

Contextual Brethren Life: Ten Years On

Preface:

So we've talked about what it means for us to not give up on "Intentional Christian Hospitality," to hold to "Kingdom-building Stewardship," to uniquely care about "Prophetic Multiculturalism." Today, we're talking about "Contextual Brethren Life." What it means, and why it matters. We'll talk about how this Core Value makes us unique out of every congregation in Columbus, about how this relates to our Christian calling generally, and, you know, what it means to be a "Brethren" Church.

And, look: I had a short historical summary of The Brethren Church and the Brethren movement at the start of this message. It was fine. Good, even. It doubled the length of the message. So I'm skipping it all. I can get any of us who want one an even better thing than I prepared, though.

So let's dive into our Core Value, here. Like last week, we'll bounce between our Core Value as it's described and what that description looks like in our life together.

Contextual Brethren Life: "A"

A. There are traditions and values that Smoky Row has which shape its identity as a Brethren church, which we here refer to as our "Brethren Life." The Brethren movement was born in Germany in 1708 out

of the Anabaptist and Radical Pietist reform movements of the 16th through the 18th centuries. Most critical among our traditions are trine immersion baptism and threefold communion (composed of the foot-washing service; the fellowship meal, or “love feast”; and the bread and cup, or Eucharist). Smoky Row, along with many other Brethren churches, also retains a commitment to making decisions through the difficult, yet worthwhile, process of consensus. We also hold to the non-creedal position that marks The Brethren Church, the denomination with which we are affiliated. Rather than a creed, we attempt to be faithful to “the Bible, the whole Bible, and nothing but the Bible” as we live out our lives of Christian discipleship. We do this knowing that this book is best understood within the context of Spirit- led Christian community.

Summary: “A”

Why don't we start by pointing out that we're Christians. We're Christians. But the faith heritage of this church, the “way of being a Christian” that has shaped us and shapes us still, is “Brethren,” it comes out of that Radical Pietist & Anabaptist mashup. These two groups--Radical Pietists and Anabaptists--started around Germany around the 1600s, Pietists loved authentic worship of Jesus, Anabaptists obedience to what Jesus asked his followers. I'm simplifying

a ton, but together, you get a mix of people who care both about obeying Christ and loving God. Again, refer to all the history I skipped for more info.

But this part of our Core Value reminds us of some very Brethren things, some of them really unique, that we incorporate into our life.

Believer's Baptism:

Things like Trine-Immersion Believer's Baptism. Which means basically that a) we baptize those who have made decisions to follow Jesus, "believers;" not infants. This was the practice of the first Brethren, they believed it was the most biblical form of baptism, and they felt that those infants and children and those who couldn't for various reasons make decisions for Christ--God was going to be merciful to them. Baptism was a thing for Christ's followers, something Jesus commanded, and so obedience called for--but it didn't magically "save" a person.

And b) the "trine-immersion" part, three-times immersed part, seems to have been the earliest practice of the Church, that people were immersed three times, and forward, in the name of the Father, and then of The Son, and then of the Holy Spirit. The early Brethren, like so many other Christian bodies that were started around their time, really, really wanted a return to a type of Christianity that was as close as

possible to the life of the first Church. They studied what records and histories there were in order to try and shape their church life like the early church, and so “trine-immersion” baptism became their model.

Three-fold Communion:

And this concern to be as guided by the Bible as they could, which led to their convictions about believer’s baptism as the most biblical form of baptism--it carried over into other things, too. The early Brethren loved Scripture. They studied, they read it, they sought to be guided and formed by it: and so they read passages like the one that was read to us today from John, this scene of the Last Supper, which alone out of the gospels talks about Jesus washing the feet of his disciples during his last meal with them.

And they realized that this is something valuable, this is something important that other Christians aren’t doing--even though they are remembering Jesus through the Bread & Cup, the “Eucharist,” which is a word, a term, that means “thanksgiving,” and reminds us of the fact that Jesus gave thanks before he broke the bread, called it his body, and passed it around the table for his disciples to eat. A pretty startling metaphor.

And so when Brethren join together for communion, we have that Eucharist, we have that small supper that reminds us

both of the Last Supper and also looks forward to the one Jesus says he'll eat with his followers on the other side of the resurrection, and we also wash one another's feet, because Jesus commanded it, and because including it in our communion is the fullest expression of the biblical last supper that we can get.

And, you know: We haven't had our three-fold, three-part, Communion service in a while. It's a real loss. I hope we can have it again soon, but I don't know.

Creeds:

And you know what a creed is, right? A memorable saying that summarizes basic beliefs. The word "creed" comes from the Latin word "credo," which means "I believe." And creeds often start with an "I believe," like the well known "Apostle's Creed," I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven & Earth"...and it goes on and on. But the first Brethren saw first-hand how reciting the right creed could become a test of faith, which if you failed, got you imprisoned or killed or your property confiscated.

So they said no to creeds, not only because they functioned as these tests, which felt icky to the first Brethren, but also because they limited the Bible; and if there is one thing that is very Brethren, it's caring about Scripture, all of it, deeply. And so we have this motto, which is corny, and silly, but it's

part of our heritage, “The Bible, The Whole Bible, and Nothing but the Bible.” We don’t teach our children to memorize creeds, but to memorize and be shaped by the Bible. Is it a cheesy motto? Yes. Does it sound a little too much like the oath people swear in judicial courts, and so makes it seem like we’re taking our cues from culture instead of the other way around? Totally. But is it right on in terms of what is authoritative and important in the Christian life? Completely.

Consensus:

And the Brethren, being a small, persecuted group, were highly relational, were a close community. They called each other brother & sister--common, now, but uncommon at their time; Brethren means, basically, “group of brothers and sisters”--they cared deeply about “being of one mind,” about “the unity of the saints,” and so they worked hard to reach decisions as a group through the process of consensus. It’s a process they saw modeled in the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15, which revealed this dynamic process in which church leaders by the Spirit helped guide the Jerusalem church through the process of decision making as a community, summarizing positions that people held, and helping bring the congregation to a conclusion that everyone could agree to, even though they might have had to release their grip on certain positions they held. Consensus is a tricky thing to have; it takes work, trust, submission to the best interests of

the entire church. It is not easy, but it is a Brethren thing, and it is part of our church life as Smoky Row.

Let's keep reading.

Contextual Brethren Life: “B”

B. We also support and promote the denominational programs of The Brethren Church. For Smoky Row, this includes participation in denominational governance and oversight, as well as in denominational programs. We support institutions of higher education that have been historically Brethren, such as Ashland University and Ashland Theological Seminary, and we partner with World Relief as The Brethren Church has done for nearly 100 years. We also bless and encourage in their lives of faith those denominational “cousins” of ours who retain a Brethren heritage: the Church of the Brethren, the Old German Baptist Brethren, the Dunkard Brethren, the Grace Brethren, and the Conservative Grace Brethren.

Summary: “B”

Most of this is fairly straightforward. Because we're part of The Brethren Church, we join with the programs and institutions and partners of The Brethren Church. We support these programs financially, our denomination financially; and

more than this, we support the programs and institutions of our denomination by giving of our time and talent.

Over the years many, many people from Smoky Row have sat on district and national boards and committees, have been involved with Ashland University and Ashland Seminary--and are right now. We've got retired missionaries, pastors, teachers, professors, who make up Smoky Row. We're on regional and camp boards. I think seven of us have Master's of Divinity degrees? We're not at a loss when it comes to Brethren formation. Our people are incredibly important to sustaining and shaping the programs and policies of The Brethren Church, incredibly important. I think we always will be, honestly. At the end of September we're hosting our first "North Central Regional Gathering" since the denomination restructured a couple of years ago.

Blessing & Encouraging:

And maybe stretching us in this section of our Core Value is this note that we "bless and encourage" those who come from our family tree of faith.

Here's the rub: the very reasons we aren't all one big denomination anymore is because there are significant differences between us. Grace Brethren churches don't practice consensus, and are structured very differently; they are often very hierarchical, and the early Grace Brethren--I'm

not sure if most would “buy” this now--but they believed a complex theological paradigm called “dispensationalism,” that parts of the New Testament--like the Sermon on the Mount--didn’t even need to be followed. This doesn't work when you say you need “the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible,” right? Church of the Brethren congregations run the gamut, but there are some of them that really don’t believe in Scriptural Authority, that the Bible uniquely bears witness to God’s work: and without Scriptural Authority you lose things--like Jesus being God, and saving us, and many of the moral demands that come with it. Most of us like our cars or the internet or childcare: Various Old Order Brethren groups say those are off-limits. They say it for really well-thought out theological reasons, but we probably wouldn’t agree with them. There are so many broad theological differences between our group, “The Brethren Church” and these other sister, cousin, historically-related groups.

And of course, I am making generalities here. And of course, because we as a denomination are non-creedal, we have no “tests of faith,” we ourselves contain within our denomination--and our church--varied theological positions that season and shape everything we do.

But even if there are differences between “us and them,” we’ve got to go back to that starting statement, right, where I reminded us that we’re Christians--and so are they--and so

to “bless and encourage” them is no stretch for us when our hearts are settled in and close to the Lord’s.

And, look: “brethren” is a good, old, patriarchal, out-of-date English word, right? So it’s used in many groups; but the reality is that as far as our family tree goes, the groups mentioned here, and the few groups that have split from them since our Core Value was set down in type, they are the only ones in our family tree. Groups you might hear of like “Plymouth Brethren” or whatever--not related to us at all.

And so:

Contextual Brethren Life: “C”

C. There are also historically Brethren values, drawn from the Bible, that are no longer universally held by our denomination, such as non-resistance, non-swearing of oaths, and non-conformity to the world. Although we may not agree on how to apply these values, we do take them seriously and support the practice of these disciplines by our members.

On “C”:

I love the phrase “Historical Values.” It so subtly, but clearly, says that they ain’t values no more. And these aren’t, by and large, for our denomination; some cousins of ours in our

family tree still practice these. Most of us in the Brethren Church don't.

Remember, the early Brethren cared about the Bible. They read it and saw things like Jesus' statement in Matthew 5, "do not swear an oath at all," because "all you need to say is simply 'Yes,' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one." They said, okay: no swearing of oaths.

They read passages like Titus 3, where Paul reminds Christians to be "peacable and considerate, and always to be gentle to everyone," they saw in Jesus' life the model of a life that didn't resist evil, and of course, Jesus didn't just model this, but also said to us in Matthew 5 "do not resist an evil person," and so they said, "Okay: we will not resist." They read passages like Ephesians 4, that Christians are to "no longer live as the Gentiles do," like Colossians 3, where we're told to "put to death...whatever belongs to our earthly nature." They saw it as critical that we Christians "become," as it says in Romans 12, "not conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds."

Now: out of these "historical values," most of us would say--I think, I guess I hope--that we agree with this last one. We don't want to "conform" to the "pattern of this world." The question is, what does it mean to be not conformed to the

world? And the way we answer that determines if we use electricity or if, like our cousins the Old Order German Baptist Brethren, we don't.

And this leads to the most important part of this section of our core value, which is the statement that "Although we may not agree on how to apply these values, we do take them seriously and support the practice of these disciplines by our members." This is so important.

Smoky Row is a place where people have permission to explore these values. There are many churches where a Christian cannot explore what it means for them to live out values like these without being shamed and slandered and name-called for it.

But it's not that way at Smoky Row. We may not agree on how to apply these biblical calls; but we don't shame each other when it seems to us that the Christian life demands them. We are a place where it's okay to explore what it means to follow all of Christ's calls--even the unusual ones.

Some of us may say that being "not conformed to the world," means we don't get credit cards, others may say it means we wear outdated clothes, others may say it is less about "not doing," and more about "becoming:" becoming like Christ, and having our entire value-system rearranged.

And I've suggested a bajillion times that with the Bible, and the Spirit, and each other, we can navigate any question and any problem we have as a congregation and as individuals. And I think that if we hang onto that "with each other" part, and allow each other to take seriously the individual exploration of these historical Brethren values we will always be a place that just really does Christian Community well.

Let's finish this Core Value.

Contextual Brethren Life: "D"

D. Our engagement with our Brethren identity is ultimately contextual. We work to maintain our traditions in light of cultural pressures, yet we attempt to translate our traditions into the idioms and needs of the day. (For example, we organize our church governing structures in a way that is functional, but not necessarily "historically Brethren.")

On "D":

We are a Brethren Church, and it means so many things. We've talked about some of them--but definitely not all. Being "Brethren" guides how we do things, what we are involved with, the general friendly-family spirit that pervades our church when we really are at our best.

But sometimes, like following a really outdated GPS, the paths that have been set for us aren't helpful at all. So, you know, we don't have a Deacon Board, although nearly every Brethren Church does--a thing that fits really well in the low-movement, part-time staff, smaller-than-even-we are rural congregations most Brethren Churches are. Years ago we decided this didn't make sense for us. We're also one of only three Brethren Churches in the 15th largest city in the United States; our roadmap for how to be Brethren in our context isn't a very detailed one. Our Brethren Life is contextual, it really is. We will always be a Brethren Church, but sometimes because of our place in life and our needs in that place, doing things the are done in other Brethren congregations would wreck us. And so while we hang onto our Brethren heritage and allow it to inform and even define our church life, we don't allow it to rule over us and imprison us as we go down the road God has called us down.

Conclusion:

So what I hope is this.

I hope we can be proud of being a Brethren Church. I love it. I love our theological heritage. On the one hand, Radical Pietism, which cared so much about an authentic, experiential, loving relationship with the Lord. And on the other hand, Anabaptism, which cared so much about living

Jesus' life and doing what he said no matter the cost. I mean, isn't that a deep, rich, theological well to draw from?

I hope we can always be a place where on some level we know we are surrounded by brothers and sisters in the Lord, who will love us with a family love--and prayerfully, one that's not super-dysfunctional.

I hope we can be a place of permission, where we feel the freedom to draw out of that historical and theological well that is our Brethren Identity, and where we consider ways of being obedient to the Lord that seem a little radical sometimes. I hope we can be thankful that Smoky Row brings both the Radical Pietist and the Anabaptist side of us out of the closet.

And I hope that we can always ask "What does it mean to be Brethren in our situation, which is always changing?" The world is not stable; and the cultures that we as a church find ourselves in--multiple cultures, right? They move and change. I hope that we can reflect on what it means to be informed by our Brethren identity in this or that situation, without being imprisoned by it.

And I am sure, that when we ask these questions the way Brethren have always asked them--to one another, with our Bibles open, and a prayer for the Spirit to guide us--we'll get

the answers we ought to get, and listen to them when they arrive.