

# The Vision and Mission of Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church

A collection of newsletter articles written by Dr. Bill  
Barcley in preparation for the building of a historic and  
reformed sanctuary.

The vision of Sovereign Grace Presbyterian Church is:

**Glorifying God. Growing together. Going to the nations.**

We want to be a people who are glorifying God in all things, because God works all things for His own glory. We were created to glorify God, and we glorify God particularly in worship. This is why we worship God reverently and joyfully, with God's Word as the focus of our worship.

We want to be a people who are growing together in God's grace. The Christian life is a life of togetherness. We grow in relationships with others in which we can share our sorrows, our joys, our love, and our hope. This is why we gather regularly for worship, prayer, and meals together.

We want to be a people who are going to the nations, as Jesus Christ teaches us in The Great Commission. This is why we support and send missionaries to preach the gospel, both here and around the world.

In preparation for building a historic, reformed sanctuary, Dr. Bill Barclay wrote a series of four articles, which were published in the quarterly newsletters of our church during the year 2013.

Articles:

1. Our Core Commitments
2. Missions and the Means of Grace
3. The History of Reformed Worship
4. How Our Building Program Reflects our Core Commitments

*The following article was published in the March 2013 church newsletter.*

Dear Sovereign Grace church family:

We have just come off of an exciting Missions conference and an encouraging Faith Promise pledge total for 2013. In case you have not heard, the pledge total was just under \$50,000—that is \$15,000 higher than our goal. At the same time, we have a building committee hard at work on the design of a new sanctuary and making plans to launch a capital campaign in the near future. As I said during the announcements before a recent worship service, our commitment to missions and the building of a new sanctuary to grow our ministry in South Park and beyond are not opposed to one another. They are fully in harmony with one another, even though, for a short time, money that might otherwise go to missions will be spent on the new building. We need to have a long term view of what it means to support missions and to seek to be faithful to the Great Commission. In the long run, if God should bring the growth and enable us to double our size, we will be able to more than double our support of the work of the gospel. There is a multiplication principle that works when churches our size expand in this way, not a simple addition principle. If God then enables us to maximize our property here and grow to 400-450 (which has been the goal of Sovereign Grace since it was formed), we would then send out a sizable core group with TWO pastors (the current—and wise—requirement of our Presbytery) to plant a new church. We would need to do that in a way that would not negatively impact the missionaries and missions agencies that we support. New churches and small churches (100 and under) spend most of their resources—human and otherwise—devoted to survival. We could not expect the new church to continue to support all of our missionaries. So the goal will be at that point to send out a sizable, sustainable group to plant a new church, while not significantly impacting missions at Sovereign Grace.

During that announcement time a few weeks ago, I also said that I would be writing a series of articles on our mission and vision. This is the first of those articles. When I spoke I used the terms “traditional” and “missional.” I confess I used them more for the rhetorical effect (they rhyme!) than because of my love for the words themselves. After the service, Bob Stewart said to me that he wishes we had a better term than “traditional” to express the richness of our worship. And he said that when he hears the term “missional” he thinks of a pastor with an earring (no, I don’t plan to get one). I agree with both of those observations. But the fact that “missional” is often associated today with “hip” pastors and young churches with contemporary worship should give us pause. In fact, it should motivate us to take back that term for ourselves.

The reality is that we as a church are committed to missions and to being “traditional” because we believe it is the BEST WAY to be faithful to Jesus’ command in the Great Commission. That is what I will address in this series of articles, concluding with how the building of a historic, Reformed sanctuary goes hand in hand with these commitments—and, in fact, will leave a legacy of these commitments for the coming generations.

In the space remaining for this article, let me lay out three basic commitments of our church, with time for only a few comments about each. First, as a church, we are **committed to the**

**Great Commission.** Why? Because we want to be obedient to the command of Jesus. As wonderful as it is to have a warm, loving church full of caring and generous people, we do not exist simply to sustain these wonderful relationships. Christ calls us to be forward-looking and outward-looking. We are called to advance the Gospel, to send the Word forth and to seek first the Kingdom of God. The mission of Sovereign Grace is the Great Commission.

Second, we are **committed to an ordinary means of grace ministry.** God has made clear to us the means by which unbelievers come to saving faith and believers are built up in faith—they are: 1) his Word read, taught and preached; 2) prayer; 3) singing to God and to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; 4) the sacraments; and 5) fellowship. It is especially through the ministry of the Word that sinners are brought to repentance and we grow in God’s grace. Thus, this is the principle means of fulfilling the Great Commission to “make disciples...baptizing them...[and] teaching them...” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Third, we are **committed to historic, Reformed worship.** We do not hold to this commitment because of a nostalgic love of what is old, or even of “tradition” itself. Rather, we are committed to historic, Reformed worship because it best communicates and passes on the Reformed faith—and therefore the true gospel.

*The following article was published in the June 2013 church newsletter.*

In the last newsletter, I began a series of articles discussing who we are as a church, what our vision is for moving forward, and how all of this relates to the current plans for building a historic, Reformed sanctuary. In the previous article, I listed three of our core commitments: 1) A commitment to an “ordinary means of grace” ministry; 2) a commitment to historic, Reformed worship; and 3) a commitment to the Great Commission. In fact, all three of these go together. A means of grace ministry and historic, Reformed worship is the best way to be faithful to God’s commands to his church in Scripture—especially the commands given in the Great Commission. I once heard a PCA ruling elder say that if a church wants to be “conservative” and “traditional” it cannot also be committed to missions. That cannot be farther from the truth. In fact, just the opposite is true.

Historically, a commitment to missions has been part of the fabric of the “old school” southern Presbyterian church from the very beginning. At the first General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia, Benjamin Morgan Palmer (whose long and fruitful ministry included serving 11 years as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, SC) preached the opening sermon and asked the question, “Do we understand, Fathers and Brothers, the mission of the Church given us here to execute?” He answered: “It is to lift up throughout the world the testimony for the headship of Christ.” The General Assembly went on to state that it desired “distinctly and deliberately to inscribe on our church’s banner as she now unfurls it to the world Christ’s last command: ‘Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature’; regarding this as the great end of her organization, and obedience to it as the indispensable condition of her Lord’s promised presence.” Notice this last line from that first General Assembly. A commitment to the Great Commission—and therefore missions—is the “great end,” that is, the goal of the church and the condition for Christ’s promised presence. The Great Commission concludes with Christ’s statement, “lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” But this promise is given to those churches who are committed to “going and making disciples.”

John Leighton Wilson, part of the first graduation class of Columbia Theological Seminary (not far from 1st Presbyterian Church), was a missionary in Africa for 20 years. He returned to the US and became secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions in the Southern Presbyterian church, where he served for 25 years. He loved missions “because it is the Lord’s ordering”—that is, it was commanded by Christ. Furthermore, he said, the Lord loves missions “more than any of us can.” Wilson loved his work as secretary, but stated that he sometimes found it hard “to have to stand between a dying world and an indifferent, hesitating church.” John Miller Wells summed up one of Wilson’s commitments in this way: “obedience to Christ’s command in foreign missions is the hope for the church itself here at home.”

Our forefathers in the “old school” Southern Presbyterian church recognized that missions and a conservative, means of grace ministry go hand in hand. Why? The first reason is that doing missions is simply being obedient to Christ’s command. Churches that fail to be obedient to this command—or any command of God—do not flourish. The second reason is that the ordinary means of grace, especially the reading, teaching and preaching of the Word

of God, is the primary means that God uses to change hearts and bring sinners to repentance.

This past weekend at the RTS graduation ceremony, Dr. T. David Gordon gave the address and showed that in 1 Corinthians 1:21, Paul literally says that it is through the “foolishness of preaching” that God saves those who believe. Paul says in that passage that both the message and the medium are foolishness. On the one hand, the message of the cross is foolishness to the world. But the medium, preaching, is also foolishness. Like our world today, the ancient world had different mediums for communicating their message. The most popular were poetry, dialogue, rhetoric and drama. Preaching would not have been the medium that most would have chosen. But that is exactly what God chose. And it is through preaching that God brings sinners to salvation.

Today, we have many in the evangelical church who say that, in our technological, visual age, preaching is no longer an effective medium for communicating the gospel message. But God’s method is “the Lord’s ordering.” And we as a church are committed to “conserving” and maintaining that method—not simply because it’s traditional, but because Gospel preaching is God’s ordained way to advance his Kingdom. Mission and a means of grace ministry are not in opposition. They go hand in hand.

*The following article was published in the September 2013 church newsletter.*

This is the third in a series of four articles about our mission and vision as a church, ultimately culminating in an article about how our building program, and the construction of a historic, Reformed sanctuary fits with who we are and where we are going. The first article discussed our commitments as a church—namely, that we are committed to the Great Commission, an ordinary means of grace ministry, and historic Reformed worship. All three of these commitments are closely tied together. In fact, we are committed to an ordinary means of grace ministry and to historic Reformed worship because we believe that is the best way to fulfill the Great Commission. So, contrary to popular belief, being “traditional” and “missional” go hand in hand. In the second article, we saw how fulfilling the Great Commission and commitment to a means of grace ministry go together because the means of grace (the Word read, taught, preached, prayer, sacraments, singing, fellowship) are the means that God has appointed to convict sinners and grow the saints (make disciples).

In this article, I want to focus on historic Reformed worship. A hallmark of historic Reformed worship is that it occupies a unique place between “low church” worship and “high church” worship. Terry Johnson describes it this way: “The ‘low’ churches lack the sense of the glory and majesty of God that results from well-ordered God-centered worship. The ‘high’ churches lack the spontaneous and personal ‘feel’ of Reformed worship with its free prayers and expository preaching.” Another way to describe this is that Reformed worship attempts to be both awe-filled and joyful. Scripture commands that we are to worship God “with reverence and awe” (Heb. 12:28). When we gather for worship, we gather to meet with the holy God who is a “consuming fire.” So our desire is for reverent worship. But this does not mean that our worship should be devoid of feeling and joy. Our God is both the majestic, holy God of the universe, but also the loving Father who has adopted us as his beloved children. This should give us joy. When we reflect on the fact that God has loved us and saved us from our sin and in spite of our sin, that should give us “one holy passion” (as the hymn writer puts it) in our worship. Reverent worship does not mean emotionless, stale, sterile worship. “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name.”

The modern trend for casual, contemporary worship is often marked by joy and passion, but not a sense of reverence and awe. We cannot come “casually” into the presence of the thrice-holy, Almighty God. The argument for the movement to contemporary casual worship is an admirable one—to reach the culture for Christ, to attract unbelievers so that they hear the gospel and come to faith in Christ. This thinking often leads to the accusation that means of grace churches which are committed to “traditional” (better, historic Reformed) worship, are not “missional” and not committed to fulfilling the Great Commission. But is the contemporary worship movement really better at attracting unbelievers and bringing them into the Kingdom? Statistics say no and the overall trends in our culture argue against it. A Business Week article from May 23, 2005 examined the recent trends in churches and pointed out that over the previous 15 years, overall church attendance had remained relatively flat. The article then goes on to say, “And if anything, popular culture has become more vulgar in recent years.” Far from reaching and transforming culture for Christ (the promise made by many of the advocates of the modern worship trends), the rise of

contemporary casual worship has coincided with a greater decline in culture and movement away from Christ.

Historic Reformed worship best engages the world in large part because it is different from the world. The church is called to be set apart from the world and its witness is strongest when it is different from the world. Even from a purely pragmatic perspective, unbelievers typically set foot in a church for two services—weddings and funerals. These services are, even in the most contemporary churches, typically the most solemn, traditional services that churches hold. So when God begins to work in the hearts of unbelievers to draw them to himself, “church” for them typically means a service that is similar to what they have seen and know (and it was often the time when they heard the gospel most clearly). From a biblical perspective, as John McArthur puts it, “The church...is the only earthly expression of heaven. People ought to walk in here and say, ‘I have never experienced anything like this.’ They shouldn’t walk in and say, ‘Ah, I feel comfortable here. This sounds familiar. It’s a pretty groovy deal here.’”

Historic Reformed worship best reflects and passes on the Reformed tradition, and therefore the true, God-exalting gospel. As Terry Johnson puts it, “it is doubtful that the Reformed ethos, that bundle of elements that make us Reformed, such as theology, world and life view, polity, piety and worship, can be grafted onto alien forms and still survive.” Historic Reformed worship is Word-centered—we read the Word, preach the Word, pray the Word and sing the Word. It follows an orderly gospel logic—God speaks to us and we respond. It is filled with rich, biblical and theological content in our confessions and songs. And its forms are dictated by sacred patterns, not borrowed from the world’s norms or an individual’s preference. These forms include the style of our music. The contemporary trend of using pop styles to sound like the world is problematic for many reasons. But one key reason is the prevalence of pop music throughout our culture. The very presence of pop styles everywhere—in elevators, in the doctor’s office, etc.—makes pop music mundane and trivializes its content. This is not to say all pop music is bad or that Christians should not listen to it. I personally enjoy listening to classic country or old Springsteen songs from time to time. But the ubiquity of the pop genre in our world today makes it a particularly unsuitable vehicle to communicate weighty, sacred content. Form and content always go together and affect one another. Weighty, God-exalting, life and death content must be expressed in forms that do not make it seem trivial.

This focus on the form of our worship is closely tied to the physical setting of our worship. This of course will lead us to talk about our plans for building a historic, Reformed sanctuary.

*The following article was published in the December 2013 church newsletter.*

This is the last in a series of four letters about our church's mission and vision, especially in preparation for building a historic, Reformed sanctuary. The previous letters were included in the last three newsletters. All four letters will soon be brought together and made available to you. In the previous three letters, I have laid out three of our basic commitments as a church: 1) A commitment to the Great Commission; 2) a commitment to an ordinary means of grace ministry; and 3) a commitment to historic Reformed worship. I have attempted to show that these three all go together. We are committed to an ordinary means of grace ministry and to historic Reformed worship because we believe these are the BEST way to fulfill our commitment to the Great Commission. We often hear today that churches can't be both "traditional" and "missional." But that can't be farther from the truth.

So how does this relate to our current building program and to the plans to build a historic Reformed sanctuary? First, our commitment to the Great Commission compels us to seek to grow our ministry in Charlotte and around the world. God has put us in a strategic location in South Park, one of the leading business districts in the Carolinas. The Session's desire is to maximize our current property here so that we can have the greatest impact possible where God has put us. The proposed 450 seat sanctuary would bring us, we believe, to about the maximum number that we could hold at our current location at one time. Growing from our current number of around 250 to 450 would enable us to substantially increase our ministry in South Park and our support of missions and missionaries around the world. Growth in ministry does not increase at the same level as growth in size. Ministry growth typically happens exponentially with regard to size growth. In the last six years, for instance, we have doubled in size, but our giving to missions has more than tripled. In addition, within the last two years we have sent two missionary families overseas to the mission field, we have one family preparing to go, and we recently sent another family to upstate New York to plant a church in the spiritually barren city of Syracuse. Since we have just about maxed out our current building, if we do not build, future growth in numbers and ministry will be hindered.

When we approach 450, we will begin making plans to plant a daughter church. Church planting is one of the best strategies for seeking to expand the Kingdom of God. But the reality is, the vast majority of church plants fail. So the Session's desire for church planting is to send out a sizable core group (perhaps as many as 75-100) with two pastors (which is actually the current requirement of our Presbytery's missions committee). We will need to be at the place where planting a new church will not affect the ministries and missionaries that our congregation supports. We can't expect the new church to continue to support our ministries. For a few years, the majority of that church's personal and financial resources will be devoted simply to survival. Again, if we do not build, none of this will be able to happen.

So, what are we building and why are we building this particular structure? In their book, *Christ and Architecture*, Donald J. Bruggink and Carl H. Droppers state, "Architecture for churches is a matter of gospel. A church that is interested in proclaiming the gospel must also be interested in architecture, for year after year the architecture of the church proclaims a message that either augments the preached Word or conflicts with it." In previous articles, I

have argued that a means of grace ministry and historic Reformed worship best communicate the gospel of God's grace and best make disciples in fulfillment of the Great Commission. So the place where we worship must reflect those commitments. One of legacies of the Reformation was that our forefathers not only effected a change in theological understanding, they also brought about changes in worship, and especially changes in the place of worship. They knew that the place of worship either reinforces or contradicts the gospel and doctrine being taught.

The proposed new sanctuary is perfectly suited to our commitment to historic Reformed worship. When someone enters our new sanctuary through the main central door in the back, at the far end of the center aisle they will see a large, raised pulpit, showing our commitment to the centrality of the Word of God, a key element of historic Reformed worship. The new sanctuary will have a simple elegance and beauty to it, reminding us that we gather there to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. The high ceiling will lift our eyes upward, giving a sense of transcendence and calling us to worship God with awe and reverence. The light-filled sanctuary, the result of the natural light of several tall windows around the sanctuary, will symbolize the radiance of God, and the light of Christ and of the gospel which have permeated our hearts and lives. The close proximity of the pews to the front of the sanctuary, and their arrangement arcing around the pulpit, communion table and baptismal font will demonstrate both the communion of the saints and the reality that in Christ we are enabled to draw near to the holy, transcendent God. Thus, it reminds us that our worship is to be both awe-filled and joyful.

Overall, this new sanctuary will not look and feel like the places where the world meets today to do its business or enjoy its entertainment—and this is intentional. This will be “sacred space,” set apart for the worship of the holy God. We do not gather here to undertake worldly, mundane activities. We do not gather for entertainment. We do not come together in a theater-like setting, with sloping seats, where the congregation sits passively, evaluating the actors or, even worse, looking down and sitting in judgment on the Word of God. We gather to worship a God who is “wholly other,” and our place of worship should reflect that. It will not have a “casual” feel. Our sanctuary will not be a place where outsiders will necessarily come and feel spiritually “comfortable.” Rather, we want all who enter our new sanctuary to know that we have gathered to do business with the holy, gracious, transcendent God, and our desire is that all who do not know him fall on their knees and “declare that God is really among” us (1 Cor. 14:25).

Finally, it is our prayer that with the building of this historic Reformed sanctuary we leave a legacy for coming generations. The tendency in the culture and in the church is always to drift, and that drift is almost always to the left. One way to battle that is to leave a legacy that seeks to maintain traditional values and forms. As Albert Mohler has put it, “we must indicate clearly and publicly that the continuity of conviction is essential.” There is no more clear and public demonstration of our commitments as a church than a historic Reformed sanctuary that reflects our historic Reformed worship.

Your servant in Christ,  
Bill Barclay