

Doctrinal Footprints
Following
The Doctrinal Journey of the Bible Fellowship Church

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Footprints in the snow. You can see them and follow them. You know that someone has walked there. But you don't know why. If you could meet the person making the footprints, you could ask about them. And then you would know why they are there. But if you only see footprints, you have only footprints, not the reason for them.

A similar mystery awaits the person who seeks to follow the doctrinal footprints of the Evangelical Mennonites / Mennonite Brethren in Christ / Bible Fellowship Church. You can follow their footsteps, i.e., see the changes they made, but you can't easily determine why they made these changes. The story of their doctrine is a story of journey, of footprints in the snow, in which we can see the what but not the why.

The Evangelical Mennonites began as a reaction. The 1850s ante-bellum national uncertainty gave rise to revivals. As political turmoil increased, fears began to grow. People began to seek personal security and became sensitive again to the biblical message of the gospel which offered something better than political peace. Revivals broke out as preachers proclaimed their message and invited people to find peace and confidence in Jesus.

In the Hosensack Valley of Lehigh County, Pennsylvania, revivalism and Mennonitism tried to walk the same path. At first they were uncomfortable and uncertain that they could walk together. And so they carried on a conversation to find if they had a similar destination. The Mennonites valued tradition and stability. The revivalists valued evangelism and outreach. These values clashed. Finally, the Mennonites insisted that the revivalists give up their revivalism, commit to the traditional message and work to preserve the church and its ways. The revivalists would not accept even the offered compromises. And so they broke away to become what they believed God wanted them to be in order that they might do what God wanted them to do.

Several Mennonite Revivalists met in September, 1858, and determined they would preach the gospel and not be bound by the constraints of tradition. At their first formal meeting in 1859, when minutes were recorded, they made a statement about what they believed. "It was decided that: Each child of the Lord, having proved himself such by his walk and conversation, shall have entire freedom to express himself according to the inspiration of the Holy Ghost." (Verhandlungen, page 24) This somewhat vague and open ended statement is understandable in the context. They believed they were being prevented from obeying what God taught in the Scriptures. They were declaring they would follow the word of God, making truth a higher value than tradition. When truth and tradition collide, the truth of God must triumph, they were saying. Everyone shall be free to follow the truth of God. They were expressing their convictions.

Two years later in 1861, the matter of what they believed rose again. Baptism was on their mind. "Then the article on baptism was discussed somewhat at length in brotherly love and it was unanimously Resolved: That God's Word and the teaching of our author Menno Simons in this as well as in all other articles of faith shall be taken as our fundamental rule and way." (Verhandlungen, page 29) But the conversation expanded.

Resolved: That we, through God's Spirit, grace and prayer, endeavor to walk willing in teaching, life and business according to the example of our Lord and the apostle as well as our author in humility and uprightness.

Resolved: That each preacher especially, as well as each member of our society, shall make himself familiar with the doctrinal teachings of the earlier Mennonites in order to take into consideration at the next conference whether to have it printed in German and English." (Verhandlungen, page 29)

Why were such studies necessary? Their statement that all should be entirely free to express themselves according to the Holy Ghost was perhaps naïve. It is easy to see why they said it. But they were apparently becoming aware of the problems with doctrine that had existed in the church from the beginning of its history. When people are entirely free to believe whatever they believe, then people will believe whatever they believe. The result is a chaos of multiple teachings and heresies. Thus, throughout history, the church has sought points of teaching on which they could agree. They have also determined when certain teaching was outside what the Bible teaches and condemned that teaching. So doctrinal statements that allow for doctrinal unity are to be sought and maintained. Doctrinal statements became a measure to determine what was or was not to be taught. A doctrinal statement defined what they thought was orthodox and what they thought was heresy. They needed to decide what they would or would not accept as taught by God's word.

Their conversations continued in June, 1862. They asked William Gehman to read the 18 articles of the confession of Dortrecht. They were uncomfortable with the articles on marriage and shunning. Their discussion ended when they agreed, "Finally the whole confession was laid aside and the New Testament accepted as rule and order enough for our Society" (Verhandlungen, page 30).

A more definite statement was on their minds when they met three years later in November, 1865. "A committee was appointed to lay down general rules and a brief statement of faith of our denomination, based on God's Word and the teaching of Menno Simons, and to report at the next Conference for further discussion" (Verhandlungen, page 44).

When they met the following June, they were ready to form their conclusions and statement.

4. The Confession of Faith, which includes the rules and discipline for the guidance of the Evangelical Mennonite Conference and which was composed by

the committee that was appointed for it by the last Conference, was read by Joseph L. Romig.

5. Then all advisory members were asked by the Chairman to express their opinions and views concerning each article and rule. If any are found wanting or deficient according to the Word of God, alter them accordingly so that they would conform to the teaching of Christ, His Apostles and our church reformer, Menno Simons. Mere thoughts and opinions however, would not be accepted.

6. The article concerning baptism was widely discussed, but was unanimously accepted as it was laid down in the Confessions of Faith...

7. After the discussion on the other articles of faith and rules, the whole creed, including rules and disciplines, with only minor changes was accepted by all except for one.

RESOLVED: That David Gehman and Joseph L. Romig shall be a committee to take care of the following: To have the above accepted Confession of Faith with the addition of the Constitution of the Mission Society, printed. 800 copies are to be printed in the German language and 400 copies in the English language. (Verhandlungen, pages 45-46)

The document was printed as determined by the conference by A. E. Dambly of Skippackville, Pennsylvania, in 1867. It was entitled, "Doctrine of Faith, and Church Discipline of the Evangelical Mennonite Society of East Pennsylvania – With Subjoined Constitution of the Missionary Society."

This publication was a milestone. The Mennonite Encyclopedia noted this significant event. "In North America the first confession was that of the present United Missionary Church (formerly Mennonite Brethren in Christ), although it has never been called a "Confession." (Volume 1, page 684)

This observation raises questions. Why did no other Mennonite group seek a new confession? Why after nearly 200 years of Mennonitism in America did the Evangelical Mennonites believe they needed to create a new doctrinal statement? Why did they not simply do what Mennonites in America had done for 200 years and just accept the Dortrecht Confession?

It may be they understood they were no longer following the same path their spiritual fathers had walked. They were no longer good Mennonites. They were Mennonite revivalists. They needed to be uncoupled from their past but did not want to walk away from it. They needed their own statement. The introduction to the new statement declared,

Notwithstanding all the trouble of the committee, should however in the future anything, of which we have now not thought, be wanting (which we do not doubt at all) in this Doctrine of Faith and Church Discipline, we would take as a remedy God's Word in hand; for it is our sincere wish to take the simple and secure Bible way, as Christ, the Apostles, and Menno Simon have taught, in order to serve Almighty God, and in pursuance of Christian order to cooperate with all upright

Christians for the upbuilding of His glorious Kingdom upon earth, according to the grace that He will in part from time to time. (...What Mean These Stones?, page 25)

Harold Shelly summarized their doctrinal conclusions.

It is noteworthy that the creed was to be judged “according to the Word of God.” The authority of the Scriptures and the traditions derived from “our reformer” were accepted. In 1866 the brethren considered themselves followers of Menno, the Apostles, and Christ... They wished to be Mennonites because they believed the teaching of Menno and the Mennonites of Dort were biblical. (The Bible Fellowship Church, pages 48-49)

Truth trumped tradition. From then on, changes in their statements would come because they sought to follow truth, not to hold to tradition or opinion. Re-examining and re-thinking what they believed became characteristic of them and their spiritual descendants.

In 1879, various splinter groups of revivalist Mennonites found each other and began a series of unions. A first uniting conference met in Ontario, Canada, in June, 1879. Two groups, one from Canada and others from midwest America, agreed to merge. A doctrinal statement was on their agenda. They approved 26 articles but did not print the text of those articles. The only information available is the number of articles, 26, but that number does not line up with previous Mennonite confessions nor with the number of articles in the earlier Evangelical Mennonite statement. At this point, it is not certain what was contained in these articles.

Later that year in November, another uniting conference was held in Pennsylvania. At this conference, the Evangelical Mennonites of Pennsylvania joined the United Mennonites, which had formed earlier that year, to create the Evangelical United Mennonites. At their meeting, the matter of doctrine was discussed. Their minutes recorded the following:

The conference, now in order, at once proceeded to investigate and weigh the subject for which this special conference was called to meet, namely to endeavor, by the will of the Lord, to effect a union of the two bodies represented by the conference, and as a preparatory step, the two disciplines were read before the conference, compared and, thoroughly weighed and considered, and it was indeed marvelous (only as it is considered that both were drawn from the Bible) to learn how nearly in point of faith and doctrine the two disciplines corresponded. The only material difference being in point of church government. The United Mennonite discipline having the preference, in this respect, after modifying a few sentences, was unanimously and cheerfully adopted by the conference. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/genconspec1879.htm>)

While it is uncertain what their agreements and disagreements were, the final statement was printed in 1880 containing 24 doctrinal statements. Their decision seems to infer that preference was given to the United Mennonite statement. A comparison between the 1880 statements and the 1866 Evangelical Mennonite statements shows a great deal of similarity. Their agreed upon doctrinal statements were published in the following year, 1880.

Several of the statements expressed in this set of doctrines need to be noted because they declare where the Evangelical United Mennonites saw themselves theologically. These particular doctrines put them with churches that are often identified as holiness churches which place emphasis on human choice and experience. Later, these doctrines would become the dividing issues leading to the formation of the Bible Fellowship Church which charted a different doctrinal course.

They wrote an article entitled "Free Will." They believed God had graciously extended an invitation for salvation to human beings but human beings retained the ability to accept or reject that invitation. Their view of sanctification was that it came after justification and regeneration. In other words, sanctification was an event or experience that followed salvation which resulted in a "perfection of those heaven-born principles." In another article entitled "Sin After Justification," they stated that believers could fall from grace though through repentance they might be restored.

In 1882, the Evangelical United Mennonites held their first General Conference. The General Conference was comprised of the Annual Conferences and met normally every four years. Matters that related to all the annual conferences were handled at these general meetings. From this time on, doctrinal changes were made at the General Conference, not at the Annual Conferences.

In 1882, several revisions were made of the rules but no doctrinal changes were made. Their doctrinal statement was less than three years old so no revision was needed.

In 1883, another merger took place between the Evangelical United Mennonites and a group from the Brethren Church identified as the Swank branch. Doctrinal discussions were part of their decision to merge. They began by determining to focus on the Evangelical United Mennonite statement for their discussion and soon agreed to accept the 24 articles of the Evangelical United Mennonites. However, they proposed a change in some of what they called rules which were not considered part of their doctrine. The 1880 statement said concerning baptism, "We recommend that baptism be administered in the water, and the mode be left to the choice of the candidate." From this statement, we learn that, while believers' baptism was expected, the mode was optional. After discussion, the merging conferences agreed to remove the clause, "The mode be left to the choice of the candidate." With this declaration, baptism by immersion apparently became the standard of the church. Other smaller changes were agreed upon. In the end, they adopted a new name, Mennonite Brethren in Christ.

At the 1885 General Conference, the doctrinal statement went untouched. Some of the rules of the discipline were discussed. Of note was their concern for sanctification. The earlier statement said, "In addition to the regular appointments for public worship, we make special efforts in the way of protracted meetings, for the awakening and conversion of sinners..." They agreed to change this statement by adding the words, "and for the sanctification of believers." It is of interest to note that in the year prior, 1884, the Pennsylvania Conference had begun to hold camp meetings which were held in part to encourage believers to go beyond salvation to experience the further dimension of sanctification which would come for those who sought it.

At the General Conference of 1888, a number of issues were on the agenda. None was so weighty as their proposal for a new statement of sanctification. No context is available to help understand the new statement. The reason for the change is not mentioned. How the request for change originated is not given. Even the committee members who wrote the proposed change are unnamed. But it is clear significant change was intended when they chose to add the word "entire" to the understanding of sanctification. The article was now entitled, "Entire Sanctification." The content of the article was altered but the essence of the statement changed little.

Discussion of both doctrines and disciplines occupied much of the 1896 General Conference. While a number of changes were proposed and accepted, the most extensive changes had to do with eschatology or the doctrine of the last days. Prophetic teaching and thinking was rising in importance as the 19th century came to an end. The teachings of J. N. Darby, from which dispensationalism grew, had crossed the ocean. The end times pot was boiling. The 1880 doctrinal statement simply contained an article on the judgment. In 1896, articles on the coming of Christ and the Millennium were added. The European influence of the prophetic teaching is seen in the books of H. B. Musselman. In the library of Musselman were several years of a publication entitled, "The Morning Star: A Herald of The Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ" by Dr. Robert McKilliam. The first volume, which Musselman possessed, was printed in 1894 in London. McKilliam was a pastor in Blackheath near London. A biography of McKilliam states

He was Editor of The Morning Star from its commencement in January, 1894, and continued so till the time of his death—thus covering just over 21 years. Through this paper, which was "a herald of the Coming of the Lord Jesus Christ," his name was known and his teaching appreciated and blessed in many parts of the world.

The doctor's favourite theme was the Personal and Premillennial Coming of the Lord Jesus. (<http://www.gospelhall.org/content/view/3068/>)

The Mennonite Brethren in Christ continued to combine their Mennonitism with their revivalism and focus on holiness emphasizing entire sanctification. In 1904, they again spent time tinkering with the doctrine seeking to get it right. But, another concern was beginning to arise. This concern was verbalized in the request of the Pennsylvania Conference that year. One of their petitions stated, "Resolved, that we as a Conference

protest against higher percentages as well as against more books on theories, arts, etc., in our Reading Course; and, to substitute some books on the deeper life in Christ instead of Lessons in Holiness” (<http://www.bfchistory.org/gencon1904.htm>). Was there an awkward pause when the petition was read? Were eyebrows raised? Was the suggestion being made that the emphasis on holiness was too much?

What had happened in the Pennsylvania Conference to give rise or make way for such a request? It might be suggested that two factors influenced this request. First was the declining influence of W. B. Musselman. Musselman had been a primary leader through the 1890s. His writings show a focus on the Wesleyan view of holiness and sanctification. He often wrote about the accompanying work of healing that was further evidence of sanctification in a believer’s life. His energetic initiatives had given new life to the work of home missions. The Gospel Workers developed under his entrepreneurial hand. The Gospel Workers grew and began to move into printing and publication. As that work grew, his leadership in the conference declined and other leaders appeared. As Musselman diminished in influence, a relationship with A. B. Simpson through C. H. Brunner began to grow. The focus of Simpson and the International Missionary Alliance, later the Christian and Missionary Alliance, was not so much on experiencing the Holy Spirit but a deeper experience with Christ. The focus was moving from entire sanctification to victorious living. Harold Shelly writes,

Few in the Pennsylvania Conference, it seems, ever fully supported the Wesleyan understanding of Entire Sanctification. A tract by C. H. Brunner in 1905 appeared to uphold progressive sanctification. Many in the Pennsylvania Conference consistently resisted the trend in other Conferences toward a thoroughgoing Wesleyan interpretation of the experience. Most preferred the Keswick explication of the Deeper Life. As noted earlier, this probably began with the influence of Dr. A. B. Simpson of the Christian and Missionary Alliance on C. H. Brunner. ([The Bible Fellowship Church](#), page 259)

Brunner’s tract on sanctification was taken from his presentation at the Ministerial Convention of 1905. The new focus can be heard, “This is two-fold, viz: That which was wrought for us, and that which is being wrought in us. The first is once forever, the second is continuous. The first is judicial, the second is practical. The first was finished on the cross, the second is going on in the believer's life.” (<http://www.bfchistory.org/SanctificationBrunner.htm>) The references to a continuing work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification certainly indicated a new direction.

Because the 1904 General Conference did not record responses to any of the petitions from the Annual Conferences, no indication is given of their view of the request of the Pennsylvania Conference.

The next three conferences were relatively quiet with regard to the doctrinal positions of the church. The 1908 Conference received a request that there be a uniform understanding of article 5, The Holy Ghost, and article 12, Entire Sanctification. The

conference replied that there was no need to make a statement since the statements were generally understood. Recurring discussions, like the use of musical instruments and the meaning of unconditional with regard to pastoral submission, were regular features but doctrinal positions were not put on the table.

Doctrinal discussion came with the 1924 General Conference. The Ontario Conference presented a strongly worded petition:

3. Whereas, The present Article XII in the Discipline on Sanctification is considered to be flexible and allows more than one interpretation, and
Whereas, Our conference is strongly Wesleyan in our teaching on Holiness— therefore—
Resolved, That we ask General Conference to give us an article that will clearly teach the Wesleyan doctrine of Holiness.
(<http://bfchistory.org/gencon1924.htm>)

The Indiana and Ohio Conference shared similar concerns which were expressed in their petition.

1. Whereas, There have been some questions raised relative to Article XII of our Discipline on the subject of "Entire sanctification," various interpretations having been given to it— be it,
Resolved, That we as a conference unanimously adopt the following:
1. That we as a conference interpret the article according to the Wesleyan doctrine of the subject.
2. That we oppose any other interpretation than the above. Which was the original intent of the article, and professed intent when the article was revised, in the General Conference of 1904, whether such interpretation be on the part of an individual or a group of individuals.
That we ask the next General Conference either to give an interpretation to Article XII in keeping with the original intention of the article and the professed intention when it was revised in 1904 or give us an article on the subject of Entire Sanctification which General Conference is willing to interpret in keeping with the above. (<http://bfchistory.org/gencon1924.htm>)

The statement of 1904 spoke of the cleansing from inbred or original sin. The new statement spoke of cleansing from all sin and all unrighteousness. When the 1928 edition of Doctrines and Disciplines appeared, the article on Entire Sanctification covered two and one half pages. Most of the other articles took but one half page. Entire Sanctification was a prominent part of their doctrinal position.

They also addressed their eschatological statement. The 1920 doctrinal statement said of Judgment Day, "God has appointed a day (2 Pet. 3:8) to judge the world (Acts 17: 31) when all will be judged according to their works. 2 Peter 2: 9; Heb 9: 27; 10: 27; 2 Cor. 5: 10; Matt. 25: 32; Eccl. 12: 14" The new statement of 1924 was more detailed and expressed the conviction that the rapture would precede the tribulation which would

precede the millennium. The new statement was no longer one sentence but three full paragraphs.

The 1928 conference showed again how central was the issue of sanctification as they adjusted the statement on Growth in Grace. Essentially, they said growth in grace is good but entire sanctification is the more fruitful position. The statement grew from one sentence to two paragraphs.

The General Conferences were unable to assemble on their ordinary four year cycle after the 1928 gathering. They met in 1936, eight years later, but no major doctrinal discussions took place. They met in 1943. While doctrinal issues were not always raised, it is clear that doctrinal positions, particularly the one on entire sanctification, were always important. While they did not have discussions each year, they took what they believed seriously. From the beginning, the expressed convictions were very significant.

In 1943, pivotal events began to unfold. While more than doctrine was involved, it is evident that doctrinal matters were helping to heat the caldron. The issues came into the record through the petitions of the conferences. The Michigan conference requested that a merger with the Missionary Church Association be pursued. Harold Shelly writes, "This denomination had similar roots in the Mennonite and Wesleyan revival traditions." ([The Bible Fellowship Church](#), page 292). At the same meeting, the Indiana and Ohio Conference expressed concern for the doctrine of sanctification:

Whereas, It has been the conviction of the older leaders of the Indiana Conference that the revision of Article 12 of the M. B. C. Discipline, at the Nappanee General Conference held in 1904 and several times since at the General Conferences, has weakened our earlier and clearer doctrinal statement on the subject of Sanctification, and

Whereas, Our leadership, both the older and the younger, keenly feel the ambiguity and confusion of our doctrinal statement on Sanctification as found in its present form, we wish to memorialize the coming General Conference that we, as a Conference never have been, nor ever can be, satisfied with the above mentioned article in its present form, and that we reserve the right to recur to the earlier and clearer doctrinal statement referred to above, and found in our M. B. C. Discipline before the 1905 edition, as our authority on the doctrine of Sanctification. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/GenCon1943.htm>)

The desire to emphasize a Wesleyan holiness point of view by joining the Missionary Church would widen the growing gap between the General Conference and the Pennsylvania Conference. As noted, going back to 1904, the Pennsylvania Conference had requested that the focus on holiness be directed toward victorious living, a somewhat different understanding of the process of sanctification less an instantaneous work and more of a progressive work. Other doctrines, such as perseverance, would have to be re-evaluated. It could even lead to alternate understandings of the process of conversion.

The 1947 General Conference brought a new name, United Missionary Church. The rationale for the new name was not acceptable to the Pennsylvania Conference. The growing division was reaching the fracture point. The issue was apparently not simply the name but all that went with it, expectations of financial responsibility and, of course, the theological perspective. The minutes offered the following published explanation:

"At the quadrennial session of the General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church, held at Potsdam, Ohio, during the week beginning Nov. 3, 1947, it was decided to change the general name of that church body to that of United Missionary Church.

"The reason assigned for the change of the church name was, the conviction that the work of the church could be more successfully carried on in the home and foreign fields under the newly-adopted name.

"One Annual Conference, the Pennsylvania, did not concur in the necessity for the present change in the church name, and was voted full and unqualified relationship to the General Conference of the body, while it continues to use the name Mennonite Brethren in Christ."

(<http://www.bfchistory.org/gencon1947.htm>)

The 1951 General Conference brought no change in direction for the conference. The name United Missionary Church was accepted by all except the Pennsylvania Conference. The conference records the issues discussed but most of them were procedure and practice. Doctrine was not being considered. Perhaps it was the last straw for the Pennsylvania Conference.

At the 1952 Pennsylvania Annual Conference, the following was passed:

Whereas, Our Conference differs greatly with the Conferences of the United Missionary Church in doctrine, in organization and in government, and

Whereas, The position of our Conference on:

Our interpretation of the doctrine of holiness;

Our desire to become an independent sending Foreign Mission Board;

Our educational program;

Our plans concerning church government;

Our wish for autonomy in the control of all funds and expenditures; and,

Our desire for proper and fair representation; Conflicts with the principles of the proposed merger, THEREFORE:

Resolved, That we hereby sever all relations with the Conferences of the United Missionary Church, and consider the Mennonite Brethren in Christ Church of Pennsylvania, Inc., a separate and distinct body, and FURTHER:

Resolved, That a report of this action be conveyed by our District Superintendents to the next meeting of the General Executive Committee to be presented by said Committee at the next General Conference.

These resolutions were unanimously adopted.

(<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1952.htm>)

Several things are notable. While several issues of difference were mentioned, first on the list was the doctrine of holiness. The Pennsylvania Conference had begun to walk a different theological path. It is also noted that the decision was accepted unanimously which indicates that the decision was clearly and strongly made.

So the Pennsylvania Conference was on its own. In the area of doctrine, it had lived with previous statements even if it did not whole-heartedly embrace them. They had to rethink everything.

While initial concerns focused on the choice of a new name, soon the issue of doctrine rose. The 1956 Annual Conference passed the following resolution

Resolved, That a Committee of seven Ministers be elected to study the Articles of Faith for the new Discipline.

The following were elected: C. E. Kirkwood, T. D. Gehret, Jansen E. Hartman, F. B. Hertzog, Donald T. Kirkwood, Willard E. Cassel and A. L. Seifert.
(<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1956.htm>)

It is speculation to ask why these particular men were selected for this work. Because the final product came from their deliberations, the speculation is worth consideration. The first four would seem to have been part of the recognized leadership. The last three came with some theological training. Donald Kirkwood and Willard Cassel were graduates with seminary degrees.

The Annual Conference of 1958 brought a first set of articles: the Holy Scriptures, the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Creation, Sin, Repentance, Regeneration and Justification. It was clear that they had chosen not to seek continuity with the doctrines of the United Missionary Church which began with a statement entitled, "God, The Creation of All Things, And Man." The Scriptures were the sixth statement. Whether the order of presentation had any significance or not, it is notable that they began with the Holy Scriptures.

Unfortunately, no record exists of the study and background which the committee utilized in its work. Only later would study committees present their work with a paper that showed how they arrived at their conclusions. At this point, the committee simply shared their proposals offering no way to understand how they arrived at the proposed statements.

The committee to write new Articles of Faith brought a second batch in 1960. The statement concerning sanctification had charted a new course,

Sanctification is a progressive work of the Holy Spirit in the believer which purifies the life and conforms the whole man to the image of Christ as the Word of God is believed and obeyed. It begins at regeneration and continues

throughout the individual's life on earth and reaching its completion at the appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ.
(<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1960.htm>)

How far the doctrinal shift had gone began to be clear in 1961. Gone were the doctrines that supported the ideas of Wesleyan holiness. A distinct point of view was taking shape. An article entitled Free Agency stated, "...By the fall of Adam man forfeited his freedom of the Will." An article entitled Election declared, "Election is a free act of the sovereign God in which from eternity, and for reasons known only to Himself and apart from any goodness in man He graciously chose from among the fallen mankind a people unto salvation..." An article on Perseverance expressed the conviction that those who are regenerated are "... preserved by the power of God, so that they shall never totally or finally fall away, but shall persevere unto the end."

The Articles of Faith were completed and published in 1961. In 1962 an article on The Lord's Day was added.

But some still were not fully on board. The 1963 conference noted that, while new men must adhere entirely to the articles, those who were ministering at the time of the transition would be allowed to differ. In 1964, the "grandfathering" was presented again.

Whereas, there are a few Pastors who had certain reservations regarding three of our present articles of faith, inasmuch as these exceptions are not in the area of the Deity of Christ, or the Inspiration of the Scriptures, these men shall be permitted to continue with us since they were members of the Bible Fellowship Church at the time of adoption of our present Faith and Order. If any new exceptions are listed by these men, they shall be dealt with by the Committee on Credentials. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1964.htm>)

Doctrinal matters were still a matter of controversy. While the discussion had shifted, a struggle was going on. In 1974, the Cedar Crest Church presented a lengthy request to deal with its growing concern.

Whereas, Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church of Allentown has had difficulties in the past over issues relating to our present Faith & Order, and
Whereas, most, if not all, members of the Official Board believe that various Articles of Faith do not clearly express (without serious loopholes) the position of our local congregation, and
Whereas, a hyper-Calvinist candidate for Pastor was recommended to Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church by the Annual Conference of the Bible Fellowship Church, October 16, 1968, which we believe could have been avoided and should be avoided in the future with a Doctrinal Statement of Faith that presents a better balance between Divine Sovereignty and human freedom, and
Whereas, this hyper-Calvinist candidate (upon the recommendation of the Annual Conference) was accepted as Pastor of Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church and subsequently caused division and many other related problems, and

Whereas, this Pastor stated that his doctrinal position was closer to the Articles of Faith of the Bible Fellowship Church than that of the doctrinal position of the Cedar Crest Church. (And if this is true, we believe that the Articles of Faith should be altered so that hyper-Calvinistic individuals cannot subscribe to it); and Whereas, we believe the balance between Divine Sovereignty and human freedom is inadequately described yet agreed to by many outstanding Calvinists. C. H. Spurgeon, for example states: "Brethren, be willing to see both sides of the shield of truth. Rise above the babyhood which cannot believe two doctrines until it sees the connecting link. Have you not two eyes, man? Must you needs put one of them out in order to see clearly?" and Whereas, we believe "faith" to be of sufficient importance to merit a more significant place in our Faith & Order, and Whereas, we, in formulating our By-Laws and local church government in accordance with Annual Conference, have experienced some hesitancy to accept the responsibilities of the position of Elder as expressed in the question, "Are you in basic accord with the Articles of Faith of the Bible Fellowship Church?" therefore, Resolved: By the Official Board that Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church form a Doctrinal Committee to establish the basic and common ground on which we of Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church can unite our efforts in the work of the Lord. The work of this Committee would be to formulate acceptable alterations and additions to the present Faith & Order (see attached preferred wording as agreed upon by the Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church) and Resolved; that we of Cedar Crest Bible Fellowship Church petition Annual Conference to establish a Doctrinal Committee to evaluate possible alterations and additions to the Faith& Order with one of the goals being to improve the balance between Divine Sovereignty and human freedom. Resolved; that we request a decision concerning this petition from Annual Conference no later than October, 1975. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes1974.htm>)

The Conference responded immediately by appointing a committee known as The Committee to Study The Doctrinal Balance of the Articles of Faith.

The Committee's report the following year brought a proposal for two new articles. The first was entitled Human Ability and Responsibility. It clarified that human choices are real choices and that humans have responsibility for making choices while stressing that God's grace enables those choices. The second article was entitled The Evangelistic Mission of the Church which made clear that a focus on the sovereignty of God did not minimize the importance of preaching the gospel and calling for a faith response to it. Final and unanimous approval of these new statements came in 1976.

The 1978 Annual Conference entertained a question from the Quakertown Church. Elders were to be in "basic accord" with the Faith and Order of the denomination. It was agreed that the words, "basic accord," did not offer a clear understanding of the expectation for the convictions of elders. The 1980 Annual Conference gave final

approval to the word, agreement, and established that elders were to verify in writing that they were in agreement with the Articles of Faith.

The 2005 Conference brought a new concern from the Quakertown Church.

Throughout 2003 and into 2004, Grace Church of Quakertown was involved with the process of calling a pastor. In the process of interviewing and discussing various potential candidates, the Search Committee and Elders became aware of differences in the understanding of salvation as expressed in the Articles of Faith (notably Articles 10 through 17).

We believe that a fuller exposition of our understanding of salvation would be helpful to churches seeking pastors and the various committees involved in the process of recruiting and approving men for pastoral service.

The hopeful results for this study on the doctrine of salvation would be materials by which Pastoral Search Committees and men considering service as pastors in the Bible Fellowship Church would be provided with a more comprehensive expression of the doctrine of salvation expressed in Articles 10 to 17 of the F & O of the Bible Fellowship Church.

We, therefore, the Board of Elders of Grace Bible Fellowship Church of Quakertown submit the following resolution to the 122nd Annual Conference:

Resolved, that we request the 122nd Annual Conference to initiate a study of the biblical teaching on the process and purpose of God's calling people to salvation, and further,

Resolved, that the chairman appoint a study committee of seven seminary-trained men to undertake this study and report back to the 123rd Annual Conference. (<http://www.bfchistory.org/Minutes2005.htm>)

The decision even to approve this study was far from unanimous, 67 for and 60 against.

What seems to have precipitated a new round of controversy was a growing expression of some to maintain a more moderate position with the doctrines of grace which would allow for a view of election based on the foreknowledge of God. Some believed the current statement did not allow this position. Others believed it did. Others thought it was theological nit-picking.

The discussion took place over several years with the result that a phrase was added to the current article on election which removed any ambiguity. The phrase, "apart from any foreseen faith," removed possible ambiguity and crystallized a position of soteriology that has united the denomination's understanding of the process of salvation.

Other doctrinal issues have been re-examined. Baptism and the Millennium have been reviewed in previous years. The issue regarding baptism had more to do with the relationship between baptism and church membership than a questioning of the practice. The Millennium discussion was more substantial and shows a shift away from a view of the kingdom that was primarily future to a view that recognizes the significance of kingdom presence both now and in the future. We added the focus of “now” to the “not yet” ideas of the kingdom that became part of our doctrinal thinking.

The history of the Bible Fellowship Church indicates that from the very beginning doctrine was viewed as a vital matter. The leaders were willing to examine and re-examine their doctrinal convictions. The desire to seek what God has taught and understand it has led to study and further study.

The doctrinal footprints of the Bible Fellowship Church clearly indicate that the church has been on a journey. The church of which we were once a part might say we strayed from the path. What has brought us to where we are is the desire to know and follow the truth of God. Because the desire to hear God’s word is alive and well in the Bible Fellowship Church, the journey has not ended.