

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

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Series: Core Values of the BIC

SERMON: "Experiencing God's Love and Grace"

(Acknowledgment to Pastor David Flowers for his sermon on this 1st Core Value, as well as contributions from Alan Robinson and Luke Keefer Jr.)

Yes, we're kicking off a new series where we will be looking at the **Core Values (Graphic)** of our denomination, the Brethren in Christ. You know, as we gather here there is at least one thing that we have in common, and that is we've all made a choice to assemble here for this worship service. And yet even with that in common, we still have our differences. For instance, in my life there are things that are important to me that aren't important to you, and vice-versa.

Some examples are frivolous...vacations for instance. When it's time for me to get away, I'm headed for the beach, and there are a lot of you headed in that same direction. But for some of you, the heat and the sand and the waves just have no appeal. For some of you, when you have a chance to get away, you're headed to the mountains in your camper. Where it's damp and musty with snakes lurking nearby. I don't get it...but I know it's important to some of you.

Some examples are not frivolous, such as how we raise our kids...what's some parents emphasize as important is not nearly as important to other moms and dads...and vice-versa.

And like it was said in the video, it's the same way when it comes to the church. We have these things called denominations, and I used to view denominations in a negative light, seeing them as a sign of division.

The truth is, denominations can be both good and bad. They can be divisive, with heated disagreements over who's right and who's wrong...who's in and who's out.

But they are not always a sign of division...sometimes its more a matter of emphasis. Just like people will believe that this is important and that is important, some denominations will believe that this is so important and it should be emphasized... while other denominations may consider it less important, choosing to emphasize other things.

Some denominations are highly liturgical while some are far less structured. Some denominations may place a lot of importance on missions, while others do not.

Sometimes, the point of emphasis may revolve around doctrine, the End Times for example. Just about all of us believe that that Jesus is coming again, it's just that there are different views of when and how that will happen, and to what degree these things should be emphasized.

In the end, I believe that eventually many people from many different denominations will be worshipping Jesus together around His throne.

In the meantime, with all this in mind...acknowledging that people *and* denominations will choose to emphasize different things as important, let's begin this sermon series by talking about...

1. WHO WE ARE

Who are the Brethren in Christ...and what is important to us?

As we get started on this series, I think it's really important that we take just a few minutes to talk about how the BIC came to identify and embrace these things that we hold near and dear, the things we'll be talking about over the next few weeks. So here's what I'm going to do...I'm going to cover 2000 years of history in about 5 minutes. Ready?

You and I, we are living in what is called “**The Church Age.**” It all began nearly 2000 years ago after Jesus ascended to heaven.

There were two distinct things that occurred during **the first 300 years** of the church’s existence. The first one was **intense persecution**. The Roman Emperors ordered the torture and persecution of thousands of Christ-followers. In spite of this, the second distinction for the church was **phenomenal growth**: many men and women committed to following Jesus...these tight-knit communities of disciples. And if you were a disciple, it wasn’t superficial, because the persecution was intense.

Something changed dramatically around the year 300 A.D. when the Roman Emperor Constantine claimed to have seen a vision of a cross with the words “In this sign, conquer.” He won the battle and ended up making Christianity the recognized religion of the Roman Empire and the persecution came to an end.

Great, right?

Well, not so fast. It’s been said that it was the worst thing that has ever happened to the church in its 2000 year history.

The persecution ended, but the life, the vitality of the early church began to lessen as this merger began to take place between the church and the Roman Empire. For instance, infants would be baptized and by doing so, would become a member of the church, even though they had no awareness of Jesus let alone the ability to choose to follow Him. On top of that, the infant – through baptism - would become a citizen of the state as well.

And so virtually everyone was baptized, and when it became assumed that everyone was a Christian, the emphasis on obedience and discipleship weakened.

By the 1500’s the church looked nothing like the early church, and discipleship was mostly lost.

However in 1517 a German monk named Martin Luther published 95 specific criticisms of the church, which led to what we now know as the Reformation. Reformation: Reform from what the existing church had become.

The Reformation brought about a split, a breakoff from the “state church”, but it was not a clean break, as the act of infant baptism continued.

There were groups that said, “Only a clean break from the “state church” will lead to the reform that is needed.” They became known as Radical Reformers, and a group called the Anabaptists were one of these groups.

We’re now at the point where the BIC can begin to identify our roots, found first in what we will call....

A. The Anabaptist Stream

The Anabaptists rejected this arrangement where you were born, baptized, and became part of the church, no less the state. They argued that infant baptism was not scriptural. And so they would baptize again (**Anabaptist = Baptized Again**), this time as believers who were fully aware of the decision they were making to follow Jesus.

In other words, they felt called to a “**Believer’s Church**” which would consist of men and women who were not brought into the church as infants unaware...but men and women who had made a choice to follow and obey Jesus. They also believed that Jesus’ clearest teaching – when it came to obedience – was found in His Sermon on the Mount. This is one reason why we here at FF are going through this sermon here in 2019.

Because of their call for radical reform, they experienced tremendous persecution, both from the state and incredibly, from the reformed church...and so a group of Anabaptist fled Europe and settled in Lancaster County a little over 300 years ago. As they settled, they also found themselves inspired and influenced by...

B. The Pietism Stream

At the heart of this was **an intimate and life changing relationship** that one could experience with the Living God. For the Anabaptist in Lancaster County, they looked around and saw Believers placing a lot of emphasis on knowledge, on the intellect, but not nearly as much emphasis on having the kind of relationship with Jesus where we would live it out.

For our forefathers, following Jesus was not just about affirming ideas, but actually experiencing Jesus, looking to Him to help us deal with the very issues He addressed in His Sermon on the Mount.. everyday issues such as anger, lust, integrity, forgiveness. So from the beginning, for what eventually became the **BIC**, there was this **emphasis placed on *How We Live***.

So we have these two streams, and eventually a 3rd one emerged, called...

C. The Wesleyan Stream

Our forefathers found themselves inspired and influenced by a man named John Wesley, who emphasized **the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing about life change**.

And so there was an emphasis placed on spiritual growth...the Holy Spirit helping the Christ-follower to recognize the deceit of sin, begin to resist temptation, and discover the freedom that is found in following Christ.

These 3 streams all merged together and eventually our forefathers took the name Brethren in Christ. And remained inspired and influenced by all three of these streams for quite a period of time.

Then, around 1950, about 70 years ago, a 4th stream emerged.

D. The Evangelical Stream

What comes to mind when you hear the word “Evangelical?” For several hundred years, to be Evangelical meant that you emphasized the four gospels to proclaim to others the good news about Jesus. This was not a strength for our denomination.

Up until the 1950's, the **BIC** had a history of separation from the world, and thus not having much impact on leading others to Jesus, and so this merger with evangelicalism was a good move for the **BIC**, was it not?

Well, yes and no. Because while the **BIC** felt it *very* important to begin engaging with the world in an effort to lead others to Jesus, the evangelical movement – in addition to sharing the good news about Jesus with others – also took on a more political nature.

And for many denominations this was not an issue for all. In fact many denominations have shown themselves eager to get involved in civil affairs.

But for the **BIC**, coming from a background where we hold dear a clear distinction between the role of the church – we have our role - and the role of the state – it has its role...suddenly there was this tension as the distinction was becoming increasingly blurred.

The **BIC** noticed how the media latched onto how political the church was becoming...how it portrayed the church voting a certain way, and over the past few decades using terms like “the moral majority” and “the religious right” to define the evangelical church. And some in the **BIC** began to question the wisdom of partnering with the state, asking, *“If we are willing to sacrifice our values in exchange for political gain...they never really were our values, were they? They were nothing more than talking points.”*

This is challenging and creating a bit of tension for us to work through...for the **BIC**, and all of the local churches such as Five Forks who make up the **BIC**. And do you know why this is so challenging for us?

The **BIC** and those other denominations who trace their roots back to “**the Radical Reformation**” – Anabaptism – we make up only a very small percentage of the pie, and small percentage of the mainstream church.

The Reformed Church – not the Radical Reformed – make up a great percentage of the church today. Most denominations today are Reformed, and are also very much intent on living Christ-like lives.

However, many of these denominations are embracing evangelicalism, believing that the church *should* partner with the state, and take an active role in civil affairs.

And so for those coming into the **BIC** and to Five Forks from other denominations, this conviction that the church has its role and the state has its role may be unsettling.

But I like how Pastor David Flowers put it. He said: ***“The BIC...our doors are wide open. We want to meet people where they are. At the same time, we want to let people know what is on the menu, what’s cooking in the kitchen. Because people appreciate that. They will say, ‘Let me know what you’re about, what you stand for, and believe in.’ Nobody likes everything on the menu, and that’s okay.”***

And so here’s who we are...here’s what’s on our menu:

We are a **Believer’s Church (Anabaptism)**, made up of men, women, youth and children who have made a conscious decision to follow Jesus.

We look to **experience Jesus through a personal and intimate relationship with Him (Pietism)**

We look for **spiritual growth to occur through the power of God’s Spirit (Wesley)** and...

We **share our story of how Jesus has saved us, changes us, and can change anyone who chooses to follow Him. (Evangelicalism).**

Many, many denominations emphasize some of these as well, using the same or different terms. It’s just that different denominations will emphasize these to different degrees.

And when you tie ours all together, I’d simply say this: As **BIC**, we have always placed a great deal of emphasis on **How We Live.**

I was talking to someone earlier this week, he said that there are “Believers” and there are “Disciples.” As **BIC**, we want to be Disciples who understand the importance of How We Live.

If this resonates with you, and I hope that it does, let's see where Jesus is taking us. But know this...we're not perfect...we are not *the* denomination. But we do have values and convictions.

And I think that in today's climate, the things we emphasize will be very appealing to those who are looking for a group of Christ-followers looking to rise above the scrum and truly follow Jesus without sacrificing our values.

And the first one, the first of five that we'll be looking at this month:

2. Experiencing God's Love and Grace

As BIC, actually **experiencing** God in a personal way has always been a part of our church's identity. It's a part of our emphasis. And while we experience God in different ways, there are none more important than experiencing the love and the grace of God.

Let's go to Ephesians chapter 2 where we read about both....

Ephesians 2:4-5 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.

Because of His great love for you, His great love for me...He graciously pulls us from the pit of death and makes us alive with Christ. And many of you get this...you know that He loves you...you understand the grace He has extended to you.

But you know what? Some of you are still trying to figure this all out. Because maybe you don't feel loved by God and maybe you don't understand this word grace.

So let's keep exploring. Later in this same passage....

Ephesians 2:8-10 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that now one can boast. For we

are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Let's talk about this word "grace." In our BIC hymnals we'll sing about God's Amazing Grace. We'll sing about God's marvelous, infinite, matchless grace...and grace is all that and more.

And yet for our forefathers, the Anabaptist...they knew what it was and they embraced it wholeheartedly...but didn't talk much about it. And we scratch our heads and say, "Why?"

Martin Luther and the Reformers played such a key role in opening the eyes of the church, causing the church to say, *"Wait a minute...we're saved not by doing this or that ritual...we're saved by putting our faith in Christ. We're saved by grace...by what Christ has done, not what we have done."*

And the Radical Reformers, including the Anabaptist agreed wholeheartedly...but as I said before, they felt that some of the reformers were stopping short.

They felt that the church was in danger of "resting on grace"...and thus would miss out on the many **experiences** that could be had with God. Experiences that lead to spiritual growth and impact The Way We Live.

And so they said, "Yes, we're saved by putting our faith in Christ, but let's not stop there...let's not rest there...look at the rest of that passage and let's not overlook the **"good works which God prepared in advance for us to do."** There's work to be done. In our hearts, in our lives and in the world around us.

Rather than "rest on grace", the Anabaptists talked of "receiving grace" which enables us to truly experience and live out this new life in Christ.

Back during WWII there was a German Pastor by the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who I believe coined the phrase, "Cheap Grace." He looked around and saw a church that appeared to be **resting on grace**. A church filled with men and women who at one point prayed, and asked Jesus to be their Savior... and just rested there. Believers, not Disciples.

“Where are the disciples?” Bonhoeffer asked. And it’s the same question that many are asking today. I heard a story recently of a couple in our church who – years ago - were invited by another couple to come and join their church. They said something to this effect: *“Come with us. It’s the easiest one that there is...just say a prayer, and you’re in.”*

Sounds like “cheap grace.” Kind of like “resting on grace”. Call it what you will...while the Anabaptist fully understood and embrace the significance of this word...they were also fully aware of the danger it presented, if abused.

This is why I’m so glad to be a part of the BIC, and a part of this congregation here at FF.

We emphasize **How We Live** *after* we come to the Cross of Jesus. It’s okay to fail, but it’s not okay for us to be content to stay where we are. We want to grow. And as we grow, we gradually become more and more like Jesus and have a greater impact in the lives of those around us.

And so, the question becomes...

3. WHAT DO WE DO?

For those in here who do not yet know what it is to experience God...His love, His grace...what are you to do?

The first thing I’d like to tell you, if you want to have many personal experiences with God, you have to be looking for Him. And you *will* experience Him, because **God is both Active and Relational**. He always has been. The Scriptures contain so many narratives and stories describing how God is actively involved in drawing men and women to Himself.

Moses for example. Moses is out tending to his flock one day when he notices a bush on fire. Now I’ve come to understand that a bush on fire in the desert is not far-fetched. Brush fires will spontaneously combust. But Moses noticed something about this burning bush...something different about this one. What did he notice?

It didn't burn up. It just kept on burning. And so he went over to check it out.

This is a great example of the dynamic that exists between God actively engaging us, and our response to God's activity. God is active, initiating all this, Moses' eyes are open, notices this bush that doesn't burn up and responds by exploring. It's at this point that God identifies himself by saying...

Exodus 3:6 “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.”

God actively engages with Moses, but Moses only knows that this voice is coming from “the God of his father”. God goes on to tell Moses that He will be sending him to Pharaoh in order to free the Hebrews – the Israelites - from bondage in Egypt. Here's how Moses responds:

Exodus 3:13 “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ And they ask me, ‘What is his name? Then what should I tell them?’”

It's not enough for Moses to go back to the Israelites and say that “the God of our fathers” has sent me to you. No, Moses wants more, actually going so far as to ask for a name. After relationship?

There are those in the church today who know of the God of their father and their mother...the God of their grandparents perhaps. They may believe in this God, they may believe in Jesus, but they are not disciples, with experiences that lead to a radically changed life.

And yet God is actively involved in all of our lives...it's just that some are on the lookout...and some don't notice that the bush isn't burning up. *“There's something happening here. Better stop and do some exploring.”*

And while it's unlikely that God will actively engage with us as flames from within a bush, I believe He continues to engage with us in so many different ways, we're just not looking.

10-20 years ago there was a popular show called The West Wing, and in one episode, the President is lamenting over the fact that God did not actively reveal Himself to the President during a time he was looking for important answers. And so His pastor said to him, "You know, you remind me of the man who lived by the river. He heard a radio report that the river was going to rush up, and flood the town, and that all the residents should evacuate their homes. But the man said, 'I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me.'

The waters rose up, a guy in a rowboat came along and shouted, 'Hey! Hey you in there! The town is flooding. Let me take you to safety!' But the man shouted back, "I'm religious. I pray. God loves me. God will save me.'

A helicopter was hovering overhead, and a guy with a megaphone shouted, 'Hey you! You down there! The town is flooding! Let me drop this ladder and I'll take you to safety!'

And the man shouted back that he was religious and that he prayed and that God loved Him and would take him to safety.

Well, the man drowned. And standing at the gates of Saint Peter, he demanded an audience with God. "Lord," he said. "I'm a religious man. I pray. I thought you loved me. Why did you let this happen?' God said, "I sent you a radio report, a guy in a rowboat, and a helicopter. What in the world are you doing here!'

Our God is both active and relational. He can be and wants you - He wants me - to experience Him...His love, His grace, and so much more. But we have to be looking.

For those of you who don't follow Jesus: How many times throughout the course of your life have you heard an invitation to begin a relationship with Jesus? You may have thought the invitation was coming from the one whose voice you heard, when it was coming from God, who was actively engaging you.

How many songs have we sung about the love of God and the grace of God? We see words on a page or words on a screen and never realize that He's actively engaging with us in the

hopes that we will begin to experience His love and His grace in a very personal way...in a way that will change our lives.

Throughout my life He has sent me warnings that I disregarded and paid the price...warnings that I heeded and reaped the benefit. He has sent blessings my way that I chalked up to nothing more than good fortune... and later came to recognize His hand behind it.

The challenge before us is discerning what is “of God”, and what is something we are just coming up with ourselves because of certain desires...and worse, what is from the dark side? In weeks to come we'll be taking a week to look at the authority of God's Word...another week to look at the role of the Holy Spirit...another week to talk about the community of faith. And all of these – God's Word, the Holy Spirit, the church community – help us discern what is of God and what is not.

Bottom line, God is active and He is personal. He is love and grace and you can know and experience Him personally.

If you're sitting here and you're feeling discouraged because you know you're a Believer but not a disciple who experiences the love and grace of Jesus...don't be.

Forty years before God spoke to Moses in the flames, Moses fled to the wilderness and became a shepherd after experiencing the worst failure of his life. Now God is calling Moses to return, not only having matured, but having a life-changing experience with God. And throughout the course of Moses' life there was frustration and failure, but as you look at his life, it is easy to see the change in his character.

Moses wasn't a failure, and you're not either. God is still actively engaging you, He's doing it right here, right now. And so I'd challenge you to explore further. To respond to what God has initiated. As you sit in your seat, just let God know that you're listening, and wanting to know “What's next?” See me after the service and we'll find a time to get together and talk about what might be next for you.

SUMMARY (less than a minute)

For the BIC, and for our congregation here at Five Forks, I've been talking about how we put great emphasis not just on what we know, but **How We Live**.

So, how are we to live?

We live looking for God to be active in our lives, first when it comes to our salvation, and then, not content to “rest on grace”, instead “receiving His grace”...we look to Him to be actively involved in our growth and transformation.

He brings people and events and songs and literature into our lives...and in addition to seeing people, events, songs and literature...we want to see Him. Be on the lookout. See what catches your eye, and explore.

I asked this of someone earlier this year, and I will never forget what they said when I saw them the following week...*“It is amazing how often I missed or overlooked what God was doing in my life. Now that I'm looking, I can see Him involved in my life in so many ways.”*

I pray that this will be your experience this week.