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# A BAND OF BROTHERS

## PASTORS UNITED IN FELLOWSHIP

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*“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up” (Ecc. 4:9-10).*

**D**on’t become a pastor if you could be happy doing anything else.” That advice was given to me in 1988 when I was six years into my career as a dentist. Life was full and I was happy. My wife and I were deeply involved in our young church, the dental practice was growing rapidly, and I loved working together with my dad who was both an outstanding dentist and a wonderful Christian man. At the same time, along with others around me, I had been sensing that I was being called into full-time pastoral ministry.

### ***Lonely in Ministry***

One particular morning in the office, my patients included a local Christian pastor along with his wife and family. He was in his 40s and had moved to our town a couple of years before to lead a local Baptist church. I knew he loved the Lord and was committed to his church. Since I was seeking encouragement or a word of wisdom from someone with many years of experience in ministry, I posed a question to him: “I’m thinking about becoming a pastor. What advice would you give me as I make this decision?” His reply was quick and to the point. “Don’t become a pastor if you could be happy doing anything else.”

Initially I was shocked! To his defense, he probably wanted to make sure I counted the cost of pastoral ministry, which he knew would involve a level of personal sacrifice. However, I honestly think the thrust of his answer was born out of his own experience of pastoral ministry which meant moving regularly, experiencing relational isolation, and sadly, a solitary lifestyle often

characterized by discouragement and loneliness. It meant committing yourself to a life devoid of deep, personal, and honest friendships. Finally, his was the type of pastoral ministry where one's life could be upended at the whim of others with no one "in your corner" to help, all while watching your wife and family pay a steep price as well. Shortly after he gave me this advice, the pastor and his family moved away from our town, on to the next church, or maybe out of pastoral ministry.

I'd seen the same struggles with the ministers of my own church where I grew up. As a result, though I'd become a Christian at a young age and wanted to serve the Lord, becoming a pastor myself was never even a remote consideration. Who would want *that* lifestyle for themselves or for their family? Not me! No way and no how! I would *never* become a pastor. Then our small local church heard about, and later joined, Sovereign Grace Ministries (as we were known then) and my understanding of pastoral ministry was turned upside down.

### ***Together in Ministry as Brothers***

From my first interactions at Celebration Conferences (annual gatherings of Sovereign Grace Churches), my perception of pastoral ministry began to change. I observed that Sovereign Grace pastors were passionate men who loved the gospel and the local church, but who also desired to labor and build together, not in isolation, but as brothers and even friends. For the first time in my life, I saw a compelling model of ministry where men not only cared for their churches but also cared for one another.

These men regularly encouraged, honored, prayed for, and sought to strengthen one another. In the midst of their serious pursuit of the Lord together, they also laughed, joked, talked sports, and mocked one another (in love, of course). They would hang out together, even outside of church contexts! I realized I was watching a model of pastoral ministry that was not merely tolerable, but compelling.

Not long after my encounter with the pastor that morning, I sold my dental practice and began serving as a pastor in Sovereign Grace. Now, for 33 years, I have thankfully and joyfully never felt or been alone. On the contrary, my family and I have been surrounded by men locally, regionally, and throughout

Sovereign Grace who are not only true brothers in the faith, but also partners in life and ministry. Most of all, these fellow pastors are truly our friends.

### ***The Value of Relationships***

We pastors in Sovereign Grace value relationships. We pursue and experience biblical fellowship. Yes, we are united in mission, in doctrine, and in governance but those don't detract from our relationships. They only serve to unite us in fellowship more deeply. Ours is more than an association of disconnected individuals, each independent and isolated, pursuing his own personal ministry in his own local context. We are joined together regionally, nationally, and increasingly internationally as well. Which of us does not sense that camaraderie and union each month when reading Dave Taylor's *Emerging Nations* updates from our brothers around the world?

We in Sovereign Grace share a long and deep history not merely as co-laborers but as a "band of brothers" whom the Lord has providentially called together for his glory and for our good. We are a denomination where "loving one another" is taught to our members but also modeled by the pastors. That value is lived out even in our conferences where the amount of time spent together over meals or drinks rivals or often exceeds the time given to formal teaching and training. Even our dress communicates more of a family reunion than a professional association: No suits and ties! (Thank you, C.J. Mahaney!)

Obviously, building relationally has not always been easy. We have experienced more than our share of trials, separations, and even heart-breaking disloyalty. However, even these we have navigated together, resulting in a deepening resolve, not only to serve the Lord's will to build churches and spread the gospel, but to do so together.

### ***Ministry in Relationships Should Be the Norm***

While I'm sure this type of interconnected brotherhood is not unique to Sovereign Grace, from what I've seen throughout my life, it is not the norm. Yet, shouldn't it be? We who were once "hating and being hated" (Titus 3:3) are now men made new. When Christ mercifully saved us, he not only reconciled us to himself, but he also reconciled us to one another. He made us children of God and members one of another. Since that is true for believers

as a whole, which it is, how much more for the shepherds who have the privilege to labor among them?

Deep, loving relationships were evident among Christ and his disciples. Gathering a group of men around himself—and what a motley crew they were—Jesus led them, taught them, and was forbearing with them. He walked with them, ate with them, and for three years carried on his ministry together with them and sometimes in spite of them. Yes, Jesus knew betrayal and he experienced deep rejection. Yet, is it not confounding that the eternal, sinless Son of God joined himself to a group of mere men so intimately? Jesus loved his disciples not only as Lord but even as brothers and friends, ultimately sacrificing his life for them—and for us!

“This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants...but I have called you friends” (John 15:12-15).

Jesus also said, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

### ***Partnership in Relationship***

In the same way, Paul the apostle who said, “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain,” (Phil. 1:21) lived out this phenomenally focused life, joined in mission and in fellowship to other men. Yes, part of the reason was for the purpose of discipleship. Caring for a growing number of churches meant discipling new leaders, but this was no sterile ministry. Hear Paul’s description of sending Epaphroditus to Philippi in Philippians 2:25: “I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier...” My fellow worker and fellow soldier, yes, but I want you to know, Epaphroditus is my brother as well. Paul says this in spite of his own experiences of desertion, slander, envy, and searing disloyalty.

From the beginning, Sovereign Grace has valued fellowship among its pastors. We now have the opportunity to build more deeply with other men regionally. Our local team meets for lunch periodically with pastors from three other

Sovereign Grace churches in our region. We each drive a couple of hours to make lunch happen. We don't meet because of a sense of duty or to discuss theology. We get together to fellowship, to share the latest updates about our churches and our lives, and to learn how best to pray for one another. In April, we hold our Regional Assembly of Elders, and though we cover much business in those two days together, we do so, not as an association of professionals but as a "band of brothers" bound together in love for the Savior and with a rich and growing history as collaborators and friends.

We "older guys" in Sovereign Grace already have a rich history of relationships with other pastors locally, regionally, and beyond. Mickey Connolly has preached annually in our church for over 30 years. When he comes, we often fish or golf together. The church sees our close relationship and it communicates God's grace. Bill Kittrell and I have been brothers and friends since the first day he walked through the doors of Sovereign Grace in the early 90s. Two of my daughters are part of his growing church. My sons-in-law both serve in the church, one as a bi-vocational elder, the other overseeing children's ministry. Bill tells me our five-year-old grandsons are friends. They also need to be separated from one another in children's ministry! I hope when they are older, they share a friendship like their grandfathers have known.

Our church loves C.J. Mahaney and the joy he's brought over the years. He does not only preach as one "filling the pulpit." He loves our people. There are so many others—a list much too long to include by name. There are men of all ages throughout Sovereign Grace who have blessed our pastors and our church. These men have shared not only their ministry but their very lives with us. These relationships have changed our church's understanding of Christian ministry and the Christian life. This has informed our understanding of what it means to experience the love of God through Jesus Christ.

### ***Not Lonely in Ministry***

As a pastor in Sovereign Grace, my ministry has been filled with Christian brothers who are my friends. When I've struggled with sorrow, they have comforted. When I've struggled with discouragement, they have encouraged. When I've felt like quitting, they have urged me on by their friendship and example. When I've experienced sickness, they have offered to jump in to help

carry the load. Being united in fellowship with other pastors in Sovereign Grace has strengthened my life, my marriage, my children, and our church.

If a young man came to me and said, “I’m considering pastoral ministry, what advice would you give me as I make my decision?” I would say, “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). Then I’d say, “Don’t do ministry alone. Find a group or denomination whose pastors not only keep the gospel central, but who live out the implications of that gospel united together as brothers and friends—and I know just the group.” And I’d add one more thing: “For me, because of the ‘band of brothers’ I’ve come to know and love, I couldn’t imagine being happy doing anything else.”