

Thoughts on the Call for an “Independent Investigation” of Sovereign Grace Churches

Different people in various public contexts have called for Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC) to undergo an “independent third-party investigation” of our denomination to determine if sexual abuse has been covered up and abusers protected in our churches. We understand that such a call may sound reasonable to outside observers—even to some who, despite the nature of some on-line discussions, do not presume SGC’s guilt.

Despite the seeming reasonableness of this appeal, last year the Sovereign Grace Leadership Team (LT) concluded that recommending such a review would be both inappropriate and impractical for a number of important reasons. We did so only after pursuing counsel from a range of pastors, Christian leaders, and attorneys, including the input of SGC’s Executive Committee, which stands in support of this decision.

Before addressing the reasons for this recommendation, it’s important to stress what it does *not* mean. It does not mean that SGC does not take allegations against it seriously, or that we are unconcerned about the details of these allegations. *Most importantly*, it does not mean that we are insensitive to the seriousness of sexual abuse and the great harm experienced by its survivors. We want the truth to be known about these allegations, we have spent years investigating them, and we have sought to answer as many questions as possible surrounding these events, a summary of which you can find in our FAQ document.

Moreover, we have worked diligently as a family of churches, especially over the past ten years, to give attention to the issue of sexual abuse. Like all sincere Christians and churches, we have learned much about the tragedy of sexual abuse and have taken concrete steps both to strengthen the safety of our churches and to equip our pastors in providing wise and compassionate care to survivors of abuse. Some details of these steps are explained in our FAQ document.

The Nature of Our Decision

A number of issues affected our decision to not recommend a third-party independent investigation of our denomination. Here are some of the main points of our thinking for anyone desiring to understand our position.

- *We made our decision based upon principles that were theological, ethical, and practical in nature.* Practical matters alone make this option impossible, but we have tried to think through this recommendation in the most principled way available to us.
- *We are not saying that external investigations are never appropriate.* Rather, we do not think one is appropriate given the present circumstances, in which scandalous allegations have been made publicly against a limited number of parties, without providing credible evidence or based upon any substantive findings by criminal or civil authorities.

- *In addition, and contrary to the impressions of some, the allegations against SGC have not gone uninvestigated; they have been investigated by civil authorities, our own years-long efforts, and the churches involved. Moreover, the ongoing allegations of covering up abuse have never been—before or since the civil lawsuit filed against us—supported by any judicial or investigative findings by law enforcement or any other party.*
- *Neither is this a decision to shield ourselves from scrutiny. We are not denying that there is an appropriate interaction with, and submission to, external authorities for churches. For example, SGC has submitted to external audits that have demonstrated our financial integrity for 30+ years. Civil authorities bear appropriate responsibility for a wide range of issues that promote the safety and common welfare of citizens. For this we are grateful, and we have cooperated and intend to cooperate fully.*
- *More to the point, we are grateful that allegations of criminal activity have been investigated by the proper civil authorities, and we stand by their conclusions. That said, the expectation that Sovereign Grace can conduct its own criminal investigation into these accusations, outside the scope of law enforcement and civil authorities who have already conducted their own investigations, and obtain any meaningful resolution that respects the rights of the accusers and those accused is not only unrealistic, but potentially harmful to all parties affected.*

Reasons Against an Independent Investigation

Our reasons for not pursuing a third-party independent investigation of our denomination fall within two general categories: standards of justice, and SGC ecclesiology.

Standards of Justice. Given the basis of the allegations, the demand that we subject our entire denomination to an investigation is neither just nor practically possible, nor would it meet biblical, or even civil, standards of justice.

- The primary events in question relate to the allegations made in the civil lawsuit filed in 2012.
 - For those unfamiliar with the civil lawsuit, the plaintiffs’ attorney made one overarching charge: a conspiracy to cover up sexual abuse against two churches.
 - These circumstances have been investigated by law enforcement authorities, by our own years-long efforts, and by the churches themselves.
 - These investigations have yielded no credible evidence of any instance of abuse or conspiracy to cover up abuse or to protect a criminal by any SGC pastor or staff member.

- *Moreover, there is not a single instance of a Sovereign Grace pastor or staff member ever being charged with—much less convicted of—sexual abuse or covering up abuse in our 35+ year history.*
- To demand an independent investigation of an entire denomination based upon unsubstantiated allegations—especially against only two churches, neither of which is any longer a part of the denomination—is unwarranted and unjust.
- The idea of an “independent” investigation ignores basic realities of the issues involved in this situation.
 - The allegations from the civil lawsuit pertain to two churches that are no longer part of SGC. We have no authority over those churches, no right to their pastoral records, and no access to their internal reports or investigations. *We are simply unable to perform what some people are demanding.*
 - Like many denominations, our churches are independently constituted. SGC has no more authority to order a denomination-wide investigation of all of its churches than, e.g., the Southern Baptist Convention does.
 - That said, if someone has criminal allegations against any SGC pastor, we would strongly encourage them to report that to the appropriate authorities.
- Beyond the civil lawsuit, SGC has faced on-line accusations that are broad, generalized, and unsubstantiated. An investigation of our denomination based on such accusations would remove these issues from biblical—and even secular, civil—standards of justice.
 - Are such unsubstantiated allegations an appropriate basis for imposing an investigation upon an entire denomination?
 - Does an entire denomination have to prove its innocence, based upon a presumption of guilt, for every accusation made online, whether it has been substantiated or not?
 - Who would decide what “independent” means, and how would such independence be established?
 - What result would satisfy? Assuming such an organization could even be identified, what are the standards for guilt, innocence, and conclusiveness?
 - How would such an investigation, under these circumstances, correspond to biblical standards of discovering truth in churches—or even reasonable, civil standards of discovering truth?
 - On what basis should we rely on an independent investigator to rule on issues that fall within the purview of law enforcement? Again, if someone has evidence of sexual abuse or cover-up that has not been reported to authorities, we urge them to do so.
 - What accountability would the investigator have? In particular, who would assure they operate with integrity and with biblical (or even secular) standards of credibility, truth, and justice?

- How can one biblically justify appointing an investigator to act as both judge and jury over an entire denomination (combining into one person functions that our legal system separates: investigation, presentation of evidence, and judgment)?
 - What investigator would be able/willing to identify *false* accusations as well as legitimate ones?
 - A just investigation should also measure *faithfulness*: how should the faithfulness of hundreds of pastors in scores of churches over decades be weighed and factored into a comprehensive view of SGC?
 - In sum, to subject *any* church (much less every church in SGC) to an external investigation based upon unsubstantiated online allegations, from the premise of a presumption of guilt, requiring compliance with requests of an investigator the church did not choose, is unwarranted, prejudicial, and singularly unjust.
- Finally, we are convinced that no independent investigation of all of our churches could accomplish what it purports to deliver.
 - Given the omission of the two primary churches in question (along with any number of SG churches which might refuse to participate) and the unsubstantiated nature of so many allegations, any report would come under harsh critique from critics and would fail to provide the basis for support that allies profess to seek.
 - Under these circumstances we do not believe any investigator, methodology, or scope of investigation could ever be identified that would both satisfy those demanding an investigation and meet the standards of objectivity and independence any reasonable party would insist upon.

Sovereign Grace Ecclesiology. Despite SGC Leadership’s inability to order an investigation of all of its churches, SGC has a detailed, well-defined polity with clear avenues to pursue biblical justice. This includes objective and impartial means of examining and adjudicating allegations of wrongdoing, within the protections of due process. We believe this honors God and protects our members and churches with both righteousness and compassion.

- For example, elders in Sovereign Grace are subject to multiple layers of accountability, along with multiple avenues of recourse, so that every pastor can be held accountable to biblical standards of morality, ethics, and doctrinal orthodoxy—an accountability we gladly welcome. Such provisions include:
 - Ecclesiastical charges related to sexual misconduct or criminal behavior (which would also be reported to authorities) against an elder can be brought at any time—there is no statute of limitations.
 - Non-members are able to bring forward evidence of alleged scandalous sin (and, of course, criminal activity) against an elder that will be used in evaluating charges against him.

- If an elder is accused of sexual abuse (or any criminal activity), that local church is required to report that to an SGC regional judicial body (i.e., the local church cannot deal with this itself).
- If a member who is sinned against and brings charges against an elder is unsatisfied with a verdict against that elder on the local level, the decision can be appealed to a regional body, and ultimately to a national body.
- All SGC elders are required to report suspicions of abuse to authorities whether their state law requires it or not. If they do not, they are subject to discipline in our polity.
- Even more importantly, our polity provides protections for those sinned against, to ensure they have clear and objective ways in which to receive justice. Survivors have a safe process by which they can be cared for and their concerns addressed, including allegations from our past.
- An independent investigation of our denomination would set aside the biblical principles underlying all these polity provisions and structures, which all those demanding an investigation should understand and support: e.g., standards for charges against an elder (1 Tim 5:19); appropriate avenues of appeal to and among elders (Acts 15; cf. Deut 17:8-9); the responsibility of elders to govern the church for which they will give an account (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor 6:1-4; 1 Thess 5:12-13; Heb 13:17); provisions that not only seek justice for the aggrieved but also provide appropriate protections for the accused (Deut 17:6; 19:5, 18-19; cf. Prov 18:7). To disregard these biblical principles in favor of pragmatic alternatives would both jettison biblical authority and undermine justice.
- As a result, such an investigation would submit all our churches and their leaderships to the processes and judgment of a single, functionally unaccountable organization or individual, who would be empowered to pass judgment on every SGC church without recourse. As we've done our best to explain above, we fail to see how such an organization or individual—who could act dispassionately and satisfy all parties—could even be appointed.
- In short, we cannot recommend that our denomination abandon the just processes it has developed and submit all of our churches to an external investigation, particularly in the present circumstances. Where there is credible evidence or substantive findings by criminal or civil authorities against a pastor or church, our polity contains ample provisions to address them compassionately, justly and effectively.

Finally, the circumstances in view have been examined by SGC, the churches involved, and civil authorities. Moreover, law enforcement retains the ability to bring charges against anyone credibly suspected of abuse or the cover-up of abuse—and were we to come upon any evidence for such crimes, we would report it to authorities, irrespective of any law or reporting requirement indicating that we were not required to do so. Such realities, however, have not mollified the on-line controversy surrounding these allegations. In sum, however desirable it

might be, any hope that a third-party investigation would put these accusations behind us once and for all is, in our judgment, utterly unrealistic.

We hope this explanation demonstrates the profound biblical and theological issues at stake in this matter. We made our recommendation in the face of public criticism and with the realization that some of our churches have faced significant pressure from some church members or their community. That grieves us deeply and we continue to pray for God's wisdom to protect all of our churches and the gospel mission we share. Nonetheless, we remain persuaded that an investigation of the sort we've been challenged to authorize—both in good faith and otherwise—is inappropriate, impractical, unjust, and finally would be unsatisfactory to all interested parties. Most importantly, as far as we're able to discern, we believe this course, the theological capitulation it would represent, and the precedent it would set, would ultimately dishonor Christ and harm the cause of the gospel.

The Sovereign Grace Leadership Team