

Introduction to the Brethren #1
Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:26
WRCoB 8.8.21

This week begins a sermon series on the church
We simply call The Church of the Brethren.

The outline for the series is based on the Brethren's tagline

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1. Continuing the work of Jesus
2. Peacefully
3. Simply
4. Together.

The sermon series will segue into a 13 week
Sunday school class on the new Compelling Vision
Passed at Annual Conference in July.

First, let's just say a little this about vision statements

What are they and why should we have one?

Here is my favorite definition from Google search.

2

A vision statement is: *"a succinct, realistic, credible, easy-to-understand, relevant, and ambitious description of the niche the organization wants to occupy in the future."*

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According to this definition then

A vision statement describes a niche
An organization hopes to fill.

That being the case, what niche do Brethren hope to fill?

For we are one of 45,000 denominations in the world
And a rather small one at that
With just under 100,000 members.

What is it about the Brethren that we want to promote?
What should people know about the COB?

Are we uniquely different from other denominations?

And if so, how?

And most importantly, as Brethren
How do we self-identify as followers of Jesus?

These are questions that a Vision Statement answers.

And so, in preparation for our forthcoming SS class
We briefly look at this peculiar people called Brethren.

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The Church of the Brethren was born out of
An illegally-conducted Bible study.

During the late 1600s

The “Thirty-Years War” laid waste to the region
Known then as the Palatinate, present day Germany.

Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed churches
Killed one another over power and territory.

As each church’s army claimed victory over a region
Its inhabitants were forced to become part of that church.

They were forced to confess the church's creed
And forced to pay into the church's coffers.

Not doing so was punishable by death.

The churches were rich, powerful and corrupt.

Churches no longer submitted to God.
Scripture was no longer the voice of authority.
Jesus no longer the Prince of Peace.

It was in this context
Alexander Mack and others gathered for Bible study.

There flamed within their hearts
A desire to return to a simple faith
In complete obedience to Jesus Christ.

They desired to recreate a church that exemplified
God's original intentions.

And they looked to Jesus, and Jesus alone
To be their guide for faith and practice.

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And so, in 1708, ignoring the law of the land
Eight men and women baptized
One another in the Eder River.

They chose to do so
Because, according to Wayne Zunkel
In his book, "To Follow in Jesus' Steps"

They "had a burning desire to take Jesus very seriously."

3 *To believe that Jesus was their Lord and Savior as Scripture presents him, to do what Jesus asked, to go where Jesus [sent] them, and to live, in accordance with his teaching, the kind of life he shared (p. 4).*

In their study, the Brethren discerned
That the church's highest authority
Was not the priest, nor the pastor
Not the church board
Nor the church's creeds.

The church's highest authority was Jesus!

And so, Brethren center their faith on Jesus and Jesus alone

He is Lord!

He is Savior!

4

From Zunkel—Since the Brethren believe that Jesus is both Lord and Savior we have a strong evangelical faith and strong social concern (p 10).

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As in the passage read today from Ephesians 2:8-10
Brethren believe that we are *saved by grace*

That this is not our own doing
But a precious gift from God.

We do not work to gain entrance into eternal life.
It is not the work we do that saves us
It is the work Jesus accomplished
That does the saving.

However, Brethren do believe we are saved
For something more than just the afterlife.
And that is spelled out in verse 10

5

Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV

**¹⁰ For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus
TO DO GOOD WORKS, which God prepared in advance
for us to do.**

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Does the world need a church that recognizes
Both the Lordship of Jesus
Believing salvation rests solely
On the way of Jesus
The truth of Jesus
And the life of Jesus?

AND a church that emphasizes service ministries
Recognizing Christ's call
To "love neighbor as ourselves?"

I, for one, believe that is a niche we must fill!

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Rev. Desmond Bittinger said it well
In a pamphlet written in the 1950s

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*The Brethren believe that Jesus came into the world to
reveal the Father and to demonstrate a manner of Christlike
living, that He came to save [human]kind, and to give
[people] an abundant life beginning here and lasting forever.
[Brethren] want to live as completely as possible the life He
demonstrated and taught. It is the Brethren purpose to make
Christ, His way of life, and His salvation known as widely as
they can throughout the world.*

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Consequently, through evangelism, through world service, through sharing, through living, and through patient, kindly teaching, the Brethren purpose to work at that until He comes again.

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This is the concept articulated in the first part of our tagline
Continuing the work of Jesus.

Make no mistake about it
The work of personal salvation
Rests on the marvelous grace of our Lord Jesus.

Thank God we do not have to work for our salvation.
For by grace we are saved.

But we are to continue the work Jesus started
By loving others as Jesus loved us
Sharing the good news of Jesus
In word and action.

The Book of James further explains this tension
Between what James calls faith and works.

8

James 2:14-17 NRSV

¹⁴ What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵ If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷ So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

Ron Arnett wrote an article in Messenger
Describing the Book of James
As especially beloved amongst the Brethren.

On the other hand, Martin Luther
The father of the Lutheran Church
Whose emphasis was on “saved by grace”
Called it an “epistle of straw.”

We live within the tension of faith and works.

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The Brethren do not confess a creed
But claim the whole New Testament
As their only creed.

We read the Old Testament
Through the lens of the New Testament.

And we read the New Testament
Through the lens of the Gospels.

And we hold the words of Jesus as our highest authority.

According to Brethren.org

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Jesus brought a message of life, love, and hope. But he offered much more than inspiring words: He understood that people’s spiritual needs also include day-to-day human ones — food, health, rest, comfort, friendship, and unconditional acceptance.

10

“I am the way,” he told his followers. He showed them how to trust, how to care, and how to help.

11

Steadily, lovingly, even radically, Jesus went about saving the world — by serving its people. Because we believe his message, we seek to do the same.

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When asked how will the Brethren be recognized
Alexander Mack, the leader of the early Brethren
Proposed they would be recognized
“by the manner of their living.”

In other words, faith, as understood by Brethren
Is more than a personal set of beliefs..

Jesus' lifestyle of self-giving love
Is the example Brethren seek to follow.

It permeates all aspects of our lives.

Brethren seek not only to believe in Jesus
But seek to follow Jesus.

Brethren seek to serve others, heal the broken
And bring hope to the despairing.

Brethren seek to love all people
Including those who are hard to love
And even seeking to love the “enemy.”

The Brethren's concept of *Continuing the work of Jesus*
Has prompted many successful programs
The best-known being Heifer Project.

Dan West's notion to send a heifer
To war-ravaged and impoverished places on earth
As a gift of love.

Brethren Disaster Ministries is another program
That conveys the Gospel in action.

My own experience of the love and care for all
That Brethren express

Is the Brethren Self-help Well Project in Nigeria
Started by the late Owen Shankster
That I worked with in the 90s.

The program helped dig wells
In Christian, Muslim and animist villages
Regardless of tribe or religion.

It impressed the villages deeply
To see the love and care
Christians had toward their neighbors.

12

("For the glory of God and my neighbors' good")

Is another so-called vision statement
A motto of the early Brethren leader
Christopher Sauer.

To do all things for God and for neighbor
Is what continuing the work of Jesus means.

This is God's call, to a world in need of God's love
As expressed in the community
We simply call Brethren. Amen.