

A WORD FOR THE SECOND (AND THIRD) GENERATION OF SOVEREIGN GRACE

JON PAYNE

In the year 2082, my youngest son will turn 67 years old. If the Lord does not return by then (Come soon, Lord Jesus!), and if He is gracious to preserve us, Sovereign Grace Churches will turn 100 years old that year. Current children will see our 100th anniversary. I've been pondering that future celebration for some time now.

There are obviously denominations that have been around much longer and have had a much more significant impact in the world. I thank God for the churches and generations of believers in the broader body of Christ that have gone before us and have proven faithful. Motivated by their example, I'm pondering our future in Sovereign Grace.

What will we be when our centennial comes? What should we be? And what can we do about it?

The Generational Transfer

We are currently experiencing the first broad generational transition in our denomination's brief life. Sovereign Grace affirms doctrines that have been confessed throughout church history, but our little family of churches is very

young. Born in revival, nurtured in grace, matured through trial, united in faith and practice, we now face this crucial generational test.

We can look to the future of our churches with confidence, not because of human gifting or wisdom, but because God is faithful. “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Ps. 20:7).

And yet, we have a crucial part to play. To be a second-generation member or pastor in Sovereign Grace is to have received a challenging and honorable assignment from the Lord. It is a slightly different calling from a founding generation and yet a pioneer calling in its own way. We are called to pioneer a faithful gospel transition from those who came before to those who will come after. We must ensure that our gospel heritage is our legacy—not because we care about our renown, but because we care about the renown of Christ through us.

How do we go about this? Let me share four pitfalls we should avoid as we embark on this transferring adventure.

The Pitfall of Idolizing Newness

First, we must avoid the danger of idolizing newness. A faithful first generation is “first” because they have rediscovered orthodox doctrines that have been neglected in some area or age of the church. In Sovereign Grace, it was exciting to hear “gospel-centered,” “the doctrines of grace,” and “New Testament church life” for the first time—and not just because they are biblical and true, but because they were also new to us. But a second-generation in Sovereign Grace is not called to discover a “new” foundation or “new” first priorities, but to find fresh joy in preaching the same things.

To keep the main thing the main thing for the third generation, we must keep the same thing the main thing right now. This requires perseverance, creativity, courage, and the humility to embrace our place in God’s timeline. Like Timothy and Titus before us, we are called to guard the foundation and build upon it. We should develop doctrinally, we should keep growing, but without demoting the Cornerstone we’ve received.

And this second-generation calling has its own challenge. As D.A. Carson warns about another denominational transition, “One generation of Mennonites believed the gospel and held as well that there were certain social,

economic, and political entailments. The next generation assumed the gospel, but identified with the entailments. The following generation denied the gospel: the ‘entailments’ became everything. Assuming this sort of scheme for evangelicalism, one suspects that large swaths of the movement are lodged in the second step, with some drifting toward the third.¹ We must resist the drift and keep the same thing the main thing.

The Pitfall of Assuming Affection

Second, we must avoid the assumption that affirmation equals affection. As we’ve heard from Carson before, “If I have learned anything in 35 or 40 years of teaching, it is that students don’t learn everything I teach them. What they learn is what I am excited about, the kinds of things I emphasize again and again and again and again. That had better be the gospel.”²

The second generation of Sovereign Grace cannot, must not, assume that since our churches still affirm the same doctrines confessionally, we are still prioritizing those doctrines functionally and emotionally. Our centennial celebration must not find us affirming Christ and Him crucified as a technical doctrine that no one shouts and weeps over. But if we are to shout and weep then, we must be shouting and weeping now at the person and work of Christ and the shocking mystery of grace.

This requires personal heart work and not assumptions, pressing for affections and not just accepting affirmations. We were not inspired by mere affirmation a generation ago, and our spiritual children will not be either. A hundred years of gospel zeal for Christ will require modeling affirmation and affection.

The Pitfall of Pastoral Apathy

Third, we must discern and confront current doctrinal threats to our centennial legacy. Pastoral coasting leads to denominational shipwreck. Some threats will remain or be amplified from the past (for example, the unrelenting attack on Biblical sexuality), and some rejuvenated threats to Biblical authority, church faithfulness, and gospel centrality will arise (the idol of cultural power comes to mind).

1. D.A. CARSON, *BASICS FOR BELIEVERS: AN EXPOSITION OF PHILIPPIANS* (BAKER ACADEMIC: GRAND RAPIDS, MI, 1996), 26-27.

2. JUSTIN TAYLOR, “CARSON: PEOPLE DON’T LEARN WHAT I TEACH THEM; THEY LEARN WHAT I’M EXCITED ABOUT,” [HTTPS://WWW.THEGOSPELCOALITION.ORG/BLOGS/JUSTIN-TAYLOR/CARSON-PEOPLE-DONT-LEARN-WHAT-I-TEACH-
THEM-THEY-LEARN-WHAT-IM-EXCITED-ABOUT/](https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/carson-people-dont-learn-what-i-teach-them-they-learn-what-im-excited-about/)

Second-generation pastors do not have to build from the ground up, but they cannot relax and presume upon their inheritance of churches and doctrines, lest they squander them in pastoral apathy. Doctrinal and pastoral vigilance, genuine partnership, prayer, and earnest preaching are our watchwords—lest our stewardship is squandered and apathy becomes our legacy. Lord, help us.

The Pitfall of Self-Trust

Finally, we must renounce self-trust for our future. All of the pitfalls above should be avoided, but none compare to the danger of self-trust. We were born by the power of the Spirit, and we will only continue by His power as well. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

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The future of the church rests in the hands of the Lord. As John Owen said on his death bed, “I am leaving the ship of the church in a storm. But while the great Pilot is in it, the loss of a poor under-rower will be inconsiderable. Live, and pray, and hope, and wait patiently, and do not despond. The promise stands invincible, that

He will never leave us, nor forsake us.”³

We must commit the second (and third and fourth!) generations to the Lord. We are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, and any Biblical and gospel heritage is due to him. So we say now, “Lord, here’s our heart and our future, take and seal it for Your courts above. ‘Tis grace that brought us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.”

His Glory Alone

And should the Lord be pleased to preserve us for our 100th birthday, should our gospel heritage become our legacy, it will be to his glory alone. And saints above and below will say, “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps. 115:1)!

3. JOHN OWEN, “THE LIFE OF DR. OWEN,” IN *THE WORKS OF JOHN OWEN* (EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND: JOHNSON & HUNTER, 1850-1855; REPRINT BY BANNER OF TRUTH, 1965), VOL. 1, CIII.

So—to my brothers and sisters in the second generation (and third!)—let us build on Christ the Cornerstone and watch over our gospel heritage. Let us pray that the favor of the Lord would continue to be upon us and that he would establish the work of our hands. And let us be confident and full of faith for the future, knowing that God is able to do far more than all that we ask or think. Lord willing, our 100th birthday will find our spiritual children and grandchildren weeping, shouting, and singing of Christ and him crucified.

This article is dedicated with affection and gratefulness to our fathers in the faith, the first generation of Sovereign Grace. Thank you for making Christ our foundation.

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