

A Response to Allegations Against Sovereign Grace Churches February 13, 2018

Over the past several days, Rachael Denhollander has twice raised allegations—first in an interview in *Christianity Today* (CT) and then in a Facebook post—concerning Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC) and its handling of sexual abuse cases. Over the past few years, we have regularly shared details on these matters privately with those who have approached us in good faith with understandable concerns. However, in our public statements, we have been reluctant to share many details concerning these accusations. Far from hiding facts, we have sought to be discreet in our communications to protect those involved—first and foremost victims and their families. In light of these recent accusations, it seems important now to address them more specifically. We hope what we share here will help to clarify some details and, as a result, address questions and misperceptions that exist about Sovereign Grace, our pastors, and our churches.

Before we address substance, however, we feel compelled to address certain aspects of recent public comments and the process surrounding them. As we stated in our response to the CT interview on February 2, 2018, we are grateful for Rachael’s courage in confronting Larry Nassar, and as pastors and churches we share and commend Rachael’s passionate concern for victims of sexual abuse. Having said that, the decisions of Rachael and others to publicly pronounce SGC and its pastors guilty of sexual abuse and conspiracy, on the basis of false allegations and with no direct knowledge of SGC’s history or the facts, have profoundly damaged the reputations and gospel ministries of innocent pastors and churches. The comparisons drawn between SGC and horrific, widespread episodes of abuse—about which the facts are already publicly established – are irresponsible. The pastors and leaders of SGC are believers in Jesus Christ, and our churches are led by pastors who fear God with the sobering reality that we will give an account for our ministry ([Hebrews 13:17](#)). We are also unceasingly aware that our faith is rooted in the absolute truths of God’s Word. To *all* Christians, truth matters, and zeal without knowledge leads to error and strife.

Rachael calls for a “fair, independent” investigation into SGC led by GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in a Christian Environment) because of the organization’s supposed neutrality. However, Boz Tchividjian, the leader of GRACE, has on multiple occasions written and spoken publicly in ways that suggest he has already prejudged the case against SGC. He has publicly indicted the motives of SGC as it relates to those allegations, and he has

publicly criticized others who have expressed any support for SGC. No investigation can be conducted or evaluated with integrity and good faith by an organization whose leader has already publicly drawn his conclusions and has used his platform to attempt to sway public opinion about the case.

In addition to various investigations by authorities, one of the two churches that were accused of wrongdoing commissioned an independent investigation of its involvement in these matters. Because this church is no longer part of SGC, we have not been given access to this independent report, but one of the church's pastors publicly disclosed certain conclusions from the investigation, and we will refer to some of these below.

No matter how great the passion for an obviously righteous cause, no fallen human being possesses absolute moral authority, and it benefits neither the victims of sexual abuse nor the name of Christ when believers publicly condemn one another without the facts.

Now to those facts. In providing these details, we hope to substantively address the allegations brought against SGC and to shed light on the false narrative some have sought to promote in recent years.

In a 2012 civil lawsuit, SGC and some of our pastors were accused of conspiring to cover up instances of sexual abuse. After the suit was dismissed in 2014, we issued a statement denying the accusations in the lawsuit and defending the integrity of our pastors. Here we will seek to address the major questions and concerns many have expressed, along with misperceptions some have regarding these issues.

Many have the impression that abuse was widespread throughout Sovereign Grace churches. This is not true. The lawsuit brought against Sovereign Grace in 2012 included accusations of abuse in two churches that had occurred many years earlier. No other Sovereign Grace churches were named in the lawsuit. While a single incident of abuse is grievous, it is simply false to characterize this as widespread within Sovereign Grace churches, whose experience with this horrible sin is, sadly, not unusual in our culture. We have been grieved to see pastors and church members tainted by this false impression.

Some have the impression that pastors have been involved in abuse. That is false. We are not aware of a single pastor in Sovereign Grace ever being guilty of – much less charged with or convicted of – sexual abuse, in our entire history. In the civil suit discussed above, two pastors were

included in allegations of abuse that had never been reported previously. These accusations were investigated by the police and the church. None of these claims have ever been substantiated and no criminal charges were filed. These pastors immediately and publicly denied these accusations, and we strongly believe them to be false.

Some accuse Sovereign Grace of conspiring to cover up child abuse. This, too, is completely false. Some of the details of the civil lawsuit are relevant here:

- This was not a criminal trial of the abusers themselves based on any charges brought by authorities. It was a civil lawsuit against pastors and churches seeking financial damages relating to past handling of claims of abuse.
- The suit was brought by 11 plaintiffs suing pastors, two churches, and Sovereign Grace.
- The claims of five of the 11 plaintiffs involved cases of abuse *that had been reported and addressed by authorities* years earlier.
- Another five of the plaintiffs made allegations of abuse that were purported to have occurred years earlier. These allegations were sensational and were never confirmed, in spite of investigations by law enforcement and the churches. These resulted in no criminal charges. We strongly believe these allegations to be false.
- The final plaintiff claimed abuse by Nathaniel Morales, now a convicted pedophile, who had been arrested by police prior to the civil suit based on reports by other victims. We will say more about his case below.
- In sum, to the best of our knowledge, only one of the confirmed cases of abuse (Morales) relating to the plaintiffs in the civil lawsuit was not reported until years after the abuse occurred.
- As to the charge of conspiracy, the very thought is abhorrent. Moreover, in 2016 a pastor of one of the churches named in the civil suit, in response to accusations of conspiracy to cover up child abuse, stated publicly that: *“We denied those charges and allegations from the beginning. Not only that, we hired an independent investigator to look into those allegations. The investigator concluded that there was not any evidence to support that conspiracy or obstruction had taken place.”* Indeed, had we ever become

aware of any effort to hide abuse or protect an abuser, we would have reported it to authorities immediately.

It has been claimed that the lawsuit against Sovereign Grace was dismissed because of a legal technicality. This is largely correct but misleading. Again, details of the lawsuit are important.

- It is true that the civil lawsuit was dismissed in September of 2014 primarily (but not exclusively) because of expired statutes of limitations.
- That said, it is important to note that the civil statute of limitations does not protect perpetrators of abuse or conspiracy to cover-up abuse. If law enforcement had found there to be substance to the accusations of abuse or conspiracy against SGC pastors, those individuals would have been subject to criminal prosecution irrespective of the civil lawsuit. No abuser or conspirator escaped justice because of the dismissal of the lawsuit.
- The statute of limitations is no mere technicality, but a legal provision that protects people from false accusations made many years after the fact. We believe it served precisely that purpose in the case of allegations in the civil lawsuit that had never before been made and had no corroboration, even if it meant that the merits of the accusations were not fully adjudicated in the context of the suit.
- Once again, the lawsuit in question sought financial damages for charges of conspiracy to cover up abuse; it did not involve criminal charges. As noted above, one of the churches named in the lawsuit had an independent investigation performed, and we repeat here the public summary made by one of their pastors: “We denied those charges and allegations from the beginning. Not only that, we hired an independent investigator to look into those allegations. The investigator concluded that there was not any evidence to say that the conspiracy or obstruction of justice had taken place.”

Some have characterized SGC’s experience with abuse as a “scandal” and compared it to horrific instances of modern abuse scandals. Such characterizations have been uninformed, irresponsible, and have severely

damaged the reputations of innocent pastors and churches. They are also false comparisons. At the root of these issues is the case of a convicted pedophile, Nathaniel Morales, who abused victims while a member in one of our churches around 30 years ago. Details of his case are grievous to recount, but they are relevant to the false impression some have of SGC.

- The abuse by Morales occurred in the 1980s at a church that was then part of Sovereign Grace. Morales was not and never has been a pastor or staff member of a Sovereign Grace church.
- According to court testimony, in 1992 Morales was confronted by a pastor and a parent of one of the victims (who was by then an adult). Morales denied the charge and then left the church and fled the area.
- As a result of an independent investigation by the church, a pastor publicly reported the following in 2016: “[T]here were only two [instances] that specific pastors were aware of. One family member went to one pastor and in that context they interacted with Nate Morales and the pastor followed up with the family member to say ‘Would you like to take this further?’ In other words, would you like to go to the police? The family member said no, he did not. The other instance was one where a pastor did not have first-hand knowledge of the information of the details—it was 2nd or 3rdhand . . . where the victim didn’t discuss the details of what took place until many, many years later.”
- Although the care of these pastors was well-intended (and they were not required by law to report these incidents), it is clear in hindsight that there were grave errors in judgment, and the abuse should have been reported regardless of the circumstances or a victim’s wishes.
- Finally, but importantly: as grievous as this situation was, it is simply wrong and irresponsible to compare it with modern day abuse scandals. No pastors were involved in abuse, and no one knowingly sought to hide or cover up abuse.

Sovereign Grace has been accused of protecting abusers through a policy of not reporting abuse. This is not true. A few distinctions are important here:

- During the time period covered in the suit, SGC as an organization did not have an officially stated policy with respect to these issues. We certainly had no policy of “not reporting.” It is regrettable now in hindsight, but SGC and its churches were like many organizations and churches in past decades in that we lacked formal guidelines for such cases.
- Despite the lack of a formal policy, we are aware that in our churches instances of abuse were reported to authorities from the 1980s to the present, including episodes referenced in the civil lawsuit. This is not to say that our pastors handled every situation as they would today (for example, the Morales situation noted above), but over our 30+ year history, our churches (numbering at times up to nearly 100) have endeavored to care for and protect its members by ensuring the involvement of civil authorities, honoring relevant laws, and seeking legal and professional counsel in these difficult circumstances.
- With respect to caring for victims, we readily acknowledge that we have learned much over the last 30+ years. There have been times when we simply did not do it well. We do not believe these instances were common, and they were by no means ill-intentioned. But in hindsight, we regret this and wish that we had done it better.
- We have worked diligently to improve. Over the past ten years in particular—and we wish it had been far earlier—we have presented to all of our pastors information concerning abuse intended to raise both our awareness and our vigilance in caring for victims. Sovereign Grace also offers its churches, free of charge, the comprehensive safety system designed by MinistrySafe, a leading organization dedicated to the prevention of sexual abuse. We stress to every pastor the necessity of reporting allegations of abuse to the authorities and prioritizing the care of the victim. We try to do what we believe every church desires to do: provide a safe environment for our children and all of our members.

Some have accused C.J. Mahaney of both being involved in protecting abusers and in creating a “culture” that perpetuated abuse. This is false on both counts. Given the unrelenting attacks made against C.J. over the past

few years, it is important for us to state the following.

- As those who have known and labored with C.J. for decades, the very idea of sexual abuse is abhorrent to him, as it indeed is to anyone who fears God and loves the gospel. Like untold numbers of like-minded pastors, C.J.'s life and ministry testify to a man who is passionate about his Savior, devoted to his family, and who has faithfully served the cause of the gospel for decades. It saddens us that people have vilified C.J. and believed the worst about him, especially that he is guilty of perpetuating abuse.
- C.J. has no recollection of hearing of Morales's crimes in the 1990s. He has honestly stated that, if he had received that report at the time, he likely would have deferred to the adult victim and his parents in the same way the pastors involved apparently did. He has also stressed that, given what we have all learned about the nature of child predators and sexual abuse generally, he would never take that same approach today.
- As for the "culture" charge, nothing could be further from the truth. The culture C.J. helped to create, by the grace of God, was one of loving the gospel, honoring Christ, and pursuing holiness. The church was not a perfect church, but it was a faithful, healthy, and fruitful church. Accusations that C.J. and the pastors at that time created a culture that engendered abuse or enabled abusers is not merely false, it is absurd.

For the past six years, SGC has found itself in a difficult situation in addressing the accusations lodged against us and our pastors. It is difficult to communicate complex details involving painful circumstances decades after the fact. It is difficult to respond to false accusations without appearing defensive and, far worse, unsympathetic to victims of abuse. Behind the details of this statement are real victims whose lives have been harmed by abuse. For victims outside of Sovereign Grace, even listening in to these details evokes painful memories and, one would imagine, feelings of indignation. That is sobering for us to consider and, like every church and denomination that seeks to honor Christ, SGC is committed to pursuing the highest standards of protection for our members, and especially our children.

However, the public nature of the charges made against SGC and its pastors necessitated this more detailed response. A certain narrative has been put

forth concerning Sovereign Grace which is untrue and unjust, and it has been damaging to pastors, church members, and ultimately the cause of Christ. We hope these details will help to correct that narrative. We trust that some who read this document will be comforted or persuaded by it; we realize others will not. Still, we have undertaken the effort in good faith, and we anticipate that this response will be our last public comment on the details of these allegations.

For the members of Sovereign Grace Churches, we are grateful for your love for Christ, your trust for your pastors, and your faithfulness to your local churches. For Christians in other churches, we hope you recognize that, like your own church, Sovereign Grace consists of flawed but forgiven sinners seeking to honor the Lord and see the gospel proclaimed in this world. For everyone reading this, we hope you realize that SGC, its pastors, and its members share a hatred of the sin of sexual abuse and a commitment to protecting against it.

The Sovereign Grace Churches Leadership Team