

Historical Context

Module 3.1

The Charis Fellowship is one of a handful of American “denominations” that originally began in Germany in 1708. Over 300 years ago in Schwarzenau, Germany a small group of believers began gathering together and a new movement was born. This Module will paint, in very broad strokes, the historical context of our movement and give a beginner’s glimpse into what has contributed to the Charis Fellowship as it is today.

In 1708, our movement began as a response to what was believed to be inauthentic expressions of Christianity that were found within the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. Placing a high degree of emphasis on living out their faith, especially in community with other believers, a small group of believers continued to pursue not only doctrinal orthodoxy but also doctrinal orthopraxy.

Even in these early days, our movement was deeply committed to biblical truth, biblical relationships, and biblical mission. However, the German State Church did not welcome these early brethren due to some deferring beliefs and practices. Ridiculed and reviled by many for the baptizing of professing believers, as opposed to infants, this original group began immigrating in 1719 to Germantown, Pennsylvania and established there the first “Brethren” church in America.

Over the last 300 years, it is unfortunate though not surprising, that our movement has experienced its fair share of division. As the Germantown Brethren Church began to grow and expand it experienced various forms of growing pains and struggle. At times division was necessary in order to maintain theological clarity and obedience to the Scripture. However, sadly there have also been moments of division that could have been avoided.

A church trial in 1881 serves as a poignant example of the latter. Henry Holsinger was accused of being “progressive” and eventually “disfellowshipped” for his ideas; ideas that included the use of modern print technology, new Sunday School strategies, salaried ministers, and a relaxed dress code. At a committee meeting, which was held in Holsinger’s home no less, Holsinger was removed from fellowship with The Church of the Brethren. Two years later, Holsinger and others formed what is now known as “The Brethren Church.”¹

Nearly 50 years later, The Brethren Church would again divide and become known as the Ashland Group (The Brethren Church) and the Grace Group (now, the Charis Fellowship). However, rather than dividing over communication strategies and dress codes, this split happened over much weightier theological issues. In *Restoring the*

¹ <http://www.brethren.org/ac/statements/2002-the-brethren-church.html> Accessed 8/16/18

Household, Todd Scoles writes about the 1939 General Conference and what emerged from its wake.

By the time of the 1939 General Conference the lines were drawn with theological titles being assigned to each group. Hoyt stated the indictment that at Ashland College, 'Legalism, that teach that men may save themselves by their own works, was a prevailing spiritual atmosphere of the institution.' Meanwhile, George Ronk published a series of articles in which he charged that members of the 'Grace' group were Antinomians who believed in eternal security and discounted the necessity of living in obedience to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount and other moral teachings of the New Testament. The names stuck, and real discussion was lost in accusations and defenses. At the Conference, the Credential Committee refused to seat 81 delegates because their churches were 'out of fellowship in their District,' or had taken action 'that did not abide by the Committees of the Conference.' Since all of the rejected delegates were from churches that supported the Grace faction, the Ashland group controlled the Conference.²

In *250 Years...Conquering Frontiers* Homer Kent, Sr. writes, "The memorable conference of 1939 brought to a consummation a struggle that had been molesting the peace of the church for years. It was now evident that there were to be two groups within The Brethren Church."³ Scoles continues,

The expelled delegates and their supporters held separate meetings after the evening sessions of the General Conference and it was there the National Brethren Bible Conference was organized, later to be named the National Fellowship of Brethren Churches...Official division, however, was not finalized until 1986 when the Grace group incorporated as the Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches.⁴

Like all points of division this one was painful and was not just felt within the academic world, between Ashland Seminary and the newly formed Grace Theological Seminary. Local churches also were left with the difficult decision regarding which group they would align with. In fact, many Charis Fellowship Churches that were established prior to 1939 did not have the words Grace Brethren in their name. The word Grace was a later addition that came as local congregations made their choice.

Today, the Charis Fellowship is a network of churches, campuses, and ministries in the U.S.A. and Canada who are passionate about Jesus. The Charis Fellowship is also a

² Scoles, Todd. *Restoring the Household: The Quest of the Grace Brethren Church*. BMH Publishing. Winona Lake In. 2008. Pg. 195

³ Kent, Homer. *250 Years...Conquering Frontiers*. BMH Publishing. Winona Lake, IN. 1958. Pg. 165

⁴ Scoles, pg. 196

proud member of the Global Charis Alliance which unites 3,000+ churches in more than 25 countries.

While not as lengthy as other church denominations, the history of the Charis Fellowship, is no less rich and significant, having both victories and black spots. The Modules that follow will expound upon and unpack the shared commitments that Charis Fellowship churches have with one another. The three-fold commitment to biblical truth, biblical relationships, and biblical mission serves the Charis Fellowship today by keeping our focus sharp and refined. Like those early Brethren believers in 1708, we are continually striving to be a movement completely committed to knowing and obeying God's Word.

For Further Study:

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