

(442 words)

So, what is a Grace Brethren, anyway?

It's happened to all of us – that awkward moment when someone asks, “So, just what is a Grace Brethren, anyway?” How do you answer? More times than we like to admit, many of us default to comments like, “Well, we're sort of like the Baptists, except we have a different way of baptizing and organizing our communion services.”

Since leaving the mainstream Brethren in the late 1800's, our movement has wrestled with an ongoing identity crisis. Early in the last century, as the liberal vs. conservative debates raged, we placed ourselves in the camp of those committed to defending the *fundamentals* of the faith. As the century progressed, it was soon apparent that we belonged to a global movement that used the label *evangelical*. While few of us are completely comfortable with everything clustered under that broad umbrella, the label fits when understood in light of the other major divisions of global Christianity – Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Mainline Protestant and Pentecostal. But none of the typical labels provide a really satisfactory answer to the question, “So, just what is a Grace Brethren, anyway?”

Through *The Identity Initiative*, a group of leaders representing the global Grace Brethren movement is proposing a different path forward. Imagine the following scenario, and see if it helps reframe our answers in ways that are more meaningful to those inside *and* outside of our movement:

“So, what is a Grace Brethren, anyway?”

“We are a global fraternity of churches that, above all, is committed to following Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible.”

“Interesting. Please tell me more.”

“While our movement began in Germany in the early 1700's, we trace our roots back through history to the New Testament and the early church. In fact, we base our core beliefs on two thousand years of orthodox Christian teaching, and we share these beliefs with more than 545 million evangelical Christians today.”

“But what makes you different from other churches?”

“The majority of what we teach and obey are convictions we share with other Christ-followers who base their doctrines on historic orthodoxy and identify with the global evangelical movement. But like most physical families, as a spiritual family we have some unique characteristics and convictions that come out of our shared journey over the past three hundred years. Some of these include ...”

As other articles in this magazine will demonstrate, one of the principal goals of *The Identity Initiative* is to reframe the way we understand ourselves (internally) and the way we explain ourselves to others (externally). What better place to begin than with a fresh way of answering the question, “So, what is a Grace Brethren, anyway?”

2,266 words

Getting it Right, Again!

The tension in the room was palpable. Spread on the table before us were the *Statements of Faith* of the Grace Brethren Churches of the Central African Republic, Chad, Cameroon, and Nigeria. Seated around the table were the presidents and secretaries who represented those churches. It was November 2013, and joining with us in Yaoundé, Cameroon, were Charis North American Representative Keith Shearer and Africa Regional Director Frank Puhl.

For most of the day, we had discussed the growing role of *Charis International*¹ as a fraternity of churches and leaders representing our global movement. We reflected on *The Charis Commitment to Common Mission*, adopted in 2008 at Bad Homburg, Germany, and we celebrated its positive impact on our churches.² But the primary reason for gathering that day was to begin laying the foundation for the next *Charis International Leadership Meetings* (Oct 2015). We are currently engaged in a global discussion that will culminate in an historic moment: for the first time in our 300-year history, delegates representing our churches from around the world will be invited to help define a fresh expression of our doctrines and practices.

This is a moment to rejoice! The hard work and sacrifices of our cross-cultural workers are bearing fruit! With Grace Brethren Churches in at least 24 countries, we are now a global movement. *Charis International* provides the platform for leaders from around the world to join us at the round table, where we can chart our future together!

So why so much tension in the room? Did it come from the surprising discovery that all four countries were using slightly different Statements of Faith? After all, if membership in our global movement requires us to sign the exact same documents, how do we explain the fact that each country has developed along its own unique path?

But that was *not* the cause of tension. Instead, it was the realization that *none* of these Statements of Faith included the very important opening paragraphs adopted by the U.S. churches in 1969:

Section One. Covenant. The sovereign congregations which are members of this corporation are united in accepting the Holy Scriptures as the sole guide and authority in all matters of faith, doctrine and practice.

¹ Meeting for the first time in October 1994, representatives from Grace Brethren Churches around the globe agreed to name our movement *Charis*, the Greek word for *grace*. They believed it was a label that captured the best of our movement, and could be shared equally by all of our churches, irrespective of their primary language.

² See the *Charis Commitment to Common Mission*, at bit.ly/1oxylzU.

Section Two. Statement of Faith. The Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches has a corporate commitment to a basic body of beliefs founded on God's revealed truth. *The Statement of Faith is the current expression of a never-ending effort to clarify an understanding of the primary doctrines we accept* (italics added).³

“So why weren’t these words included in the teachings we received from our spiritual parents?,” asked one African leader. My thoughts immediately raced back to my years in Latin America. I didn’t remember seeing those words in the Statements of Faith adopted years ago by Argentina, Brazil, or Mexico, either. “I’m sure there wasn’t a conscious choice to deceive anyone,” I replied. “I can only assume that our spiritual parents focused on teaching good doctrine, and may not have understood how important these opening words would become for our global movement.”

In the present-past cultural orientation of central Africa, faithfulness is often measured in terms of fidelity to what our spiritual parents taught us. This stands in stark contrast to the future orientation of most North Americans. In our culture, *new* is often considered *better*, and we can be quick to discard the *old* for something *novel*. Yet we find strong echoes of the African worldview in the Apostle Paul’s challenge to Timothy:

*Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.*⁴

But what if our spiritual parents actually expected us to keep studying and keep improving our Statement of Faith? The spirit that launched and labeled us as “the progressives” in 1886 included a dual commitment to understanding God’s never-changing Word *and* applying it in meaningful ways to God’s ever-changing world. Have we worked hard enough at implanting that conviction as our movement became global? And are there good reasons why we’ve waited almost fifty years before reengaging in what they called “*a never-ending effort to clarify an understanding of the primary doctrines we accept?*”

A Brief History of Our Statement(s) of Faith

Recent historians of the Grace Brethren Church left us with helpful explanations of the process through which a traditionally non-creedal movement came to embrace the need for a summary statement of our core beliefs.⁵ But since most of us may not take the time to reread those books, allow me to refresh our memories with a summary of our history:

No Printed Confession!

³ Only sections pertinent to this article are cited here. For the complete version of the Preamble of our Statement of Faith, go to fgbc.org/about/statementoffaith

⁴ 2 Timothy 1:13-14 ESV

⁵ See Plaster, David, *Finding Our Focus*, Winona Lake: BMH Books, 2003 and Scoles, Todd, *Restoring the Household: The Quest of the Grace Brethren Church*, Winona Lake: BMH Books, 2008. Both books are available at bmhbooks.com.

A fascinating exchange between Benjamin Franklin and Michael Welfare, a member of the Ephrata Community, captures the attitude of the early Brethren toward written summaries of our beliefs. Franklin struggled to understand why the early Brethren were reticent to publish a statement of faith, and invited Welfare to address the issue. Welfare replied,

When we were first drawn together as a society... it had pleased God to enlighten our minds so far as to see that some doctrines, which we once esteemed truths were errors; and that others, which we had esteemed errors, were real truths. From time to time He has been pleased to afford us farther light, and our principles have been improving, and our errors diminishing. Now we are not sure that we are arrived at the end of this progression, and at the perfection of spiritual or theological knowledge; and we fear that, if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves bound and confin'd by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther improvement, and our successors still more so, as conceiving what we their elders and founders had done, to be something sacred, never to be departed from.⁶

The New Testament As Our Creed

In 1883, when the *Progressive Brethren* broke away and created a new fraternity of churches, they also studiously avoided any formal doctrinal statements. Dave Plaster describes this defining moment of our history as follows: “When a very simple statement was proposed at the beginning, someone moved the New Testament as the substitute motion for the statement of faith, and they voted by unanimously singing the doxology together!” Once again, our forefathers affirmed our commitment to Scripture, as well as our reticence to express our beliefs in any form that might become a creed.

By 1892, however, our leaders were willing to recognize the need for a short document that clarified what made us different from other groups that also followed the New Testament. It was assumed that our churches believed the major doctrines held by other evangelicals, so they weren’t included in the resolution. Instead, the delegates approved a short list of statements that outlined what they called “divine ordinances.” These included baptism by trine immersion, feetwashing, the Lord’s Supper as a full evening meal, the bread and cup, and the holy kiss. Another clause reaffirmed our commitment to a “truly congregational” form of government.⁷

⁶ Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. (Dover Publications: Mineola, N.Y., 1996), 91, cited by Todd Scoles in *Restoring the Household*, p 173.

⁷ Plaster, p 80-81

THE MESSAGE OF THE BRETHREN MINISTRY
National Ministerial Association of The Brethren Church
(1921)

The world was changing rapidly, and the *Progressive Brethren* were committed to engage that world. Some of us migrated to big cities. Others read widely, traveled broadly, and even pursued higher education. Simultaneously, we began to increase our contact with evangelicals whose beliefs differed from ours. Of great concern to our spiritual fathers was the growing influence of *liberalism* in the American church, and the possibility that some of our leaders would be led astray by its errors.

In 1921, the *National Ministerial Association* adopted *The Message of the Brethren Ministry*⁸ as a summary of the essential beliefs for members of that organization. For the first time in our history, leaders agreed upon a short summary of what they considered the essential beliefs of our movement. It would be used to help determine which leaders were qualified to lead our churches. *The Message* is a good document, and I hope you will take time to read it. It was officially adopted by our National Conference in 1938, and guided us until our current Statement of Faith replaced it in 1969.

THE STATEMENT OF FAITH
Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches
(1969)

Dr. Russell D. Barnard served as the first full-time director of *The Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church* (now *Encompass World Partners*) from 1946 until his retirement in 1966. The following year, he was asked to chair a committee responsible to create a more robust expression of our doctrines. While most evangelicals would have little difficulty in embracing most of *The Message of the Brethren Ministry*, the new *Statement of Faith* went much farther in incorporating position statements that had come to define our beliefs over the intervening decades. In other words, while the new *Statement of Faith* was an accurate summary of *what we had come to believe*, it would be inaccurate to conclude it was a faithful reflection of *what we had always believed*.⁹ As Welfare observed to Franklin many years before, we are a movement committed to *continuing to grow* in our understanding of God's truth. The *Statement of Faith* was adopted in 1969 with only a few dissenting votes.¹⁰

⁸ A copy of *The Message of the Brethren Ministry* can be accessed at graceconnect.us/the-message-of-the-brethren-ministry/

⁹ Scoles observes, "Most likely, none of the six major branches [of the Brethren movement] would be immediately recognizable to Alexander Mack.", see p. 228.

¹⁰ See current *Statement of Faith* can be accessed at graceconnect.us/statement-of-faith/

Where do we go from here?

Forty-five years have passed since our spiritual fathers adopted our current *Statement of Faith*. For our movement in North America, this was a period where many of us continued to learn, to grow, and to engage the broader evangelical community. Yet we have remained faithful to our DNA, planted deeply by our spiritual fathers, that “the Holy Scriptures [are] the sole guide and authority in all matters of faith, doctrine, and practice.”

At the same time, we acknowledge that these past 45 years have marked us in some very painful ways. Many reading this article are still carrying scars from the three significant doctrinal disputes summarized in Scoles’ chapter, *Testing Autonomy*. I’ve survived two of them, and I doubt there is a person among us who would say to his or her grandchildren, “As a fraternity of churches and leaders, we’re pleased with how we conducted ourselves, and urge you to imitate us.”

So let’s admit that many of us feel more than a slight twinge of fear when we think about engaging once again in discussions about what we believe. Yet while the *worst* of our history might have surfaced in these disputes, is it possible that the *best* of our movement can be found there as well? With each debate, we came to the edge of a precipice, looked over into the abyss, and decided to move back to our historic commitment to the Scriptures above all else. More than any other distinguishing characteristic, I believe this is the genius of our spiritual forefathers - to submit to God’s Word while exploring fresh ways of applying it to God’s world.

But something else has happened during the past forty-five years. *We became global movement of churches!* Current statistics reveal that more than 90 percent of Grace Brethren Churches and perhaps 95 percent of worship attendances are located outside of North America. And as I travel the world, I meet new Christ-followers worshipping alongside folks who consider themselves third, fourth, and even fifth-generation Grace Brethren!

We know that our spiritual parents expected us to keep studying and keep improving our understanding of God’s Word. We must also believe that they intended this commitment to be equally shared among *all* of their spiritual descendants. So the first time in our 300-year history, we are creating the opportunity for the *global* Grace Brethren family to join the process! Other articles in this magazine will explain this process in greater detail.

We began this article in a tension-filled room in the heart of Africa, where eight key African leaders were wrestling with feelings of being marginalized from one of the most important characteristics of our movement. I’m pleased to report that the tension soon dissipated as we explained the inclusive process of *The Identity Initiative*, and the goal of creating a *Charis Commitment to Common Identity*.

How about you? Are you ready to join in regional and global dialogues destined to help write the next chapter in our ongoing quest to submit to God’s Word while engaging God’s world?

1,033 words

Truth That Builds Bridges

One of the most innovative and potentially helpful paradigms developed by the *Charis International Steering Committee* centers around the concept of 'truth expressed in relationship on mission.' While truth is frequently employed to build walls and emphasize differences, truth can also be employed to extend bridges and celebrate what we share in common. *The Identity Initiative* is creating a path forward where our doctrinal convictions will be expressed in ways that demonstrate unity within the context of a fractured and broken world.

Let's begin on the broadest possible level, asking the most significant question of all time: *What will you do with Jesus Christ?* We believe the answer to *that* question will divide humanity for all of eternity. In the increasingly hostile environment in which many Christ-followers live, *this is* the defining question, and our answer is what distinguishes us from the Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Secular and Animist worlds.

In the globalized context of the Grace Brethren movement today, we propose that the most important affirmation we must make is a statement about our loyalty and submission to the Jesus Christ as revealed in the Bible. And our answer to this question serves as a constant reminder that Christ *already established bridges* between us and anyone else who calls Him Lord and Savior.

The goal of the first Truth Cluster is to affirm to all persons everywhere our loyalty and submission to Jesus Christ.

On another level, we face a second set of significant questions. Where do we place ourselves with respect to historic orthodoxy and the global evangelical movement? Certainly no one among us believes that God's plan for this age began in 1708, when our forefather Alexander Mack and seven others committed to start a church that would be faithful to the New Testament. And we accept the fact that most of the theology our spiritual ancestors *taught* was a theology they *received*. For the previous 17 centuries, many godly men and women had developed, tested, and propagated the basic tenets of our common faith. These include doctrines like the Trinity, the Virgin Birth of Christ, Substitutionary Atonement, the authority of Scripture, and many more.

Today we believe that the best of orthodox Christianity can be found within the global evangelical movement. This is not to say that other branches of Christianity are void of truth. And it is not to say that we are comfortable with everything we see in global evangelicalism. Instead, it is an affirmation that, out of multiple streams that trace their source back to the New Testament, we identify most with those who share the label of Evangelical Christian.

The goal of the Second Truth Cluster, the *Evangelical Core*, is to demonstrate to ourselves and others that we trace our roots back to the New Testament through the stream of historic Christian orthodoxy, and we share many of our most important convictions with the global evangelical movement.

On another level, we belong to a global spiritual tribe that traces its spiritual heritage back more than 300 years to a place in time. From those humble beginnings, and through moments of exciting growth and painful separations, we emerged as a fraternity of churches that share a common commitment to *Biblical truth, Biblical relationships, and Biblical mission*. We are not the only tribe in God's great family. We certainly don't claim to be the biggest, the wisest, or the best resourced. But we share common roots, we actually like each other (most days!) and we are proving that together we can accomplish far more than anyone could dream of doing on his or her own.

Think for a moment about your own family. Much of your DNA is the same as everyone else on planet earth. Yet there are strands of your DNA that make it clear you belong to one of the broad racial divisions that inhabit our world today: Hispanic, Caucasian, Asia, Native American, etc. And yet there are a few strands that would lead any researcher directly back to your immediate and extended family.

While the First Truth Cluster recognizes that Christ placed us in his global Body, and the Second Truth Cluster reminds us that we are a product of historic orthodox Christianity and member of the global evangelical movement, the Third Truth Cluster is far more personal. **The goal of the *Charis Core* is to identify those characteristics that unite us as the global Grace Brethren movement. It seeks to answer the question, "What are those unique commitments to truth, relationship and mission that we consider the distinguishing marks of our family?"**

Beginning in 2015, we will encourage the development of *Fourth Truth Clusters*, where each regional fraternity of Grace Brethren Churches will be encouraged to work out expressions of biblical truth in relationship to their surrounding culture. Examples might include truth statements about *initiation rights* in Africa, *ancestor veneration* in Asia, *the role of the church as an advocate for the poor* in Latin America, or *a biblical position on immigration* in North America.

These Fourth Truth Clusters recognize that our churches in different regions face different issues in their quest to speak God's truth into the burning social issues of the day. In this model, space is created for churches from one global region to respect the right of churches in other regions by not requiring agreement on these matters.

Through the paradigm of Truth Clusters, the *Charis International Steering Committee* is providing tracks for us to develop fresh expressions of our core identity and doctrines. But before turning the page to see their proposals, why not attempt the following exercise?

Take a blank sheet of paper, and write the following:

1. What does our movement most need to say that would demonstrate to the world that we are loyal followers of Jesus Christ?
2. What core doctrines does our movement hold in common with historic orthodoxy and the global evangelical movement?
3. What are those family characteristics in the areas of truth, relationship and mission that mark us a part of the Grace Brethren movement?
4. What are some of the burning social issues we face in our part of the world into which we need to speak God's truth?

Truth Clusters One and Two of The Charis Commitment to Common Identity

THE CENTER

We declare that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God¹¹, as revealed in the Bible, the written Word of God¹², is the only Savior and Lord¹³.

This reality, the Word of God both incarnate and written, forms the center of our shared experience of true biblical unity. Therefore, we identify with all who share this common center in Jesus Christ and the Bible.

THE EVANGELICAL CORE

We, believers in The Lord Jesus Christ associating as the movement of Charis International, have historically shared our commitment to these core truths of the Bible with other genuine believers in Jesus.

We seek to understand the Bible according to its own intent, as it was written, therefore we acknowledge that this declaration does not claim to have any particular authority distinct from the Holy Scriptures, which remain the unique and ultimate reference.

We therefore declare our commitment to these core biblical truths:

1. **The One True God** - There is one, and only one, true God¹⁴, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob¹⁵. He is the Creator and Lord of all that is¹⁶, existing eternally in three persons, never less and never more - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit¹⁷.
2. **The Lord Jesus Christ** - Jesus Christ is God Himself, existing from eternity¹⁸. Everything was created by Him and for Him¹⁹. His incarnation took place in the womb of a virgin²⁰. He is fully human, and experienced humanity²¹, but never sinned²². He died a substitutionary death to atone for sin²³, resurrected bodily²⁴, and ascended into heaven²⁵ where He is presently ministering²⁶ until He will come again²⁷.

¹¹ John 1:1,14

¹² Matthew 5:17-18, Second Timothy 3:16, Second Peter 1:20-21, Psalm 19:7-11

¹³ John 14:6, Acts 4:12, First Corinthians 12:3, Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:9-11

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4, Isaiah 43:10, First Corinthians 8:4-6, First Timothy 2:5

¹⁵ Matthew 22:32, Acts 3:13

¹⁶ Genesis 1:1, Psalm 146:6, John 1:3, Colossians 1:16-17

¹⁷ Matthew 28:19, Luke 3:22, Second Corinthians 13:14

¹⁸ John 1:1-3, John 8:58, Titus 2:13

¹⁹ Romans 11:36, Colossians 1:16

²⁰ John 1:14, Matthew 1:18-23, Luke 1:29-35

²¹ Luke 2:52, John 19:28, Philippians 2:6-8

²² Hebrews 4:15, First Peter 2:22

²³ Romans 5:8, Second Corinthians 5:21, First Peter 2:24-25

²⁴ Luke 24:36-43, Romans 1:4, First Corinthians 15:3-8

3. **The Holy Spirit** - The Holy Spirit is fully God²⁸ and as such is personal²⁹. He was involved in Creation³⁰ and the inspiration of Scripture³¹. His works of convicting³² and regenerating³³ are essential to the believers salvation. Believers are entitled to the benefit and joy of being filled³⁴ and walking in the Spirit³⁵ for empowerment in Christian life, service, and mission³⁶.
4. **The Bible** - The sixty-six books, and only these, known as the Old and New Testaments, are the written Word of God³⁷. God's inspiration and superintendence of the writing of every word of the Bible³⁸ guarantees that what was written is His Word and therefore authoritative, true, and without error³⁹. God's Word is powerful and effective to accomplish His purpose of salvation among all nations⁴⁰. God's Spirit illumines the minds of believers in every culture to understand, apply, and disclose the unchanging truth of Scripture in fresh and relevant ways for the benefit of the whole Body of Christ⁴¹.
5. **Humanity** - God created the universe and all that is, including man and woman in His Own image⁴², therefore all people are bearers of that image⁴³. However, Adam's subsequent sin resulted in a condition of spiritual death⁴⁴ which all people since Adam have experienced⁴⁵, marring the beauty of God's image in them in every facet of life. This condition of spiritual death⁴⁶ has rendered all people unable to save themselves⁴⁷, therefore the new birth is a necessity for salvation⁴⁸.
6. **Salvation** - The salvation brought by God is a complete and eternal salvation by His grace alone, received as the free gift of God through personal faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work⁴⁹.

²⁵ Acts 1:9, Hebrews 4:14

²⁶ Ephesians 1:19-23, Hebrews 4:15-16

²⁷ Acts 1:11

²⁸ Acts 5:3-4

²⁹ John 16:7-15

³⁰ Genesis 1:2

³¹ Second Peter 1:21

³² John 16:8-11

³³ Titus 3:5

³⁴ Ephesians 5:18

³⁵ Galatians 5:16

³⁶ Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 3:16-21, Acts 1:8

³⁷ Luke 24:25-27, First Peter 1:23-25, Psalm 119:89,160

³⁸ Second Timothy 3:16, Second Peter 1:20-21

³⁹ Psalm 19:7-11

⁴⁰ Romans 1:16, 10:8-17, 16:25-27

⁴¹ First Corinthians 2:9-16, Ephesians 1:17-23

⁴² Genesis 1:26-28

⁴³ James 3:9

⁴⁴ Genesis 3:1-24

⁴⁵ Romans 5:12,19

⁴⁶ Romans 6:23, Ephesians 2:1-3

⁴⁷ Romans 8:6-8

⁴⁸ John 1:12, 3:3-5

⁴⁹ Ephesians 2:4-9, Titus 3:5-7, First Peter 1:18-21, Hebrews 9:12, 10:14

7. **Church** - There exists one true church, which is called the Household of God⁵⁰, the Body of Christ⁵¹, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit⁵². It is comprised of all true disciples of Jesus Christ, and is created by the action of the Holy Spirit⁵³. Tangible expressions of this true Church are found in local churches⁵⁴.
8. **Christian Life** - While the believer is justified by faith alone⁵⁵, the faith that justifies is expected to result in the evidence of obedience⁵⁶ and good works⁵⁷ which are the products of the indwelling Holy Spirit⁵⁸. The dimensions of biblical ethics are both individual and social, and extend to every facet of life⁵⁹. God faithfully continues to finish the work of sanctification which He has begun in the life of each believer⁶⁰ with the goal of Christ-likeness⁶¹.
9. **Angels, Satan, Demons** - God created a multitude of spiritual beings called "angels"⁶². Righteous angels continue to serve God and work both in the heavenly sphere and on earth⁶³. By his disobedience, Satan, a fallen angel, became the adversary of God and God's people⁶⁴, carrying with him a procession of demons⁶⁵. Jesus Christ has overcome Satan⁶⁶ so that the final judgment and doom of Satan and demons is certain⁶⁷.
10. **Future Life** - The dead will have a conscious existence in eternity⁶⁸ and their bodies will be resurrected⁶⁹. Unbelievers, already under condemnation, will be sentenced and suffer eternal punishment in the Lake of Fire⁷⁰. Believers, already having been granted eternal life⁷¹, will be judged and rewarded according to their works⁷², and experience glorified bliss forever in the presence of the Lord⁷³.

⁵⁰ First Peter 4:17, Ephesians 2:19-20, First Timothy 3:14-15

⁵¹ First Corinthians 12:27, Ephesians 1:22-23

⁵² First Corinthians 3:16, Ephesians 1:21-2

⁵³ First Corinthians 12:13

⁵⁴ Hebrews 10:25, Galatians 1:2, Romans 16:4-5, Revelation 2:1,8,12,18; 3:1,7,14

⁵⁵ Romans 4:5

⁵⁶ Romans 1:5

⁵⁷ James 2:14-17, Titus 3:8

⁵⁸ Galatians 5:22-23

⁵⁹ Matthew 22:37-40, Colossians 3:17

⁶⁰ Philippians 1:6, 2:12-13

⁶¹ Romans 8:29, Second Corinthians 3:18

⁶² Daniel 7:10, Hebrews 12:22

⁶³ Hebrews 1:14, Ephesians 1:21; 3:10

⁶⁴ First Peter 5:8-9, Revelation 12:1-10

⁶⁵ Revelation 12:1-10, Ephesians 6:12

⁶⁶ First John 3:8

⁶⁷ John 12:31, Romans 16:20, Revelation 20:10

⁶⁸ Philippians 1:21-23, Luke 16:19-31

⁶⁹ John 5:28-29

⁷⁰ Matthew 25:46, Revelation 20:15

⁷¹ John 3:16, 6:47

⁷² Romans 14:10-12, First Corinthians 3:10-15, Second Corinthians 5:10

⁷³ First Thessalonians 4:17, Revelation 21:3-5, Psalm 16:11

1072 words

The Path Forward

It was 1993 and a group of mission leaders were gathered to wrestle with some of the big issues facing our global movement. Thanks to the God's blessing and the sacrificial work of many faithful men and women, new fellowships of Grace Brethren churches had been planted around the world. Quality leaders were emerging, and we knew that the role of *Grace Brethren International Missions* needed to change.

Out of those strategic meetings was birthed a commitment to creating meaningful ways for Grace Brethren churches and leaders to connect with one another. The first significant step forward took place the following year, when representatives of our churches from around the world met at the Chateau de St. Albain in France. It was an historic moment for many reasons. Perhaps the most significant was our mutual commitment to abandon the idea that the North American church was the parent, and to affirm the equality of all of our churches by inviting them to join us as 'equals at the round table.'

While space limitations prevent us from retelling the fascinating journey of *Charis International* since its inception in 1994, we can celebrate the reality that we succeeded in creating viable ways for us to communicate, to cooperate and to encourage one another as a global movement of churches. Subsequent global and regional gatherings built upon those commitments and led to multiple cooperative ministry efforts. Most importantly, the *2008 Charis International Leadership Encounter*, held simultaneously with the 300th anniversary of our movement, created a set of common ministry goals that unite us.⁷⁴

At the same event, delegates representing our churches around the world unanimously agreed to charge the *Charis Steering Committee* with the responsibility to continue leading our movement. Current members represent the five continents where we have churches, and most have held key positions in leading Charis in the past. Over the past few years, we have labored together to chart out a preferred path forward for the global Grace Brethren Church.

The Identity Initiative

Building upon the success of creating the *Charis Commitment to Common Mission*, we are now turning our attention to creating a *Charis Commitment to Common Identity*.

Background and details concerning the *why* and *who* for this initiative are found in other articles in this magazine. We now turn our attention to the *what, where, when and how*.

The *Charis Steering Committee* began by creating a goal: by October, 2015, delegates from around the Grace Brethren world will be fully prepared to engage in a dialogue resulting the adoption of a *Charis Commitment to Common Identity*. Working backwards, we carefully identified the steps it would take to achieve this noble goal. We understood that the *process*

⁷⁴ To read *The Charis Commitment to Common Mission*, follow this link: bit.ly/1oxylzU.

might be as important as the *product*. In other words, the *how* might be as important as the *what*. In contrast to the ways our movement engaged theological questions in the past, we committed to creating pathways for healthy dialogue, appropriate debate, and resolutions that would be meaningful to our global family of churches.

Taking a cue from the excellent work done by Grace Brethren churches in France, we developed the concept of *Truth Clusters* (see page ???????). Then we appointed a Task Force, representing Africa, Asia, Latin America, and North America, and charged them with creating the first two Clusters. After all, we reasoned, our affirmations about Jesus Christ and historic orthodox doctrines are not on the table for debate. In these two areas, the question is not *what do we believe*, but rather, *what is the best way to summarize what we believe*. Using current Grace Brethren statements of faith and other globally recognized summaries of evangelical doctrine, the Task Force created the *First and Second Truth Clusters*. While we recognize these documents can always be improved, we agreed to focus our attentions elsewhere.

We concluded that the priority task before us was the creation of a globally acceptable Third, or *Charis Truth Cluster*. To succeed, we determined to create an orderly way in which the greatest number of Grace Brethren ‘voices’ would be invited to the table. Here is a summary of the process:

Cycle One	Sept 2013 – April 2014	Regional Task Forces	Task Force answers the question, “What are the distinguishing marks of the Grace Brethren movement?”
Round Table One	July 2014	International Task Force	Data gathered from Regional Task Forces is used to create a single <i>Charis Truth Cluster</i>
Cycle Two	Sept 2014 – April 2015	Regional Leadership Discussions (held within each country)	The <i>Charis Truth Cluster</i> is discussed, debated and suggestions for improvement are gathered
Round Table Two	July 2015	International Task Force	Data gathered from Regional Leadership Discussions is used to create a final proposal for the <i>Charis Truth Cluster</i>
Charis International	October 2015	Delegates representing National Conferences	The <i>Charis Truth Cluster</i> is debated and finalized
National Conferences	As soon as possible		National Conferences of Grace Brethren Churches are encouraged to endorse the three Truth Clusters

Recently I was asked if I was worried someone might ‘hijack’ this process in favor of promoting a personal agenda. I smiled to myself, thought about the many checks and balances incorporated into this process, and replied that it was extremely unlikely. After all,

there is no single person, committee, or even national conference that controls the agenda. As you can see, this is an inclusive and international process that invites observation and scrutiny on every level. We believe that trust will flow in every direction due to the high levels of transparency and inclusion outlined above.

On a personal note, it was in September 2010 that I began praying daily for God to lead us to renewed expressions of our core values and beliefs. As I looked across the global Grace Brethren movement, I sensed the time had arrived for us take concrete steps to reach in at least two directions: toward younger leaders and toward the many national leaders that God is raising up among us. These same stirrings were happening in the hearts of other leaders, and they are reflected in the direction in which the *Charis Steering Committee* is leading us.

Now it is time to broaden that circle. Will you join us in regular prayer as we move steadily toward an historic encounter in October 2015? Will you pray regularly and participate helpfully in the creation of the *Charis Commitment to Common Identity*?