

BLUE RIDGE FELLOWSHIP MINISTERIUM

of the

Fellowship of Grace Brethren Churches

Officers

Zach Doppelt, President *Dan Gillette, Secretary*
Steve Mitchell, Vice President *Don Eshelman, Treasurer*

Members

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Christian Becker</i> | <i>Ralph Miller</i> | <i>Kevin S. Smith</i> |
| <i>James Burke</i> | <i>Ralph Molyneux</i> | <i>Louis Urban</i> |
| <i>Paul Fink</i> | <i>Daniel Pierce</i> | <i>Doug Witt</i> |
| <i>Roy Glass III</i> | <i>Paul Sink</i> | <i>Danny F. Wright</i> |
| <i>Lester Kennedy</i> | <i>James Smals</i> | <i>C. L. Young</i> |

Date: June 29, 2011

To: The Fellowship Council of the National Fellowship of the Grace Brethren Churches

Dear brothers,

We the undersigned represent the churches of the Blue Ridge FGBC. As fellow pastors, we trust that you will recognize and appreciate our letter as an outpouring from the hearts of shepherds, heavy with care and love for the flocks entrusted to us. The occasion of our writing is a collective concern over significant ministry issues in the Fellowship at the national level. Sincerely motivated by biblical discernment, our aim is the preservation of our Fellowship – for we know that sound doctrine is a fundamental necessity for biblical unity. Because the introduction of unbiblical beliefs and practices causes schism, we join our voices in opposition to three specific threats to our precious unity, as follows.

OUR CONCERNS

1. Mysticism. We are grieved to observe FGBC leaders spreading or endorsing mystical beliefs and practices which are dangerous counterfeits for biblical spirituality. By “mystical,” we mean the centralization of the subjective self in hermeneutics/epistemology (knowing), religious experience (feeling), and theology/metaphysics (being), with a consequent blurring of divinity and humanity. From the undermining of objectivity follows mysticism’s infamous devaluation of propositional truth. These spiritual trends and their postmodern and “emergent/emerging church” sources are gaining acceptance in the FGBC under overlapping categories such as:

- “*Contemplative spirituality*” or “*contemplative meditation*” – a misnomer in which meditation is no longer cognitive contemplation of biblical truths, but is redefined (along the lines of eastern philosophy) as an emptying of the mind or detachment from the objective world and its

limitations. Toward this end, some Contemplative teachers advocate rhythmic breathing techniques and even altered states of consciousness. A pervasive emphasis is on entering The Silence, a supposed advance beyond logic and propositional truth. To find biblical warrant for “noncognitive” spirituality, appeal is typically made to Psalm 46: “Be still, and know that I am God.” However this ignores the passage’s context – God’s rebuke of those who strive against His sovereignty – which provides no justification for entering The Silence. Another popular contemplative practice, *lectio divina*, revives ancient monastic techniques for “experiencing” Scripture versus analyzing it. But this dichotomy is false and unhealthy.

- “*Spiritual formation*” – a broad movement effectively displacing (protestant) discipleship with techniques and rituals drawn from various catholic, monastic, quietist, and other mystical sources. While the origin of an idea or practice may not, by itself, determine its validity, the doctrinal fruit from those sources is disconcerting. Historically, the goal of mysticism has been “the soul’s rest in God,” rather than biblical holiness – being conformed to the image of Christ. Ironically, spiritual formation cannot form Christ in us, to the extent that it is disconnected from sanctification. A recurrent motif in spiritual formation is the discovery and embrace of the “true self,” which by mystical union with God is practically pure and divine itself. As a result, the soul or inner self becomes the source of authority. The theological implications of this approach are monstrous and, we believe, ultimately incompatible with the FGBC Statement of Faith. What good is it to affirm verbal plenary inspiration of Scripture if we are simultaneously upstaging it with the pursuit of supposedly superior mystical experiences?

Beliefs and practices belonging to mystical/emerging/postmodern perspectives are increasing among national leaders of some cooperating organizations within the Fellowship.

2. Egalitarianism. We are deeply concerned by a move within the Fellowship to extend women’s ministry to eldership or pastoral roles, whether by function or office, contrary to the plain New Testament teachings restricting these ministries exclusively to men.

We believe the cultural pressures at work against traditional gender understandings, in concert with varying shades of feminist theology and philosophy, are the real driving forces behind this new direction in women’s ministry. The fanciful way in which prohibitive or restrictive biblical texts are handled by some change-agents demonstrates a hermeneutic approach that is more committed to the weight of subjective experience than to the value of propositional truth. (An overlap with mystic/emerging/postmodern influence is likely here.) Indeed, the foundation of Sola Scriptura seems to be left in question among some such leaders. For this reason, our concern ought not be neglected as a periphery or debatable issue; this is essentially tied to the fundamentals of our faith.

Examples of this weakening commitment to the biblical standard of male pastor/eldership are evident in some national organizations within the Fellowship.

3. Lack of discernment and accountability. Several individuals among us have attempted to address these issues privately with different leaders (GBIM, CENational, Women of Grace USA,

Grace College/Seminary, Moderator), some of whom have been more open to dialogue than others. Unfortunately, satisfactory solutions have not been achieved. In the worst cases, leaders displayed an attitude of unwillingness to consider discernment, and even censored a blog which expressed critical thinking. Consequently, we are left with unsettling questions, such as: Which of our national leaders can we count on to display a sense of responsibility for what is happening around them? How, exactly, are the leaders of national organizations held accountable? To whom do they answer, and to what extent are their answers made public?

We are well aware, and exceedingly glad, that the FGBC is not hierarchical; thus we do not expect the Council to issue edicts upon these organizations. However, it seems to us that every District, if it is to be a “cooperating” organization with the national Fellowship, deserves authentic cooperation from the national organizations. More transparency is a pressing need.

We intend no personal attack, and are not calling into question the personal integrity of any individual involved. But we cannot ignore the destructive effect that merely subjective, experiential spirituality has on the church. Therefore we repeat this warning against mystical, emerging, postmodern teachings which undermine the biblical concepts of discipleship and sanctification, diminish the authority of Scripture, and weaken commitment to exclusively male eldership/pastoral ministry.

OUR CALL

1. Affirmation: we call on the Council to give us a clear and timely acknowledgement that each of our three concerns are, *at least in principal*, valid. Even if you are unconvinced that these teachings and practices are occurring at high levels in the FGBC, or that confrontations have been handled properly, we nevertheless look to you to affirm your own position on the issues themselves. As an antidote to the FGBC’s lack of transparency, will the Council lead the way by modeling open dialogue with us?

2. Accountability: we call on the Council to confront the question, “Where can a concerned inquirer go for straight answers or at least authentic dialogue in the FGBC?” We ask for open communication and public accountability at every cooperating organization in the FGBC. To this end, we are looking to the Council, as our co-laborers in the Gospel, to create a variety of forums for our concerns. Will you lead the way in deepening accountability, widening accessibility among our cooperating organizations, and assuring that voices are heard?

We request the courtesy of an *acknowledgment* of our letter by July 25, and a *substantial reply* to our letter by August 25, both to the attention of Dan Gillette, Secretary (dljjjj@juno.com).

Prayerfully, in the bond of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Kevin S. Smith (on behalf of the Ministerium membership)