

Sunday, September 22, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 108 The Founding of the Grace Gospel Fellowship

Introduction/Review

- In Lesson 106 we saw that the formation of the Worldwide Grace Testimony in 1939 was the first attempt at organization within the Grace Movement.
- In Lesson 107 we reported that in 1943 J.C. O’Hair approached C.R. Stam about becoming a traveling representative of the Worldwide Grace Testimony.
- By 1944 some within the Grace Movement were calling for more organized fellowship amongst Grace Believers in the United States. These events ultimately led to the formation of the Grace Gospel Fellowship (GGF).
- In July, 1974, Ray Reich, the long time librarian at Grace Bible College, published an essay titled “Our Grace Heritage” in a special edition of *Truth Magazine*, the official periodical of the GGF. In this article Reich recounts the events that led to the founding of the GGF.
 - “By the middle 1930’s there were numerous churches and independent Bible classes across the country preaching and teaching the Grace Message. As noted earlier, Bible conferences and the advent of radio provided media for the dissemination of the truth concerning the dispensation of the mystery. At the outset there was little outward unity or pooling of efforts to do a more effective job. The first step of unification came through Bible conferences in the Midwest, where people from many locations were brought together to share their mutual blessings. The second step was the organization of the Worldwide Grace Testimony. This, however, was in reality a self-perpetuating mission board. The mission board did conduct a Bible conference which benefitted the constituency, but the pastors who were not on this board felt a lack. There was a need for a fellowship organization of the pastors.” (Reich, 11)

The Formation of the Grace Gospel Fellowship

- According to Ray, his father Pastor Herman Reich was one who especially felt that an organized fellowship of Pastors was needed. Ray reports that it was at a conference of pastors and missionaries at First Church of the Fundamentals in Evansville, Indiana, September 11-13, 1944 that his father Herman first proposed the formation of an organized fellowship. (Reich, 11)
- Records indicate that the following men were present at this meeting: C.F. Baker, Harry Bultema, Carl Clum, J.C. O’Hair, F.P. Pickett, Herman Reich, Raymond Reich, E.F. Ruelweler, C.R. Stam, Hal Reed, Walter Redman, Otis Wasson, and Otto Deming. (Reich, 11)
- “Pastor Herman Reich proposed that a new fellowship organization of pastors and Christian workers be formed which would adopt the Doctrinal Platform of the Worldwide Grace Testimony

and have as its object “to provide a fellowship among those who believe in the truths contained in the doctrinal statement, and to promote the gospel of the grace of God through this land and world.” (Reich, 11)

- “The proposition was adopted and the convention elected as pro-tem officers Herman Reich (President), Raymond Reich (Secretary), and Otis Wasson (Treasurer). It was decided that the new organization be named Grace Gospel Fellowship, and that the next National Convention would be held in St. Louis in May of 1945 with the host Pastor E.F. Rueweler of the St. Louis Bible Fellowship.
- In his memoirs, Pastor Stam recounts the pivotal and often overlooked role that Pastor Herman Reich played in the formation of the GGF.
 - “By the grace of God my traveling ministry was very fruitful, but it was Pastor Herman Reich, of the First Church of the Fundamentals of Evansville, Indiana who, with his board, invited us to conduct the first National Berean Bible Conference at his church. Thus was formed the Grace Gospel Fellowship, a national organization of grace believers. Pastor Reich somehow has received almost no due credit for this, but he was a great booster of others, and he was the one who had the faith and vision to take the first step.” (Stam, 84)
- On May 9, 1945 the GGF Convention met in St. Louis and adopted its Constitution. At the time of its adoption membership in the fellowship consisted of twenty-one pastors, eight Christian workers, three foreign missionaries, nineteen laymen, and one seminary president. (Reich, 13)
- Article II of the Constitution stated the following regarding the purpose of the fellowship.
 - “The purpose of this organization shall be to promote a fellowship among those who believe the truths contained in the doctrinal statement and to proclaim the Gospel of the Grace of God in this land, and through the Worldwide Grace Testimony, throughout the world.

Recognizing the one true Bible Church in this present age, composed of all who possess genuine faith in Christ, it is not our purpose or desire to form a denomination or church organization, or to carry out the functions of such, in governing or directing groups of believers.” (quoted in Reich, 13-14)

- At the first convention in May, 1945 it was reported that some young people had been denied entrance to some of the larger Bible institutes because of their position on water baptism. As a result a need was voiced for a school where the doctrines of the Fellowship could be freely taught. A Bible Institute committee was organized and charged with the task of starting a Bible Institute program possibly by September of that same year. The work of this committee culminated in the founding of Milwaukee Bible Institute (now Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids, MI). (Reich, 13)

Organizational Functions and Operations

- According to Reich, for many years the GGF steered clear of taking on any projects that might create the perception that the Fellowship was functioning as a denomination. Over time, however, the decision was made that taking on some programs would not harm the independence of each local church. Two such programs included: Pastor Subsidy Program and Sharebuilders.
 - *Pastor Subsidy Program*—assisted with the payment of a pastor’s salary for a time enabling him to devote all of his time in organizing and developing Bible study groups into young churches which could, in time, be self-supporting.
 - *Sharebuilders*—made low interest loans to groups for the building or purchase of church property. (Reich, 14)
- Another function of the Fellowship is the examination and licensing or ordaining men to the ministry. “Candidates are carefully examined in every facet of doctrine and practical spiritual life in order to give assurance to churches that ordained men of the Fellowship are capable and reliable and give evidence of a divine call.” (Reich, 15)
- “Originally membership was open to all believers but only ministers, missionaries, evangelists, and Bible teachers had voting privileges. Later on this restriction was withdrawn, granting to all members of voting age a voice in the business transactions of the Fellowship.” (Reich, 14)

Since its inception in the mid-1940s, the GGF has gone through various changes to the structure of the fellowship. Not all of these changes were without controversy as the June, 1961 edition of the *Berean Searchlight* testifies. In this edition of the magazine, Pastor Stam includes the text from a message he delivered at the October, 1960 GGF Pastor’s Retreat regarding a proposal on the table to restructure the GGF.

- “The Grace Gospel Fellowship has until now been an organization of believers within the ‘Grace Movement’, banded together for the propagation of Pauline truth—the truth of the One Body with its One Baptism. Now, however, we are being asked to consider a proposal that the GGF re-organize itself into ‘an association of churches, organizations, and individuals’.” (Stam, *Berean Searchlight*. June, 1961, 79-80)
- Stam then breaks down the proposal as follows:
 - Section I—PROPOSAL: “to re-organize the GGF from an association of pastors and laymen into an association of churches, organizations, and individuals.”
 - Section II—PROCEDURE: “Churches and organizations will . . . be invited to affiliate with the GGF and send delegates to the next convention.”

- Section III—ORGANIZATION: The membership is to be composed of “All churches, organizations, and individuals subscribing to the doctrinal statement and who are in accord with its aims and purposes. The government of the GGF shall be vested in the delegates to the National Convention.” (Stam, *Berean Searchlight*. June, 1961, 80)
- At the end of this section, Stam emphatically states in capitalized text, “It should be noted here that the delegates representing the organizations and individuals within the GGF would be so few in number, proportionately, as to make the organization in effect *an association of churches*.” (Stam, *Berean Searchlight*. June, 1961, 80)
- It is clear from reading the article that Stam was not in favor of restructuring the GGF into an association of churches. Stam viewed this proposal as on par with the centralizing of church government and sectarianism. In the end, Stam writes,
 - “If this proposal is accepted, the GGF will have driveled down into one of the sects of Christendom, and much division and heartache will be the result. Furthermore, its leaders will have exchanged the power of the Spirit in great measure for mechanical and political power—and all this without the slightest guarantee of improved organization.

How much wiser and happier we of the GGF will be to remain one of the organizations within the “Grace Movement”, dedicated to the propagation of the unadulterated gospel of the grace of God and the glorious truth of the baptism of all true believers into Christ and the One Body of which He alone is the Head.

If we obey His Word in this, He will surely give us the wisdom to improve the organization of GGF.” (Stam, *Berean Searchlight*. June, 1961, 92-93)

- In the September, 1965 issue of the *Berean Searchlight*, Pastor Stam set pen to paper to explain what a GGF-Affiliated Church was.
 - “1) A church that is self-governing and free from outside control. It chooses its own name, elects its own officers, exercises its own discipline and owns its own property. While “affiliated” with the Grace Gospel Fellowship it is in no way controlled by it, nor is it under the control of any church denomination or religious hierarchy.
 - 2) A church whose doctrinal platform is in agreement with that of the Grace Gospel Fellowship . . .
 - 3) A church which believes that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable” . . ., but also recognizes the importance of “rightly dividing the Word of truth.”
 - 4) A church which recognizes the distinctive character of the revelation committed to Paul as the apostle for this present dispensation and views all Scripture in the light of Pauline truth.” (Stam, *Berean Searchlight*. Sept., 1965, 168)

- Ray Reich reports that, in 1970, sweeping changes in the administration of the Fellowship were approved.
 - “A full-time Executive President, Charles O’Connor, was employed to direct promotion and development. The United States was divided into twelve regions, each of which has been organized with its own officers.

A National Cabinet, composed of an elected Pastor and a Layman from each of the twelve regions, serves as an Executive Committee with the President of the Fellowship. They are responsible for the administration of all functions of the national organization, including the promotion and dissemination of dispensational truth.

Churches may vote to become Affiliated GGF Churches. Delegates from affiliated churches and approved organizations conduct the business and establish policy at the National Conventions. The chief concern of the Fellowship is the planting of new churches, which will result in an enlarging home constituency, which will produce a greater missionary outreach around the world, thus bringing greater glory to God.” (Reich, 15)

- Currently, according to the GGF website, the Fellowship is structured similarly to the sweeping changes that occurred in 1970. As of September, 2013 the GGF website states the following regarding their organization.
 - “When our constitution was revised in the early 1970’s, the country was divided into twelve regions. After a short time, regions 3 and 4 merged to become “Region 3.” In 1995 regions 5 and 6 asked to be merged as “Region 5.” There are ten regions at this present time. Each region has a council comprised of all active pastors plus lay representatives for each affiliated church and some representing the individual members of GGF who are not in an affiliated church. The proportion of representation is established by our constitution. Each region selects one pastor and one layman to represent them on the National Council.

The National Council serves as the governing board for the Fellowship. The National Council selects someone to serve as president of the Fellowship. The president acts for the Council in all the daily operations. He is responsible for the operation of our office and all of its procedures.” (ggfusa.org/about-us/history)

- In addition, the GGF lists the following as “Affiliated Ministries.” Please note that all of these ministries are specifically offset on the GGF webpage from “Grace Sites”, thereby indicating that they have been approved or sanctioned by the fellowship.
 - Believers Express Service
 - Grace Adventures (Formerly Known as Grace Youth Camp)
 - Grace Bible College

- Grace Ministries International
- Grace Mission Philippines
- Grace Publications
- Ministry Coaching, MD
- Prison Mission Association
- Salt Ministries
- San German Ministries
- St. Louis Theological Seminary
- TBS Ministries
- Things to Come Mission

Concluding Thoughts

- The GGF, as it is presently constructed, bears all the markings of a denomination. They have their own fellowship association, national council, Bible College, mission board, and publishing house. While some within the fellowship might take issue with this classification, there are some who would concede the point.
- It is my personal private subjective opinion that organizing at a level beyond the local church is a mistake. Paul never established anything beyond local churches. While Pauline churches of the first century may have cooperated with each other loosely, they did not bear the type of organized structure that the GGF currently manifests.
- Organizing beyond the local church brings politics into the equation, as the history of the Grace Movement will bear out over the rest of this class.
- The men who founded the Fellowship in the 1940s did what they thought was right. In fact, they were doing what the rest of Fundamentalism was doing at time, formally organizing beyond the local church.
- It is my opinion that they should have remained a loose fellowship of independent churches as they were during the 1930s. Once the movement institutionalized and political bickering and in-fighting over doctrine began to take hold, the movement stagnated and fractured. As of yet, the Grace Movement as a whole has yet to regain its former vitality and energy.
- It is to thriving independent churches that we must look to in the present as well as the future if we are going to seek to recapture the heyday of O'Hair.

Works Cited

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