

Steve, Tony, Sándor, James, and Luke,

I have never met most of you, and I imagine that only one of you knows who I am. Nevertheless, I'm writing to share my grief over and profound disappointment in your actions and decisions, an explanation about my resignation from the Board of Overseers at South Grove Church, and why we will not be attending any church that is part of the network. My hope is that it will lead you to reconsider your decisions, your approach, and to repent. It will not change my decision to resign - the damage is done and the trust broken.

I'm attaching a document that I wrote as I was organizing my thoughts on the revelations of the last several months. This letter will not re-tread that territory, since it is handled thoroughly in the attachment. We did not include the attached document (or anything like it) with our request for an independent investigation, in part to keep it short and simple, and in another part not to prejudice you against our request. Nevertheless, I want you to know why I joined in the call for an independent investigation. The version that I'm attaching has been edited from the version that I was working with in August 2022 when we wrote to request that you commission an impartial investigation into Steve's honesty for the last several years as events unfolded. The main changes are that before we asked and you refused to commission an independent investigation, I labored hard to keep an open mind, to remain persuadable, and to hold out hope that my analysis would change based on such an investigation. Since you have refused, I have revised it, as you have not offered and I no longer hold out hope of being presented with information that would change my analysis. Please consider it carefully, especially as context for why we called for an investigation and why I'm writing this letter.

I am deeply, personally wounded and grieved by your decision not to help me and South Grove Church in response to our request for an independent investigation. As I understand it, you have given three primary reasons: 1) the emotional toll that it would take on the network leadership team, 2) that there is no Biblical example of an independent investigation, and 3) that you don't feel Jesus' leading in it. I'll address these in reverse order.

With respect to the assertion that you "don't feel Jesus' leading in it," I am sharply skeptical of this. Our local board *does* feel Jesus' leading in pursuing an investigation, and that's why we asked for it. It is very difficult for an outsider to your closely-knit inner circle, like me, to observe this situation and avoid a conclusion something like this: "Steve and his inner circle of long-time close friends, all of whom Steve is responsible for raising to leadership, prayed about it and say they heard from God exactly the conclusion that they wanted - not to investigate their dear friend and leader." Sometimes we pray about things and hear exactly the conclusion we want, and in those situations I think we do well to be mindful of our prejudices, preferences, and implicit biases. Even as I began composing this on Wednesday, September 21, 2022, I stumbled upon this helpful thread from reputable Christian therapist, author, and seminary professor Chuck Degroat:

<https://twitter.com/chuckdegroat/status/1572564204967849985?s=42&t=gGgOw2IkN5akAzwWoMx7sg>



CHUCK degroat
@chuckdegroat

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Years ago a pastor began spiritual direction and counseling with me only to quickly end our sessions after I made a suggestion. He'd enjoyed an early morning CrossFit session and came in fired up - "God is calling me to plant churches across this region!" 1

8:31 AM · Sep 21, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone



CHUCK degroat @chuckdegroat · 5h

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Replying to @chuckdegroat

I asked if we could listen, pray and discern over six months and then revisit this. That didn't land well.

I've seen many, including myself, mistake the voice of God for a neurochemical cocktail. Activated sympathetic nervous systems produce fierce emotions. 2



CHUCK degroat @chuckdegroat · 5h

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Activated nervous systems also demand quick actions. Of course, God is in our complicated neurobiology, but God isn't our neurochemical high. We're often so out-of-touch with our bodies that we don't know the difference. 3

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CHUCK degroat @chuckdegroat · 5h

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We've justified all kinds of action, sometimes even harmful action, on the voice of, well, an activated fight-mode instead of the quiet whisper of God.

As it turns out, spiritual discernment also requires bodily and emotional discernment. 4

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CHUCK degroat @chuckdegroat · 5h

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But many of us just don't even know where to begin on this.

Changing this reality is just one piece of much of what needs to be done for renewed hope and healing in the church. (End)

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410



How have you distinguished what you have identified as the voice of God from activated neurochemical systems in your sympathetic nervous system? Have you done the work to differentiate between your impulse to protect yourself and your comrades? You have taught and continue to teach in the Series classes that as we evaluate prophecy and hearing from God, we test it against scripture. Have you done that? What were the results? **I suggest that if you tested this against scripture, you would conclude that you either did not hear from God clearly on this, or that you heard and you are misunderstanding.** This dovetails into your second claim, that there is no Biblical example for an independent investigation.

God is the God of truth. He cares about truth. He cares about what is noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy. Perhaps it is true that there is no direct example of an impartial investigator being appointed in the Bible to uncover the truth of a matter. The excuse of the "lack of a Biblical example" is not

applied to so many of the things that the Network does. The Bible does not provide a direct example to support the existence of the network leadership team itself. The Bible does not provide a direct example of planting churches in college towns. The Bible does not provide a direct example of only taking the Lord's Supper at Team Meetings and not at regular Sunday service. There is no biblical example of sending 5% of South Grove's giving to the network fund, or of the network requiring such a contribution in order to share in discipleship relationships with the network or to use the resources of the network (like the series classes, member bible training, kids programs, worship songs).

Yet we do these things without direct Biblical examples. Sometimes we do them because they seem wise, or practical, or like good judgment. This is precisely one of those times, when wisdom and good judgment should dictate that we do something that is not specifically called for in the Bible or shown as an example of having occurred in scripture. It is imprudent to lean on the claim that there is no biblical example of it when it is expedient for your personal desires, but then to disregard it on other matters of church governance.

We see other, more mature and developed networks and denominations undertaking independent investigations. Has the SBC been wrong in undertaking independent investigation, since there is no biblical example of it? Has The Village Church been wrong as they undertake an independent investigation into Matt Chandler's actions? Has Acts 29 been wrong to ask him to step aside from his Acts 29 duties while the investigation happens? Are they capitulating to culture? Or do they understand that some things we do because they are wise, even if the Bible does not specifically prescribe them? The fact that our sisters and brothers in more mature and developed organizations are willing to have these investigations should cause us to consider this. We did not ask for a broad, undefined investigation like many outside have asked for - we limited our request to commissioning an impartial investigation into whether Steve has been truthful and above reproach in the past several years as this has unfolded. Yet still it was refused.

God abhors sin, and lying is sin. God is impartial and directly instructs that we not be partial to the low or defer to the great, but to judge fairly. The reason why we asked for an independent investigation is because there are circumstances that strongly suggest that Steve has not been honest about things for the last several years. We asked that it be independent because I do not believe that it is possible or likely, as a practical matter, that the network leadership team can address this without partiality in light of the very deep and long-term relationships between you. **Even in the reasons given for not conducting an investigation, you show partiality.** You are explicitly showing partiality by preferring and protecting the emotional state of the network leadership team over that of the network churches and the people in them. You are preferring yourselves and your own emotional states over the people of South Grove. Favoritism is not part of God's character. There is no favoritism with God (Ephesians 6:9, Romans 2:11, Deut 10:17, Acts 10:34). If you show favoritism, you commit sin. (James 2:9). By appointing an independent investigator, you could avoid sin, avoid partiality. You have chosen to protect Steve and yourselves. This is wrong, sinful, and has grievously hurt me and many others at South Grove. An independent investigation would alleviate the partiality and allow the pursuit of truth. Both of these are things that God cares about. Both are things that you have undermined.

The other rationale provided for declining our request to conduct an investigation is the emotional toll it would take on the network leadership team. My desire in this letter is to be charitable with the words that I choose and how I address these concerns with you, but in this respect gentle words will not suffice: **this is catastrophically bad judgment.** It is cancerous selfishness. In all things our example is Christ. For pastors

in particular, the shepherds of the bride of Christ, it is particularly important to take notice of what Jesus says about being a good shepherd and his behavior in it. Jesus both says and does exactly the opposite of what you've done to this point. He says in John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." You have decided the exact opposite. You are allowing the sheep to suffer in order to protect the shepherds. People at South Grove are suffering for your protection. I am suffering because of your protection of yourselves and your fellow shepherds. Refusing to pursue the truth without partiality because of the effects it might have on you and your inner circle is gravely wrong. You are failing to shepherd the flock, and instead protecting yourselves to the great detriment of the flock. Is this what Jesus did? No - instead He gave Himself up for us.

I have heard Tony teach several times that we are not called to lives of safety and security. Neither are you as network overseers called to lives of safety and security. You are not called to these positions for comfort and shelter. Your selfishness is wounding the sheep. It has wounded me and my family and my friends at South Grove. I will not lead people in following under the lead of the network or the network leadership team because of this. Since Bobby has decided to follow the lead of the network and network leadership team despite this, I cannot be a part of it.

Other reasons have been mentioned, like a concern that conducting an independent investigation would set a bad precedent for endless investigations. This is not a court system or government, and you are not establishing binding precedents for the future. Even if you were, the matter is of such serious consequence that it demands investigation even if it sets a precedent that you don't care for. This is a poor excuse.

I've also heard it suggested that this is based on the advice from John Lanferman of New Frontiers, to not engage with critics. I have sincere doubts about whether that advice would apply to internal calls for investigation, as opposed to folks from outside of the organization lobbying mortars from the periphery. Have you asked him, as an advisor, whether you should also ignore internal calls for investigation? In asking for an impartial investigation, you were not hearing from Andrew Lumpe, Jeff Irwin, Jeff Miller, or Ben Powers attacking you from the outside, this time. We came to you and humbly asked for help to alleviate our concerns, and you refused.

I've also heard that this is a "slippery slope" that would lead to unending investigations. Even if this were not logically problematic (the slippery slope is a logical fallacy), sometimes a slippery slope must be trodden when the destination that takes you over it is an important destination to reach. Sometimes you step on the slippery slope carefully, walking slowly to ensure safe footing. If the journey to truth and impartiality is on the other side of the slippery slope and you're walking away from dishonesty and favoritism, you pass over the slippery slope making your footing as sure as you can along the way.

For all of you, I want to offer a sincere word caution at the words chosen to talk to people about this. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] told me that I was denying the power of the cross by having problems with this situation. I disagreed sharply [REDACTED], but let me say to all of you that this sort of invocation

is terribly unwise, particularly if you're going to invoke it so casually. By no means was I suggesting that Steve cannot be forgiven or that he has not been forgiven - which is the power of the cross. Instead, I was seeking information to evaluate whether he is qualified for the office of a pastor. The power of the cross for justification does not mean that disqualifying behavior is overlooked in church governance. We can conclude this with certainty because after Jesus died to justify us with God, he caused the qualifications for overseers to be published in the epistles. The purpose of the cross was not to render everyone qualified for the office of overseer, but to justify us before God. Suggesting that someone may be disqualified from the office of overseer is not denying the power of the cross. And **to charge someone with denying the power of the cross is to charge them with blasphemy.** [REDACTED]

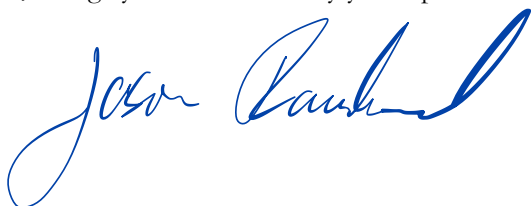
[REDACTED] My hope is that [REDACTED] all of you as a network leadership team can see how this is far beyond unhelpful. It was overbearing and manipulative. It leaves me concerned that you have used such tactics with others who are less willing to stand up in opposition to it. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] **You wrongly leveled an accusation of blasphemy against a brother in order to protect your friend and mentor. I hope that you can see how profoundly wrong that is.** For all of the network leadership team, please be mindful of using such harsh and overbearing words and methods.

My resignation from the board of overseers at South Grove is because I believe the path that you have chosen is beyond merely unwise. You are showing partiality to yourselves and your inner circle, and most particularly to your friend and mentor. You are prioritizing the wellbeing of the shepherds over the sheep. Rather than seeking the truth without partiality, you are leaning on the position that you "heard from God" that you are not supposed to do an investigation. Bobby has decided, against my recommendation and judgment, to keep South Grove in the network. I believe this to be a mistake, because I believe that Steve has been dishonest for the last several years as this situation has unfolded. I now firmly believe this because when we asked you to have an impartial investigation, hoping to exonerate Steve, you declined. I will not lead people in following a leadership group headed by someone who has been disqualified by dishonesty for the last several years. Nor will I lead people in following a leadership team that prioritizes the shepherds over the sheep, or who engages in overbearing behavior, and refuses calls for accountability. I'm resigning because Bobby has decided to keep South Grove in the network, and I cannot lead people in the direction that the network leadership is headed and that Bobby is following.

This will be very difficult for me and my family, having spent the last three years in close community with my dear friends at South Grove, having moved here for this church. Our children will be hurt. We are hurt. We are all hurt, and it's in the name of protecting yourselves and your friends on the network leadership team from the emotional toll that you believe it would take on you to have an impartial person inquire into whether Steve has been telling us the truth in the last several years. I don't believe that the impartial God of truth would lead you to the conclusion that you've reached.

Please, change your course. It may yet help others.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jason Paul". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.