

Open Letter Upon Release Of SGM Panel Report On Tomczak Departure

7 Concerns

Larry and Doris Tomczak

A week ago my wife and I completed a 21 day fast to seek the Lord for 2012. Near the top of our list were issues related to SGM (Sovereign Grace Ministry). At the end of the fast we received a call from Dave Harvey, interim President of the ministry, wanting to ask forgiveness for his sinful behavior towards us and our family almost 15 years ago. A week later he sent us an advance copy of their panel report dealing with our departure from SGM.

What follows is our public response to this public report. It would serve the reader to first read the statement we made available on our website larrytomczak.com entitled, “The Tomczak Departure from SGM – What Really Happened?”

As Doris and I said in our “Departure” statement, we are not blameless in our journey. We love all those involved and simply present here observations that either amplify or adjust some points expressed in the SGM report. We forgave our brethren years ago but, as a matter of integrity, present here seven significant points that need to be addressed.

1. BIAS

The hope of onlookers regarding the panel was for an unbiased 3rd party to assess a few of the critical issues and offer their wisdom. Unfortunately, the examination was basically handled “in house” by sincere men who had a definite stake in the outcome – namely their livelihood and the preservation of the ministry image.

The SGM board member and two SGM senior pastors who wrote the report are to be commended for their hard work. This was an unenviable task because of their longstanding close association with SGM leaders, direct involvement in the ministry, and their families’ ties with many church members. Would they “get in trouble” if they stated things contrary to what other senior leaders desired in the outcome?

When President Clinton was being accused of immoral and unethical behavior, an independent counsel, Kenneth Starr, was brought in with his team to investigate matters for Congress and the American people. If something similar happened to our current President, you would not think it wise to have fellow Democrats, Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi or Harry Reid leading the panel! Yet this was the approach chosen by the SGM board. And while others

objected, we felt it was important to participate despite our misgivings and trust God to work through a less than ideal process.

2. BLACKMAIL

On October 14, 1997 our journal entry records the following: “Larry and our child talked by phone with a lawyer. He advised Larry to tell the Team (the board) to ‘not even think of using our child’s confessed sins to blackmail Larry.’ ‘It’s blackmail and punishable by jail, prosecuted in every state – no exceptions. It’s a breach of penitent/counselor confidentiality.’”

When Ted Kober, the President of Ambassadors of Reconciliation heard the tape recording of what was said to us repeatedly by the Team he dropped his head in dismay while his associate literally wiped away tears.

The panel report says, “CJ allowed for the possibility of making known their child’s sin if Larry communicated that he was leaving SGM over doctrinal disagreement.” This minimizes CJ’s sin and describes it far too mildly. He made a direct, emphatic and unethical threat. He was not allowing for the possibility, he was promising to expose our child. In our conversation, we confronted him three times with the word “blackmail” to describe his threats. His exact words back to us were “I’m stating it!” He threatened us with blackmail!

- At the first mention of the threat, Doris called CJ on it: “That’s blackmail!”
- In two subsequent taped conversations with other SGM leaders we again labeled it “blackmail.”
- An attorney from whom we sought counsel defined it as “blackmail.”
- National leaders who heard the tape recordings referred to it as “blackmail.”

I read the following words to CJ in Nashville from Webster’s dictionary:

“Blackmail: extortion (the act of obtaining from a person by force or undue or illegal power or ingenuity) by threats especially of public exposure.”

Webster’s dictionary defines what it is and, as they say, “It is what it is!” Why soft-pedal this coercive threat that was used to obtain our silence? Plus we have the recordings to prove it and have requested on several occasions that the SGM board and others that were involved listen with us to themselves on the tapes before there’s asking of forgiveness. To date they have dismissed our request.

While CJ, and the SGM board and the panel report acknowledge what happened was “coercive, wrong and sinful,” they all stop short of being specific about the most egregious

offense which is immoral, illegal and unethical. It was premeditated, repeated and agreed upon by all the leadership team. (The report makes this clear.)

Departed board members Paul Palmer and Brent Detwiler both cited “blackmail” when they asked forgiveness – the former over 8 years ago! Yet when Dave Harvey called us the week before the report’s release, he (like CJ, Steve Shank and Larry Malament) hedged on using the accurate and serious designation.

Isn’t it time to once and for all stop any “spin,” man up, and confess it for what it is? And an addendum...if CJ and Steve have a “vague recollection” (as stated in the report) of CJ supposedly calling us within a few days to “withdraw the threat” so it really didn’t “hang over” us for over a decade, why when CJ and Steve called our child 5 years later to finally ask forgiveness for some of the areas of offense did they still refuse to call and ask forgiveness of Doris and me even when our child asked them to? Why would it take 14 years before CJ and Steve would finally confess the injustice and even then “tone it down” with softer terminology? These are real questions that warrant real answers. By the way, they have a “vague recollection” of some call. WE HAVE NO RECOLLECTION of any such call! We wouldn’t have forgotten it or failed to put it in our journal of those events!!

3. BREACH OF CONFIDENTIALITY

The vow of confidentiality that CJ made to our child is sacrosanct and inviolable. Tragically, CJ broke this vow by divulging details to a person who is trustworthy and who came forward with the specifics. The report said, “CJ has no recollection of this conversation,” and then moved on. A serious ethics violation of this magnitude cannot be brushed off as seemingly insignificant. A man of sterling character who described in detail what was said to him by CJ in violation of a clergy/penitent vow has to be given weighty consideration. It should be considered alongside of other sinful conduct surfacing in a leader who is under investigation. More is needed here. In addition to this event, Larry Malament also revealed confidential details to other members of the SGM Team and local leaders in a conference call we were a part of on October 8, 1997. Later, a Team member relayed that Larry M. also did this on another occasion and stands ready to testify accordingly.

4. BREAKING THE MATT. 18 ETHIC IN A PUBLIC ASSEMBLY

At Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, Maryland (a church that we co-founded in our apartment and in which we invested 15 years of our lives), CJ stood before over 1,000 people (with guests and unbelievers present) and branded me a “liar.” He admits he instructed technicians to “turn off the tape” and did say, “I’d rather be dead than do what Larry Tomczak is doing.” In spite of several witnesses (for example, one teenage boy told us

he confronted CJ to his face a few days later) and having been confronted with his exact words in print for over a decade, the report says, “CJ does not recall saying anything along these lines.” We do not believe this is sufficient reason for dismissing the charge.

Last year at Covenant Life Church, CJ acknowledged some of his sinful attitudes in the above episode. Many believe his confession was incomplete; he minimized the severity of public slander in violation of Matthew 18:15-17; and still needs to make amends for debasing in a single moment a leader’s reputation built upon 25 years of Christian ministry.

5. BANISHMENT

Over the years one of the most common accusations brought against SGM is one where former members are shunned or banished after disagreement with leaders or simply choosing to leave the church. The report confirmed this to be our experience, with which multitudes identify.

The panel cited CJ’s public criticisms “was the death of Larry’s reputation at CLC...church members stopped interacting with them.” [We would add these included close relatives for many years.] CJ sent a letter to pastors asking them “not to engage in casual conversation or pursue fellowship with Larry.” He penned a letter to thousands of folks throughout the movement of churches suggesting I was under “church discipline” when I never was. This manipulated people into shunning us by confusing them. Friendships built for years were shattered overnight. The panel members were courageous in allowing this material to be included. What needs to be underscored is how, under CJ’s leadership, instruction, and personal example, this un-Christlike treatment of us and many others of God’s precious sheep was allowed to flourish. Some SGM board members, local pastors and church members are guilty of blindly following his lead.

Our experience brings this to the surface and should not be ignored. We turned over to the panel the names of over 105 leadership couples who experienced spiritual abuse in SGM. Imagine how many other church members have also been victims.

Families have been devastated, close friendships destroyed and children have turned away from the Lord and church involvement in the wake of this uncharitable practice. Our own extended family was divided and still feels the painful effects of this ungodly treatment until this very day.

Where this has happened, may leaders humbly repent and change their ways to allow a new season of blessing and favor for SGM. The report says this is not “systemic”. The

reality is, it has been a pattern that has devastated our immediate and extended families plus scores of God's people across the country. It must be acknowledged, confessed and renounced. Our situation brings it into the light so changes can be made to avert future hurt and relational devastation.

6. BETRAYAL

When I consented to take a leave of absence to deal with family matters, I had every intention of returning to my leadership position in our local church and in SGM. This is very significant to grasp! In the months preceding the blackmail, our entire family experienced "lording over, abuse of authority, manipulation and control" (which CJ confessed and asked forgiveness for in our December, 2010 Nashville reconciliation). This treatment brought us to the point where it was untenable and as a matter of conscience, we had to leave SGM. We literally felt as an entire family we were under "house arrest" with our every action, word and motive scrutinized and questioned. The legalism became unbearable. The report also acknowledges I was "stuck," left without any process of appeal.

The report cited how I initially "gave agreement" to Reformed doctrinal tenets, but later changed my mind. There is truth to this but two points need to be made: 1) I, like many former SGM leaders who had also left over the doctrinal changes, was wavering and reluctant to comply. I finally mustered the courage to speak up, die to "fear of man" and express my true sentiments regarding differences of doctrine. 2) My major battle was with the fear of man in an atmosphere of intimidation and man-pleasing. I remember sitting in a "Team" meeting where it was said, "Mark Altrogee and Benny Phillips (SGM senior pastors viewed as suspect at the time) may have to be let go if they don't agree with the Reformed Doctrine." I thought, "Larry, be careful – will I be next?" I should have spoken up and suffered the potential consequences. I confess my former cowardice.

What wasn't made clear in the panel's report are related and significant points revealing the depth of betrayal I encountered.

- Criteria established by SGM leaders for returning to my former role as senior pastor made it an impossibility unless I embraced certain Reformed doctrinal tenets which in my conscience I could not do.
- People nationwide were deliberately misled. An example would be, "It was always our intention to see Larry restored as senior pastor." Numerous disingenuous public statements and letters went out to SGM churches and nationwide which misrepresented what actually happened.
- My "7 Reasons for Departing PDI" (SGM) were not conveyed to people as I requested.

- My “confession” letter was the result of intimidation which forced me to use loaded terms, affirm SGM leaders and insert material with which I was uncomfortable, but required to include.
- At a public church meeting, CJ instructed me to nod in agreement with what he would say while I appealed that I couldn’t do it in good conscience.
- Three former SGM board members, two former administrators and three of the Atlanta leaders in the church at that time (who have all left SGM) cite “abuse of spiritual authority, over lording, and deceitful conduct” in their experience. This is tragic.

Scripture calls us to “restore” struggling Christians in a “spirit of gentleness” (Gal.6:1). Although most of the leaders have come forward to repent and ask forgiveness for what was done to us (as the report reveals), what needs to be understood are the aspects of betrayal and levels of deceit that forced our departure from a ministry we co-founded and never intended to leave.

“Did you leave without the leaders’ blessing?”

Yes – we believe we had no alternative.

“Did you honor your commitment to not return to public ministry for ‘at least 6 months?’”

Yes – on the exact date the 6 month season expired, I spoke for the first time on a Sunday to an inner city church gathering at the invitation of a dear friend.

7. BAD THEOLOGY

This point can be made briefly. Over the years SGM has experienced “bad fruit” from “bad theology” and, thank God, begun to make changes. The panel stated the obvious, uncharitable treatment we endured, the lack of compassionate care in a difficult family situation, the “over emphasis on indwelling sin,” etc., etc.

A number of the same SGM board members and pastors who attacked us judgmentally have now experienced their own family “issues” which tempered them and drove them to confess their sinful, self-righteousness to us, several of them in genuine tears.

The report highlighted how “misguided” it was to believe the idea that “good pastors = good kids” and admitted “that there was too much of a link made between Larry’s parenting and his child’s sin.”

Other areas could be cited but our point here is that CJ and SGM leaders should be more forthright in their public repentance through public statements addressing where they veered off course theologically. Multitudes believe there still is too much “spin” and “self-vindication” among top-tier leaders.

A nationally known leader and frequent speaker at SGM churches and conferences told me something months ago that I can’t forget. For close to two decades this man has provided counsel and instruction to SGM and has intimate knowledge of the inner workings and problems of the ministry. Here’s his observation:

“The number one problem with many of the Sovereign Grace Ministry leaders is their propensity for self-vindication.”

We suggest you pause here and reread this leader’s observation.

May this panel’s report, our two published statements, as well as constructive criticism to SGM from numerous places (see the email at the end of this document from a former long-time SGM pastor) in this “time of discipline” for Sovereign Grace Ministry and its primary leaders, help these men to address unbiblical positions and practices to honor the Lord, heal wounds, and regain favor as an overall ministry.

POST SCRIPT: BLAMELESS [AND ABOVE REPROACH]?

In order to be faithful to criteria for Biblical leadership, SGM must steer clear of the sin of favoritism and partiality [starting with CJ], and be consistent with what was expected of former SGM leaders. The question still remains: should the SGM senior leaders step down for a season to be retooled for ministry according to I Pet. 5:1-5; Titus 1:5-9; I Tim.3:1-7; and I Tim. 5:17-24? Perhaps the best way to answer this is the following: “If the things in the panel’s report, in our two statements, and in the accompanying email came to light regarding your pastor, would you give him a “pass?” Would you deem him fit for ministry according to the qualifications of Scripture?

“Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be blameless...” 1 Tim 3:1-2

BELOW IS A LETTER (E-MAIL) WE RECEIVED FROM A FORMER, LONGTIME SGM PASTOR. WE READ IT AFTER WE COMPLETED OUR “OPEN LETTER” AND FOUND THE OBSERVATIONS TIMELY, ACCURATE AND ILLUMINATING. WHEN GROUPS OF SGM LEADERS ARE MENTIONED, WE’D OFFER THAT THERE ARE DEGREES OF CULPABILITY. REMEMBER PAUL PALMER AND BRENT DETWILER, DEPARTED SGM LEADERS, CONFESSED AND REPENTED OF BLACKMAIL WHILE WE STILL AWAIT THAT RESPONSE FROM THE OTHER SGM LEADERS. HERE IS THE LETTER:

Friends,

First of all, I believe that the panel was inappropriately tasked to ask the *Wrong Questions*. He who frames the questions controls the debate, and I believe that's exactly what the SGM Board attempted to do. Given the gravity of the situation, I don't think three questions were nearly enough. But given the three, here's my opinion of what they should have been:

1. Not - "Was CJ's participation in fellowship in keeping with the teachings of scripture?"

Rather - "Did CJ violate the standards of fellowship, confession and repentance that he imposed on other SGM pastors & leaders? Did CJ behave in a manner that would not have been tolerated by any other SGM pastors under his authority? (Broaden the scope of the question to consider any wider patterns of double-standard hypocrisy. For example, did CJ's own son act out in ways that would have, and did, get other SGM pastors fired from their jobs? Are there any other "high-status" leaders in SGM, whose teenagers experienced behavioral troubles, but they and their jobs were "protected" - unlike other SGM pastors before them?) In other words: Was CJ giving himself the benefit of living by different standards than he espoused and enforced?"

2. Not - "Did CJ wrongly influence the process of Brent's dismissal from Mooresville?"

Rather - "Did CJ demonstrate a historical pattern of marginalizing and disposing of SGM leaders that did not meet up to his subjective, extra-biblical standards? Did he "shun" them and teach others to do so by his example? Was Brent already a "dead-man-walking" before he even started at Mooresville because CJ had already punished him, for self-serving reasons, with the loss of status & ministry? Did CJ preside over and infuse an entire SGM culture with an extra-biblical pattern of dismissing & casting aside some of its own pastor/leaders in an unloving and unreasonable manner?"

3. Not - "Was Larry Tomczak's departure from SGM handled properly?"

Rather - "Did CJ attempt to blackmail Larry Tomczak by means of thoroughly unethical threats against his family? Did other members of the SGM board do the same? Was it a "heat-of-the-moment" threat made out of emotion & quickly regretted, or was it a "cold-blooded" & purposeful act, only rejected 11 days later after severe rebuke from a respected lawyer. (In other words, did CJ & others back off by reason of moral repentance or functional impracticality? It seems clear that they did not immediately express any sorrowful repentance to Larry and his family.) Is attempted blackmail an "ordinary" sin or a "scandalous" one?

On a secondary note, if the panels wish to address the legitimate question of whether Larry Tomczak's departure was handled properly, they needed to dig back a little further. Larry's departure began much earlier with his systematic marginalization from

SGM ministry. After CJ assumed primary leadership of the organization, he acted to steadily limit Larry's influence and opportunities there. He greatly limited Larry's involvement in CLC, a church he had co-founded. He greatly limited his role as a speaker at SGM conferences and events. Larry had to move his church membership to Fairfax in an attempt to find meaningful involvement. Similar to Brent's experience many years later, Larry had to move on to new territory, in Atlanta, to attempt a new church plant in order to satisfy his God-given desires to serve in ministry. The handling of the departure of Larry Tomczak from SGM began years before the blackmail. The whole process of fault-finding, leading to marginalization and more fault-finding, leading to removal and eventually active shunning needs to be examined. Especially in light of the widespread impression that this represents a pattern that was repeated with many other leaders in SGM.

Further questions:

A. Why does the panel lean so heavily on quoting Larry's letter of resignation & repentance as a defense for CJ, seeming to implicate SGM's partial justification in light of Larry's admitted faults? That letter is actually "Exhibit A" in a very serious suggestion of abuse-of-power and manipulative practice by SGM. Many other deposed SGM pastors have been required to write similar self-incriminating letters against themselves. It's a wonderful CYA tool for SGM, and is being used as such right before our very eyes. The problem is that these letters are frequently coerced and highly influenced by SGM. They are frequently edited to make sure they come out the way SGM wants them to sound. Larry, and other pastors in similar positions, was under enormous pressure to go along with the program and write what would satisfy those who wielded the power over his life and future. Think in terms of communist Chinese re-education camp confessions. That letter of Larry's represents a shameful exercise in SGM bullying, manipulation, intimidation and abuse. They should be ashamed of using it against him now.

B. The report cites the board's appeal for Larry to continue with their program of rehabilitation rather than leave prematurely. They so wanted him not to leave for the wrong reasons. They claimed this was a matter of integrity. And they so wanted to be able to commend him after a successful restoration process. The problem with this line of reasoning is that THERE WAS NO PROGRAM OR PROCESS OF RESTORATION!!!! Just ask the other 100-150 pastors who have been cut loose by SGM. What is the recidivism rate for SGM pastors who have been deposed? Between 1-2%? Stick around for restoration? Really? SGM has no history of restoring pastors. SGM has a lot of explaining to do about its pattern of "throw-away" pastors.

C. The "ironic" integrity apparently sought by the SGM leaders, in dictating Larry's departure terms, seemed to revolve around the proper portrayal of Larry's

disqualification as a poor parent. People who have been around Larry's family know that is patently unfair! (Again I am reminded of the extra-biblical standards which were used as a cudgel on former pastors with teenage kids but which were no longer applied in later years to CJ and other "high status" SGM leaders.) Bear in mind the situation at the heart of the coercion. It involved a 17-18 year old young man who was not caught in his sin. Rather, he had taken personal initiative to expose his own failings by seeking out and confessing to spiritual leaders in the vain hope of finding help to experience the grace of God. Question: Did these highly-placed SGM leaders represent God well as conduits of His grace? This is the fuller context of the blackmail.

D. In the panel's attempt to minimize the seriousness of the blackmail, (ie. It did not continue for a decade like Larry intimidated... CJ & Dave & Brent & Steve were motivated by their desire to "protect" the movement of churches... They wanted to frame Larry's departure with "ironic" integrity... They never acted to follow through on their empty threat...), the panel members overlooked an important point. The threat of blackmail actually worked!! By their own admission, Larry did NOT mention doctrinal differences in his departure explanations, even though he clearly wanted to. The coercion was effective!! CJ and the board were saved from the legal liabilities of applying blackmail, but they ended up achieving the desired goal.

E. If CJ had truly repented of his offenses towards Larry, why didn't he act expeditiously to bring Larry back to CLC to publicly redress his public slander of Larry before the church? He publicly called Larry a liar and said that, "I'd rather be dead than do what Larry's doing." CJ actively destroyed much of Larry's reputation and many of his long-time relationships at CLC and beyond, but was grossly inadequate in taking measures to publicly restore him.

Closing thought: I found it very disturbing that the panel overseeing the Tomczak blackmail repeatedly claimed to present findings in a way that was slanted *against* CJ. It seemed absolutely the opposite to me. I thought they took every opportunity to place Larry in a negative light in order to minimize the culpability of CJ & the gang. They repeatedly highlighted mitigating circumstances that took the edge off the crime perpetrated by CJ, Dave, Brent & Steve. And then, the SGM board has the audacity to refer to the panel's report as "objective". Objective?!?!?!? That was never even a remote possibility given the make-up of the panels. Please don't insult our intelligence by anointing them with "objectivity". In fact, the SGM Board should make known the criteria by which the panel members were selected. The original process of selecting "jurists" was supposed to have some aspects of randomness. Can the Board unequivocally assure us that they did NOT hand pick the panelists of their choice and rule out the pastors that they didn't want? Please defend the integrity of the process.

And now we wait for the AoR report. But that has already been re-framed for us as merely a catalogue of local grievances presented without corroborating witnesses or cross-

examination. Something to learn from and use for making changes and addressing deficiencies. But apparently having no bearing on any evaluation of the qualifications of senior SGM leadership.