious"⁴ —11:16), personal (13:5, 6), prejudicial (11:21, 22; 12:21-25), preference-based (tradition/culture determined) (8:1-9:22), public (6:1-8), and pejorative (4:8-10).⁵ In other words Paul is telling us not to *sin* when we disagree.

I heard today from a Christian book-seller friend of mine who was threatened with a lawsuit by a Christian book buyer because the buyer did not get all 23 volumes of a set of books he ordered. I assume the buyer was a Calvinist for two reasons. First, not many other people order 23 volumes of Calvin's comments on the Bible. Second, the man knew how to fight.

You can get a measure of the man's sin in this: even when told that there are only 22 volumes in the set he ordered, his wrath continued unabated. Ironical isn't it? This believer violated the teaching of the Bible (in his unappeasable, litigious wrath) in order to acquire teaching about the Bible.

Alexander Strauch sharpens an application arrow with these words: "*In many church disputes, believers fight for so-called truths that are not*

³ Ephesians 4:1-6

⁴ The Greek word speaks of being "fond of strife". It refers to pugnacious fighting spirit.

⁵ Please pardon the "P" words. They are in J.I. Packer's memorable line, "'sweet 'Ps'—a preacher's ploy for pointedness. Pardonable? Perhaps."

*explicitly revealed in Scripture while egregiously violating clear and repeated teaching of Scripture on godly conduct and attitudes.*⁶ There is something profoundly wrong when Christians argue for what they believe the Bible commands in ways that obviously violate what the Bible commands.

We need to rise above this. We must learn how to co-exist peacefully without absolute oneness of mind. It may be that—given our varying opinions—we will not always be able to work in close partnership with some people, even though we dearly love them as brothers in Jesus. But brothers: this is no reason *not* to unite. Neither is it a reason *to* sin.

We are to handle disagreement with transcending grace and love. This will allow us to live together—and if need be, for the sake of conscience, live *apart*—in a way characterized by love. I call this *united division*; dividing in such a way that Christian unity remains intact and brotherly love remains strong.

United Division

The goal of this paper is to offer guidelines to help us know how to disagree and (if need be) divide without sinning in the process. Even more so it is to stake out a path of (sometimes necessary) division which not only avoids sin, but actually *enhances* unity and *advances* mission.

When Peace Trumps Agreement

There is a time when the *absence of conflict* trumps agreement. Abraham and Lot did better to part ways than to attempt adjudication of wrongs and agreement of mind (Genesis 13:5-9). Paul and Barnabas had an honest disagreement that made ongoing partnership impossible (Acts 15:39, 40).

In another place, perhaps shockingly, Paul reasons that even in a marriage relationship, it is sometimes better to let a separation happen than to *fight* for reconciliation!⁷ In occasional extreme cases it is better to let spouses live apart than to continue relentless efforts to keep them together. Paul gives as his simple reason: "*God has called us to peace*" (1 Corinthians 7:15). Sadly

⁶ Alexander Strauch, *If You Bite and Devour One Another*, p. 18

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 7:12-15. I am not commenting here on what Paul may or may not be saying about divorce here. My point is that Paul clearly is saying that the efforts of a believing spouse to stay in the same house with an unbeliever may cause much more strife than peace, and God has called us to the latter.

there are times when attempts to stay together produce little more than ongoing conflict.

When honest Christians who share a love for God's Word cannot agree fully, when disagreements affect their ability to partner without compromising personal convictions, when ongoing efforts to reconcile opinions lead only to ongoing tensions, and when prolonged resolution efforts deplete resources needed for gospel and pastoral mission, it is best that Christians agree to dissolve (or at least alter the shape of) their partnership. I think this process needs to be marked by several commitments.

Purposeful Unity

Disagreeing Christians must always resolve to agree in essentials. We must be of one mind and purpose.⁸ The historic adage: "*In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things, charity*" must be to us more than a time-honored cliché; it must be a rule for life.

I realize that when offences are real and emotions are raw, such determined unity is more than difficult. I also realize that some of you have been affected more personally by recent concerns than I have, making this easier for me to say than for you to do. Nevertheless my brothers: God calls us to pursue intentional one-mindedness; an eager, deliberate, resolute, unflinching effort to maintain unity in a way worthy of the gospel (Ephesians 4:1-3). This involves a concerted effort to agree on the core doctrines and values around which all Christians must unite, and then affirm emphatically our oneness in those things.

Gospel Priority

Passages like Philippians 1:18⁹ indicate that the progress of the gospel is more important than that we expose others' wrongs. If the gospel is preached what does it matter *to me* that people are preaching it at my expense (or even with wrong motives¹⁰)? And should I not rather be defrauded by a brother than that the gospel be maligned in the public eye?¹¹ George Whitefield got it right:

⁸ Philippians 1:27-2:5; Ephesians 4:1-7; Romans 16:17, 18

⁹ See also Ephesians 4:1-3

¹⁰ Of course wrong motives matter greatly to *God*, but the point here is that they shouldn't matter much *to me*.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:1-8

"Let the name of Whitefield perish, but Christ be glorified'.... 'Let my name die everywhere, let even my friends forget me, if by that means the cause of the blessed Jesus may be promoted' . . . 'But what is Calvin, or what is Luther? Let us look above names and parties; let Jesus be our all in all – So that He is preached I care not who is uppermost. I know my place . . . Even to be the servant of all . . . I am content to wait till the judgment day for the clearing up of my reputation; and after I am dead I desire no other epitaph than this, 'Here lies G.W. What sort of man he was the great day will discover.'"¹²

Brothers and sisters, our view of others should be shaped first and foremost by this: is there strong evidence that they love and are preaching Christ, and are they feeding His sheep with grace and truth?

There may be defects of character and doctrine, there may be flaws in judgment, there may be weaknesses in style or form, there may be inconsistencies in application or polity—but the priority issue is: are they preaching Jesus and seeking Jesus and living Jesus and giving Jesus to others?

If so then my *heart* must be united with theirs even if my hand cannot be. I may not be able to partner extensively with them, but I must rejoice that they proclaim the gospel—and I must pray that they will continue to do so. In the end it is this *gospel and Jesus priority* that must defend our unity, decide our judgments, determine our allegiances, and dictate our tone.

"Impossible" Humility

Philippians 2:1-5 calls us to profound humility. "All humility" was Paul's spirit in serving the Lord no matter how people treated him (Acts 20:19). He exhorts pastors in Titus 3:2 *"to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."*

The terms are absolute: speak evil of *no one*; show *perfect* courtesy (i.e.-gentle humility) toward *all* people. Paul's words are intentionally categorical. No one means *no one*; I am not to malign *anyone at all*. His phraseology in Titus 3:2 runs literally like this: "[be] gentle, showing all meekness toward all people." These are stirring words: true gentleness offers complete meekness to every person.

¹² Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, p. 154

I've heard this called "impossible humility"—and I am deeply familiar with what that gripping phrase means. Sometimes humility and self-control feel impossible. We feel like *under these circumstances, in the face of these offences, when victimized by these sins we must fight back*. Truth has to be heard. Right has to be done. Wrong has to be exposed. A defense has to be mounted. Somebody has to pay.

But God calls us to be humble no matter what, even while we are under full reputation-slaying attack. This does not preclude us from ever giving a defense of ourselves and our ministry, but it does prescribe the tone and heart we take in doing so.¹³

Brothers, I believe we can walk with all humility—with the Spirit's help. But it will involve at least five difficult, seemingly impossible choices.

Assume you are at least partly wrong

True humility assumes that it is in error—at least in part. Assertions of certain knowledge—especially about matters less clear in Scripture—are pride-symptomatic. "...[K]nowledge puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Corinthians 8:1-2).

So much of our recent mutually reciprocated contention has involved personal interpretations of words and actions—with an air of *infallible certainty*. "This leader is wrong. The Board should have done this. So-and-so was lying. That critic was sinning." Such presumptuous judgments indicate an inflated ego. In all likelihood, any time I say "I know", except on matters of first importance indisputably taught in Scripture, I am decidedly *not* being humble.

Humility says—and it means it—"I am aware that I do not have all the facts and cannot possibly have access to them. I am conscious that I can never know another man's intentions or all the factors that led him to do what he did or say what he said. And yes, I am quite sure that I am at least partly wrong in my interpretation of Scripture and of other people's actions and intentions—and I'm going to function as if I really believe this."

Confess sins to whoever has been affected by them

¹³ Paul defended his ministry in 2 Corinthians 10-13, but he did so with great reluctance and palpable humility, choosing this recourse only as a last resort to ensure that his gospel ministry did not suffer irreparable harm at the hands of false teachers.

I'm guessing that many of us have sinned during our recent trials. There's plenty of blame to go around. Leadership failure, gossip (both sharing and hearing), anger toward leaders, fear of man and love of approval, accusation, suspicion, judgment without adequate data; who among us hasn't been guilty at least in measure? Have I *never* believed less than the best, spoken evil of others, misread motives, indulged anger, felt bitterness?

In response to this, humility is eager to confess sin to those sinned against. It is far more concerned about how I have sinned than how you have sinned. Humility puts others' good and believers' unity over *personal* safety or reputation or even ministry. Humility leads us to say: "I have sinned in this way and this way, and this other way, and I am sorry. Will you please forgive me?"

Forgive the Sins of Those Who Have Confessed

If humility is willing to confess, it is also eager to forgive. Like God who is "ready to forgive" (Nehemiah 9:17), humility is poised to show mercy. The publican had simply to say "God, be merciful to me a sinner" and he went home justified (Luke 18:13, 14). The Prodigal couldn't even complete his planned confession before the father (read that *Our Father*) threw his arms and a robe of welcome around him (Luke 15:18-22).

Humility is not a confession critic. Grace doesn't wait for the right words. Mercy doesn't insist on complete, full-understanding repentance. If it did, given how imperfect every one of our confessions to God has been, *none of us would be forgiven yet*. Humility forgives readily, eagerly, almost hastily. It is poised to show mercy, and is eager to declare it.

Brothers and sisters: if we believe we've been sinned against, will we be humble enough at least to ask: (1) "Am I willing to require as little acknowledgement and confession as possible in the interests of unity?" (2) "Would I want God to hold me to the same standard of confession to which I am holding others?" (3) "Am I eager to assure my confessing brother of my forgiveness and of his Savior's, by offering him the *forgiveness words and promises* he needs to hear?"¹⁴

¹⁴ I am very much aware of the debate over offering words of forgiveness to others. We have been challenged to do much more of this by *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*. I share the concern that some have had about this practice. History in high church liturgical settings shows that this can quickly degenerate into mere form and ritual. That said, once again we must avoid reactionary practice: a practice that rarely or never proclaims such forgiving words. We have every right and great reason to say to a brother or sister who has

Friends, if there are departures from our family of churches let us make sure that—if and where they are appropriate—there are both confessions of sin *and* assurances of forgiveness to go with them.

Do not presume to judge motives or intentions

Humility knows that in the end only One can judge motives (1 Corinthians 4:3-5; Hebrews 4:12), and that we had better leave that task to Him alone. Confident accusations rooted in interpretations of *why* another person did what he did or what he *meant* by what he said are almost always presumptuous expressions of pride. I do not know what motivates another person—whether the flawed leader or the outspoken critic—to do what he does. Nor do I know what he *meant* to say or do. To pretend that I do—even worse to then *proclaim* my pretended knowledge—is playing God.

Acknowledge the source of the truth you have

Humility knows that if in a given controversy I happen to be right, I am so only by the grace of God. "...*What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it*" (1 Corinthians 4:7)? John Newton helps us here:

"As to religion...I am not to expect others to see with my eyes! I am deeply convinced of the truth of John the Baptist's aphorism in John 3:27, 'A man can receive nothing—except it be given him from Heaven.' I well know, that the little measure of knowledge I have obtained in the things of God—has not been owing to my own wisdom and teachableness, but to God's goodness. Nor did I learn everything all at once—God has been pleased to exercise much patience and long-suffering towards me...since He first gave me a desire of learning from Himself. He has graciously accommodated Himself to my weakness, borne with my mistakes, and helped me through innumerable prejudices, which, but for His mercy, would have been insuperable hindrances! I have therefore no right to be angry, impatient, or censorious to others, especially as I have still much to learn..."¹⁵

I have nothing to add.

confessed sin that based on his/her faith in the finished work of Christ he/she is forgiven. Why—I wonder—would we *not* be eager to do so?

¹⁵ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, p. 274

Brotherly Charity

Humble love believes and hopes all things, refusing to interpret others' actions in a negative light unless absolutely compelled to do so. Love is not cynical or suspicious—but ever-inclined to read the best of intentions into even the worst of actions.

*"Suspicion makes a man a torment to himself and a spy toward others. Once you begin to suspect, causes for distrust will multiply around you, and your very suspiciousness will create the major part of them."*¹⁶

We should love all people with all charity and grace—even when it may feel like we have no obligation to do so.

*"...while I desire to hold fast the sound doctrines of the Gospel towards the persons of my fellow-creatures, I wish to exercise all moderation and benevolence. Protestants or Papists, Socinians or Deists, Jews, Samaritans, or Mohammedans, all are my neighbors; they have all a claim upon me for the common offices of humanity."*¹⁷

How much more should we love our brothers!

*"I belong to none of these churches [Episcopalian, Baptist, Independents, Methodists, Presbyterians] exclusively; but am connected with them all, because I believe there are among them all, members of the one true church, the spiritual body of Christ, of which I trust I, though grace, am, however unworthy, a member also. If they love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, I care not a button, by what name they are called, nor to what party they are joined. They are my mother, and my sisters, and my brethren. In other things we shall not be all of one mind till we meet above. Till then let us love and pity and pray for one another."*¹⁸

Paul's sweet savory words form a fitting introduction and conclusion to all our disagreements: "Grace be with all that love the Lord Jesus in sincerity" (Ephesians 6:24, KJV).

Peaceful Civility

¹⁶ Charles Spurgeon, *"The Blind Eye And The Deaf Ear,"* Lectures To My Students, Zondervan 1954, pg. 325

¹⁷ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, p. 273

¹⁸ John Newton, *Wise Counsel*, p. 323, 324

Brothers and sisters it is never right to resent others or judge uncharitably. We must resist every urge to be harsh in tone or speak evil or lose patience or treat any other human being—never mind a brother or sister—with anything but peaceful civility and courtesy.

Alexander Strauch's simple statement carries an enormous weight of conviction: *"The Holy Spirit does not lead believers to speak evil of others, or to be self-righteous faultfinders or harsh critics."*¹⁹ In other words, I can be sure that if I'm harsh in judgment and/or shrill in tone (whether toward leaders or critics), I am emphatically *not* Spirit-filled.

By this simple test we see that a massive spirit of sin has entered the church:

"Too much of that impatience which you speak of, towards those who differ from us in some religious sentiments, is observable on all sides.

I do not consider it as the fault of a few individuals, or of this or that party, so much as the effect of that inherent imperfection which is common to our whole race. Anger and scorn are equally unfitting in those who profess to be followers of the meek and lowly Jesus, and who acknowledge themselves to be both sinful and fallible; but too often something of this leaven will be found cleaving to the best characters...

Tell them, I hope to hear that all animosities, little and big, are buried by mutual consent in the Redeemer's grave. ...Alas! the people of God have enemies enough. Why then will they weaken their own hands? Why will they help their enemies to pull down the Lord's work? Why will they grieve those who wish them well, cause the weak to stumble, the wicked to rejoice, and bring a reproach upon their holy profession?

*...May God give you wisdom, faithfulness, and patience. Take care that you do not catch an angry spirit yourself, while you aim to suppress it in others; this will spoil all, and you will exhort, advise, and weep in vain. May you rather be an example and pattern to the flock."*²⁰

Forthright Integrity

We must all have the integrity to face how our choices have affected others. If we have sinned against others, we must own our sins, admit ongoing tensions, confess remaining offences, and hide from no blame that is ours.

¹⁹ Alexander Strauch, *If You Bite and Devour One Another*, p. 79

²⁰ John Newton, *Letters of John Newton*, p.273

In controversy it is easy to attribute blame rather than accept responsibility. In our present unsettledness we might be tempted to claim that unity could be preserved if *not* for the views of others—when in fact the disagreement is due to a change in our own views, not theirs. Truth be told, separation may be needed, not because of what someone else believes but because of what *I* have come to believe.

We all change our minds. We all believe things now that we once did not. Growing minds will be changing minds. Integrity demands that we admit when we are the ones changing. In our present polity controversy this is a consideration for both sides.

For example: those embracing a polity that *omits* extra-local authority, and/or argues for something akin to representational/ congregational government, should acknowledge forthrightly that they have changed their view and must own the part that may play in a potential separation. This is not to fault anyone; it is simply to recognize and openly declare what is.

On the other hand, SGM leadership has changed its mind in recent years in adopting a polity that *decreases* apostolic role and care. For this reason some of our brothers may feel compelled to leave our partnership because SGM no longer represents commitments to which they themselves still adhere. SGM leadership has needed to own its role in this, and it has.

These are but two examples; space does not permit mentioning more. But here is the word that applies to us all: we must all have the integrity to own our role in departures if in fact we are the ones who have changed.

Weeping Gravity

The Scriptures call us so to love one another that departures cause grief. There should be in every separation something of the spirit of the Ephesians—*“And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again.”*²¹

We need a heart check. Departures should be marked by a far greater sense of grief than of grievance. If in leaving—or staying behind—I am more mad than sad (or if the emotional mix is even close) than I can be sure that the flesh has found a foothold within.

²¹ Acts 20:36-38

Separate Complementarity

All would admit that sometimes departures are unavoidable. There are times when conscience demands withdrawal from close formal association. Carl Trueman has written:

"To paraphrase Charles Hodge, ministers take vows to honor the rule of the church's assemblies;²² when those assemblies make a decision, one must actively support, passively submit or peaceably withdraw. One does not have the option of simply ignoring the ruling and carrying on regardless; nor does one have the option of mounting a kind of perpetual guerrilla warfare within the church."²³

Active Support and Passive Submission

Active support can happen when I agree sufficiently with decisions made to throw my endorsement and support behind them. This is the kind of partnership SGM churches and pastors have enjoyed for many years.

Passive submission is when I may not agree fully with decisions made, but choose not to contend over it. This is a valid option *so long as* it does not imply quiet *non*-support. A wife is not submitting to her husband if she disagrees with him, and then refuses to support his decision—even if she stays quiet in her non-support. She is filling her role only when she prays for the blessing and assists the success of her husband's leadership—even when she disagrees.

Godly passive submission not only stops fighting over a leadership decision, it actively prays and works in hopes that the decision will in the end be *wise*, and will be prospered by God.

Peaceable Withdrawal and Ecclesiastical Complementarity

There will be times when a man or church believes that formal compatibility no longer exists. In this case peaceable, non-divisive, and non-recruiting withdrawal will need to occur. If this becomes necessary it leads to a

²² Mr. Hodge is speaking of Presbyterian assemblies, but the application to our SGM context cannot be missed.

²³ Carl Trueman, *No Country for Old Men*, <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/no-country-for-old-men.php>

question: *can withdrawal happen in such a way that the kingdom goes forward and cooperation continues—even if not in such close alliance as previously enjoyed?*

In the case of our *Sovereign Grace Ministries* family, given our theological and methodological compatibility on virtually everything of any significance, can we practice a form of *ecclesiastical complementarity* by still pooling resources and fellowship in ways that simultaneously allow *some* to honor conscience (by discontinuing formal partnership) and *all* to further the gospel (by continuing functional cooperation)?

I choose the word *complementarity* purposefully because of its familiarity. Not intending it to suggest the leadership/followership roles we normally associate with the word, I use it instead to imply the hand-in-glove relationship that the word also suggests.

I want us to think of the potential we have to work together even though we disagree. This is a different category than is commonly being discussed (at least in my hearing). *Is it not possible that our differences do not have to produce a complete end of meaningful association and cooperation?*

I think that Paul and Barnabas prove this possibility. Their disagreement/departure did not end their partnership; it simply changed it. It is clear that they went on with mutual respect and shared vision (after their separation Paul implicitly commends Barnabas for his sacrificial labors for the gospel—1 Corinthians 9:6). In the end they shared co-workers (ironically including the very one who had been at the heart of their disagreement—see Acts 15:37-40 and 2 Timothy 4:11). There is no hint that they suffered any damage to their relationship or long-term diminishment of their ministry because of their policy/procedural difference of opinion. They simply partnered in a different way.

Functional Partnership

Is there a complementary functional cooperation that can be preserved between SGM and former SGM churches, rooted in our shared love of the gospel, our massive agreement in convictions and values, and our long relational and missional history together?

In practice this may mean that while some churches may not agree with SGM polity, they may be willing to maintain fellowship with us at our events and partnership with us in our mission. Can we find a way to make this

happen—while continuing extra-local care for the other churches that believe in it, and want it?

If by God's grace we can pull this off, might it not lead to the advancement of a shared mission, the strengthening of many hundreds of cherished relationships, the enjoyment of tens of thousands of saints, and the present and eternal praise of our Savior?

10 Questions We All Need to Ask If Departures Happen

If at the end of the day, this level of partnership is deemed impossible, then parallel mutually-respectful paths of ministry will need to be taken. Should that be the case I would offer a number of suggestions (in the form of questions) to ensure that as we divide we do so in unity and love. I hope they help.

1. *Will we all pray for one another—committing to talk to God in behalf of one another much more than we talk to others about one another?*
2. *Will we all make sure that those offended by or differing with us have been, and have felt, heard—by inviting critique with gratitude for correction?* Let us do this without neglecting the companion responsibility to offer needed correction with gentle grace. Having so loved one another may we then leave each man to stand on his own before God.
3. *Will we all choose to confess sin where needed, and forgive sin when asked?*
4. *Will we all be willing to affirm and emphasize points of unity so that the accent is placed on what unites us in Christ rather than on what separates us?*
5. *Will we all be willing not to make it personal, choosing instead to forebear under wrongs rather than defend self or vilify others? (2 Tim 2:22-26; 1 Peter 3:8-12; Romans 16:17-10)?*
6. *Will we all choose to judge and affirm charitably the ministry and intention of others and to thank God loudly and long for the past, present, and future kingdom impact of those from whom we are now separating?*
7. *Will those leaving be willing to affirm SGM to all who inquire of it and will those remaining in SGM be willing to help those leaving find a new home?*
8. *Will we all be willing to tell our story wisely?* Based on open dialogue with those from whom separation has occurred, can we agree to an honest and respectful report of our separation, in a way that upholds the values that we all share?

9. *Will we all be willing to consider ongoing fellowship, worship, and partnership in visible and meaningful ways?*
10. *Will all who leave SGM resolve to leave by themselves without recruiting others, and will all remaining SGM leaders and pastors be committed to a defined process of care for any who leave?*²⁴

The Grace of Our Doctrines

Brothers and sisters: above all, *can we keep loving Jesus, and talking with each other about Jesus and the things that matter most, so that our unity—even in division—grows deeper and stronger than ever?* This is no clichéd plea: it is the essence of living in the fellowship of the gospel in the grace of God through Christ.

I once heard an old preacher charge a group of Calvinists with these words: *“Brothers, it is good that we love the doctrines of grace. It is better that we live the grace of the doctrines.”* This is our chance to live that grace. We are called to walk in love and unity—even if need be, in division. If we choose not so to walk, it will not be because our differences are too large; it will be because our hearts are too small. I believe better things of us all because I believe greater things of our God. Let us live in the good of this for his glory. And now:

*May “peace be to the brothers, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace be with all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with love incorruptible.”*²⁵

Amen and Amen.

²⁴ Andy Farmer has assembled a pastorally sensitive and wonderfully humble plan of care for folks leaving our individual churches. See the *Appendix: One Pastor’s Reflections*

²⁵ Ephesians 6:23, 24

Appendix
One Pastor's Reflections
July, 2011
(Excerpts)
By Andy Farmer

"When someone does come with the declared intention of leaving, we can follow a meaningful pastoral path. Here are some things I've tried to practice – not so much steps but things I try to remember.

- Make sure that the first thing they hear is our profound appreciation for them coming and talking to us.
- Make a sincere effort to listen and hear. Not in a 'let me get a transcript' way but in a way that they can honestly say, 'I think you are hearing and trying to understand where I'm coming from'.
- Clearly and warmly express that if they were to leave they would be deeply and personally missed. We would miss them and the church would miss them.
- Make an appeal for a dialogue because of the importance of the decision – a dialogue that wouldn't simply be about whether they stay in the church but about how we can learn and grow. Even if they decline it will be a better experience than simply an 'exit interview'.
- If they decide to leave make sure they know you are committed to do everything you can to help them find a new church home. I've even scheduled follow up calls or meetings to find out how the process is going. I've had more than one family settle back with us when they looked around and realized that our church (with its acknowledged flaws) was as good as they might find elsewhere.
- Make a commitment to lead the way in appreciation, affection and trust in God for them so that no one in the church will have any question as to the fact that they are valued brothers and sisters whether they stay as members or not.
- Keep a door open for care until they settle somewhere – stressing that your greatest concern is that if trials come when they are between churches you are there for them.
- Make an intentional follow-up of prayer and friendship that allows them to continue to talk about their concerns even if they are not under your care. Some of my most valued counselors are folks who were with us but now have an outsider perspective.