

Connecting With the Bible Fellowship Church

“We, the Bible Fellowship Church, seek to become an expanding fellowship of churches united to make disciples of Jesus Christ.”



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(August 2014)

Considerations for Connecting with the Bible Fellowship Church (BFC)

The Biblical Merit of Connectional Churches

The Scriptures give justification for connectional fellowships of churches. The New Testament presents evidence of churches joined by mutual doctrinal compatibility and fellowship, yet being autonomous, submitted to a local rule of elders. A number of biblical reasons support a connectional fellowship of churches and demonstrate the positive merits of such fellowships versus churches being totally independent.

- **Union** – A fellowship of churches manifests to the world that God exists and is united in His purpose to redeem His people and conform them into the image of Christ by means of the proclamation of the Gospel – Jn. 17; cf. Rom. 8:28-30.
Jn. 17:21 “...that they may all be one...”
- **Accountability & Process** – A fellowship of churches provides doctrinal, pastoral and congregational accountability. It also will assist in times of pastoral change and congregational growth, as well as conflict.
Acts 15:22 “...it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church...”
- **Missions** – A fellowship of churches provides a comprehensive missions approach that includes assistance, discipleship and support. It provides a synergism to create a church planting movement.
Acts 11:22 “...they sent Barnabas off to Antioch...and he left for Tarsus to look for Saul...”
- **One-Anothering** – A fellowship of churches thrusts Christians into community and united efforts to extend the Kingdom, and gives churches a sense of the broader universal Church. It also affirms the truth that we need one another, i.e. gifts, prayers, support, etc.
I Thes. 1: 7 “...so that you became an example to all believers.”
- **Glorifies God** – God’s purpose for His Church is to bring glory to His name. We are created to give Him glory. When the Church hears of the broader work of the Spirit, in a fellowship of churches, it causes glory to be lifted up to God.
Acts 11:18 “...they quieted down and glorified God...”
- **Pitfalls:**
 1. A fellowship of churches could cause bureaucratic tediousness.
 2. A fellowship of churches could slip into a competitive movement.
 3. A fellowship of churches could lose its vision to grow by concentrating too much on the local level.

Advantages to Connecting with the BFC

- **Biblical Foundation:** Acts 15; Rev. 1
- **Credibility:** A corporate support system
- **Accountability:** Pastoral, ecclesiastical, financial and doctrinal
- **Counsel:** Ministerial Relations Committee, Credentials Committee, Conference Pastor, Regional Fellowships
- **Resources:** Work teams, ministry teams, financial and material.
- **Leadership Continuity:** Pulpit supply
- **Fellowship:** Corporate, regional, ministerial
- **Doctrinal Stability**
- **Training:** Church planting, pastoral, other
- **Missional:** Church planting and foreign missions
- **Christian Education Support**
- **Retreat Services:** Pastoral and congregational

Doctrinal Compatibility

1. A commitment to the Reformation views of God's sovereignty and grace (Faith & Order [F&O] – Articles of Faith - Part I)
2. A Presbyterian (federal) polity: rule by elders, autonomy of the local church, connection to churches of like faith (F&O – sections 200, 400, 500).

Specific distinctives: believer's baptism by immersion, elder rule, election, total depravity, perseverance of the saints, inspiration of Scripture, and a pre-millennial eschatology.

Connectional Compatibility

1. BFC Conference (*Faith and Order* – Sec. 500)
2. Autonomy yet mutual submission to fellowship and adherence to the F&O

3. Support of the mission and departments of the Bible Fellowship Church – not regulated, rather a submissive support
4. Reliance upon denominational procedures and assistance, i.e. pulpit supply, conflict between pastor and elders and/or congregation, discipline, reporting
5. Agreement with the *Biblical Principles for Living (Faith and Order – Section 100)*

Steps for Connecting with the Bible Fellowship Church

1. Contact the director of Church Extension Ministries of the Bible Fellowship Church – office@churchplantingbfc.org.

2. Acquire information on the Bible Fellowship Church:

- web sites – www.mybfc.org / www.churchplantingbfc.org
- Email – office@churchplantingbfc.org
- The *Faith & Order* of the Bible Fellowship Church.
- Video – *According To the Holy Spirit!*
- Historical Book – *The Bible Fellowship Church* by Dr. Harold Shelly on our history website – www.bfchistory.org

3. Arrange a meeting with the director of Church Extension Ministries:

Contact <office@churchplantingbfc.org>

4. Send a formal request from the leaders of the connecting church to the Board of Church Extension Ministries, requesting to be accepted as a “mission church” of the Bible Fellowship Church. Acquiring this status will enable Church Extension to begin its assessments and make a recommendation to the BFC Conference for acceptance into the Bible Fellowship Church as a Particular Church.

Church Extension Ministries
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5. Proceed with the necessary assessments:

- Financial Assessment – This assessment determines the connecting group’s ability to support a pastor and the ministry of the church.
- Elder Assessments – This assessment determines if the connecting group has at least two men who will qualify as elders according to the Scriptural guidelines and the Faith & Order of the Bible Fellowship Church.
- Committed Participant Assessments – This assessment determines if the connecting group has at least twenty people over the age of eighteen, who are born again, and will commit to support the church with their prayers, attendance, tithes and service. (If a membership role is established, Church Extension will assess such a role.)

6. Recommendations – The Assessment Committee will make their recommendations to the Board of Church Extension. If all is favorable, the Board of Church Extension will recommend that the connecting church be accepted into the BFC Conference of the Bible Fellowship Church as a “Particular” church. If there are areas that need more discussion and work, the Director of Church Extension will meet with the connecting church and determine what things need to be addressed in order to move ahead with acceptance into the BFC Conference.

7. Reception into the BFC Conference – The director of Church Extension will arrange the reception of the connecting church into Conference. The pastor and delegate of the connecting church, along with some of its members, will need to attend Conference for the reception. Upon approval by the Conference, the pastor and delegate will be seated with the conference and a reception ceremony will take place. This includes greetings for the pastor and testimonies from the flock.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CHURCH

A Fellowship of Evangelical Mennonite Revivalists

Seven Mennonite revivalists, under pressure from their bishops to give up their style of evangelism, huddled at a farm house in Milford Township, Lehigh County, Pennsylvania. It was Friday, September 24, 1858, just two weeks before the next high council. Should they acquiesce to restrictions upon the freedom of expression they enjoyed in their revival and prayer meetings? No, they would not. And so they established the Evangelische Mennoniten Gemeinschaft (Evangelical Mennonite Society). In their new fellowship which would remain Mennonite in doctrine, they would continue enthusiastic evangelism. Within two weeks all seven--elder William Gehman, bishop William N. Shelly, preachers David Henning and Henry Diehl, and deacons David Gehman, Joseph Schneider and Jacob Gottschall--were outside the New Mennonite association (now the General Conference Mennonite Church). One year later, the first Tuesday in November 1859, they held their first semi-annual preachers conference in the Evangelical Mennonite Meeting House in Haycock Township, Bucks County. Eleven days later they dedicated a new meeting house in Upper Milford Township, Lehigh County. Thus began the Bible Fellowship Church.

The prayer meeting crisis -- The crisis which led to this new fellowship of Mennonite revivalists had erupted in the Upper Milford Mennonite Meeting House, "number two." Nummer zwee, as the congregation was called in the local dialect, was one of the new progressive congregations which had come out of the Franconia Conference of the (Old) Mennonite Church in 1847. John H. Oberholtzer, bishop of the Swamp Mennonite congregation, had resisted the pressure to wear the traditional unrolled coat collar. He also urged the conference to allow written minutes and a constitution (German, Ordnung). Division followed, some congregations separated from the conference and a few new congregations emerged. Into the progressive Upper Milford congregation came a young convert named William Gehman. Evidently a magnetic individual he was soon selected preacher by vote and by lot.

Gehman preached and conducted prayer meetings wherever he gained entrance. In 1853 the high council of the "New" Mennonites discussed their type of prayer meetings and allowed them to continue. Some evidently remained suspicious of these enthusiastic meetings; more discussion ensued. In 1856 the bishops restricted these prayer meetings. The following year bishop William N. Shelly, one of the bishops who had enjoined the prayer meetings, had a change of heart and entered a formal protest. He attempted to demonstrate to the council that these prayer meetings were in accord with the Gospel. The vote went against Shelly. These prayer meetings had to cease. Thus his name was stricken from the list of preachers in May 1858 and the others had until October to conform.

Unacceptable restrictions -- A controversy over the ownership of the Upper Milford meeting house followed. The congregation by one vote rejected Gehman's claims on the meeting house. Through a financial settlement and contributions he and his followers began to erect their own

meeting house, which was known as nummer drei (number three), in the valley. In it he preached, prayed, exhorted and from there went forth to homes and nearby churches spreading the joy of the message he loved. He inspired many young men from his congregation to follow him into ministry. Possibly the most significant was his wife's cousin, Jonas Musselman, whose three sons became preachers.

The Fellowship Reaches out -- In 1861 Eusebius Hershey, a traveling preacher from Rebersburg, Center County, Pennsylvania, joined the Evangelical Mennonite Society. He inspired many as he traveled widely conducting protracted meetings and prayer meetings throughout Pennsylvania, Ohio and Ontario, Canada. He also kindled interest in overseas missions. After years of travel in America and as an old man he moved on to Liberia, West Africa where he preached the Gospel and soon laid down his life.

As other young men joined the preachers in revival, the organization developed. In 1866 they published their Glaubenslehre which contained a statement of faith and church order along with a constitution for their mission society. The articles of faith were essentially the Mennonite Dortrecht Confession of Faith of 1632. The organization was doubtless derived from the Ordnung of the East-Pennsylvania Conference of Mennonites. The missions constitution may have been their own creation. It certainly was what they were all about. Their mission was to proclaim the Good News everywhere they could and to help others do the same where they could not go. They added meeting houses and preaching stations from Coopersburg, Pennsylvania to Wadsworth, Ohio. Congregations in the Lehigh Valley survived; Wadsworth passed away. It was just too far away for proper nurture.

Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Pennsylvania Conference

Union with like-minded Brethren -- Other Mennonites were influenced by the same revival winds which blew through southeastern Pennsylvania. In Canada Daniel Hoch spread the Word. He encouraged the Evangelical Mennonites, but many opposed him in Canada. Other Mennonites in Canada and the Midwest came under the spell of the revival tides. Among these were Solomon Eby of Ontario and Daniel Brenneman of Indiana and their followers who were excommunicated. They joined forces to become the Reformed Mennonites (1874). Some New Mennonites, followers of Daniel Hoch, united with these Reformed Mennonites to become the United Mennonites (1875). These kindred spirits found the Evangelical Mennonites of Pennsylvania and together became the Evangelical United Mennonites (November 1879).

With the new union came a church paper, greater structure and new theological emphases. The Gospel Banner edited by Daniel Brenneman provided reports of evangelistic activities, stories to challenge the heart, and doctrinal articles which developed a new way of thinking. When the preachers conference excommunicated those who refused to relinquish their life insurance policies, the Banner cheered. Reports from camp meetings challenged people to seek entire sanctification and healing. Articles selected from Methodist sources pointed away from Mennonite emphases. A new understanding of the Return of Christ to establish His earthly kingdom gained acceptance.

William Gehman, the only active preacher of the founding seven, was elected the first presiding elder of the Pennsylvania Conference in 1880. At the time there were five active congregations: Zionsville, Coopersburg, Quakertown, Fleetwood, and Springtown. It was about this time that a stationing committee began to assign preachers to the congregations.

In 1883 a small group in Ohio which called itself Brethren in Christ merged with the Evangelical United Mennonites to form the Mennonite Brethren in Christ. This was the last merger of the Pennsylvania Conference. At the time many wondered whether it was time to drop Mennonite from the name of the denomination. Tradition and the concern to allow young men to be certified conscientious objectors in Canada preserved the name.

Leadership for the new century -- New leadership arose in the final decade of the nineteenth century, from which issued the leadership for most of the first half of the twentieth century. They launched new efforts at evangelism and church planting. Tabernacle or tent meetings were conducted in various places where homes were not obtainable. The first Sunday School Convention was held in 1889.

In 1892 William Brunner Musselman became the second presiding elder. A man of boundless energy, he developed the first denominational hymnal; created the Gospel Worker Society, an organization for women's ministries; inaugurated a new magazine, the Gospel Worker Society Herald; and began a printing organization known as Union Gospel Press. Later he moved the press and his organization to Williamsport, Pennsylvania and eventually to Cleveland, Ohio.

Charles Henry Brunner, writer, poet and musician, succeeded his cousin as presiding elder and chairman of annual conference. C.H. and his wife established the Gospel Herald Society for men. Together with the Gospel Workers they planted many new congregations on the edges of Conference. He promoted foreign missions in the Pennsylvania Conference through the newly formed Christian and Missionary Alliance in which he became an honorary vice president. He edited the Gospel Banner and for many years, the Annual Conference Yearbook (1896-1941).

The Conference began to commission missionaries to diverse parts of the world, Henry and Kate Weiss to Chile, Calvin and Phoebe Snyder to China, and Rose Lambert to Armenia, Turkey. Others soon followed. For the early decades of the twentieth century the majority of missionaries were associated with The Christian and Missionary Alliance.

New articles of faith were debated and approved. The Wesleyan emphasis on a "Second Blessing" or second work of grace, was evident in the article on Entire Sanctification. According to this teaching, the sin nature could be eradicated and the sanctified person be free from all conscious or intentional sin. The new articles on the Return of Christ reflected the widespread preoccupation with the impending end of the age.

The leadership of the Pennsylvania Conference until the fourth decade of the twentieth century was essentially the same. Presiding elders Harvey Brunner Musselman and William George Gehman controlled every aspect of the Conference. Musselman chaired annual conference and Gehman governed the Gospel Herald Society during a period of growth. Interest in outreach and

missions increased. The vision of reaching beyond the old boundaries and into nearby urban areas inspired many.

World War One, the Great Depression, and the outbreak of World War Two did not dampen the spirit of evangelism. By 1920 the Conference was double what it had been in 1900. In the next twenty years it doubled again.

Loyalty was a central theme during this era. Most people trusted and submitted to their leaders with little resistance. Disloyalty was unacceptable. A drift from the Wesleyan doctrine of the late nineteenth century grew as the twentieth century progressed. The Wesleyan notion of eradication of the sinful nature was replaced by the idea that the tendency to sin was counteracted by living victoriously in the Spirit as taught by Keswick sources. This was the beginning of an emphasis on the process of sanctification rather than on a second work of grace. Pastors began to write Sunday School lessons for the Uniform Lesson Series which were published by the Union Gospel Press. The Conference had its own hymnal, *Rose of Sharon*. The first history of the denomination, *History of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ*, edited by Jasper Huffman was published in 1920.

New leadership and new directions -- The end of an era began with the death of W.G. "Daddy" Gehman in 1941. Four years later H.B. Musselman became emeritus. Paul Timothy Stengele and Timothy D. Gehret provided transition to a new, post war era. Relations with the other Mennonite Brethren in Christ conferences were not good. Doctrinal and ecclesiological disagreements were magnified by personality differences. When General Conference in 1947 voted to change the name of the denomination to United Missionary Church, the Pennsylvania Conference resisted. Pennsylvania was allowed to use the old name, but five years later voted to separate from the other conferences. The official reasons included differences over the doctrine of holiness, foreign mission programs, educational plans, financial autonomy, church government, and objection to a projected merger with The Missionary Church Association.

The Gospel Herald Society became the Home Mission Society; later it became the department of Church Extension. Other changes followed. Berean Bible School was opened in 1950 to prepare pastors, missionaries and Christian workers for the church. A shortage of ministers was stemmed and new missionaries were commissioned. After eighteen years as a three-year Bible school, the school became Pinebrook Junior College. The college closed in 1992. College and Seminary had become the preferred preparation for ministry. To compete with existing theological institutions which were considered acceptable did not seem wise to many.

The Bible Fellowship Church

In 1959 the Conference adopted a new name, Bible Fellowship Church. New articles of faith were ratified which reflected more accurately the beliefs of the Fellowship. The practice of feet washing was dropped. The title of presiding elder which had recently become district superintendent became conference superintendent when there was only one such officer for the denomination. Finally when a more presbyterial structure of government was adopted, the position was dropped altogether.

An important feature of the Conference was camp meeting. This was the place where the whole Conference came together. Here they heard other preachers and met brothers and sisters from other congregations. They worshipped, prayed, fellowshiped and ate together. The first site was Chestnut Hill, near Coopersburg, in 1881. Other locations were used until the purchase of Mizpah Grove in East Allentown in 1910. There and at Edgewood Grove near Shamokin many encountered God in special ways and made lasting commitments. Evangelism, Bible teaching, reports from missionaries, children's meetings, and youth meetings inspired the campers. A children's camp, Victory Valley, near Zionsville, opened in 1956. In 1968 the Fellowship sold Mizpah Grove and purchased Pinebrook Bible Conference. Pinebrook became the center for summer and winter spiritual vacations and retreats.

A home for the aged and for orphans was begun in Center Valley around the turn of the century. An autonomous board controlled this operation until the title was transferred to the Conference in 1954. Few aged and fewer orphans lived in the home. A new home for the aging was opened in Nazareth in 1960. Two years later the original home and farm were sold. A larger facility for the aging was recently opened near Allentown.

The pursuit of a biblical basis for every facet of the denomination characterized annual conferences and ministerial conferences. A multitude of study papers, discussions, and recommendations focused on a wide range of topics such as, eschatology, inerrancy, finance, ordination, church government, the relationship between the Annual Conference and the particular church, divorce and church membership, church discipline, total abstinence and church membership, and the role of women in the church. Abortion, homosexuality, the aids crisis, and other social issues were addressed.

From a loose association of Mennonite revivalists, influenced by the holiness movement to a Wesleyan denomination to a Reformed fellowship holding to believers baptism, the Bible Fellowship Church stands today. Once each congregation was autonomous. Later they came under the strong hand of presiding elders in a modified episcopal system. Today particular Bible Fellowship Churches are ruled by local elders. Each particular church sends elders along with their pastors to Annual Conference. New churches continue to be built, education facilities are being added and new congregations and daughter churches planted.