

Unpacking Our BIC CORE VALUES: THE FOUNDATION OF OUR FAITH
“Experiencing God’s Love and Grace”

John 3:16 & 17 and Acts 4:12

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Have you ever seen this guy? If you watched sports—particularly pro football—in the 80’s and 90’s he’s probably familiar to you. He used to show up at football and basketball games and at tennis and golf events. Other people took their cue from “rainbow hair guy” until holding up signs with John 3:16 became a common occurrence at televised sporting events. Eventually TV executives became so annoyed with this guy and his copycats that they threatened to fire camera operators who showed people on TV holding up John 3:16 signs. If you remember him, what did you think of this guy? Did you view him as a bold witness, an embarrassment to followers of Jesus, or just some guy seeking his 10 seconds of fame on national television? Did you ever wonder what people who weren’t Christians thought of him? I came across this question from a sports fan on line...

This season I watched every Monday Night Football game—games broadcast live from New York to Seattle to Miami to San Diego. I haven't paid that much attention in past years, but on every single game this season I noticed someone in the stands holding a card reading "JOHN 3:16." Usually the person is sitting at either end of the stadium so that when a kicker goes to kick an extra point the sign is clearly visible. Am I missing out on something? What in the world does John 3:16 mean? Is it a hex on the kicker? Is it a riddle? Please rescue me from my ignorance.

John 3:16 means different things to different people, but to followers of Jesus this verse—with its emphasis on God’s love and salvation—lies at the heart of our faith. I’d like you to read the words of John 3:16 & 17 aloud with me...

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Another verse that emphasizes the priority of salvation is found in Acts chapter 4. For those of you who were here last Sunday, it was these words that caused the religious leaders to take note that Peter and John had been with Jesus. When interrogated by the religious leaders with the question, *“By what power or what name did you heal the man who was crippled from birth?”* Peter said,

“Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ **Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.**”

The salvation Jesus brings to those who confess their sins and place their faith in Him is the foundation of our faith as followers of Jesus. And this focus on salvation is central to McBIC’s mission of, *“Helping people connect with Jesus.”* Our goal in all we do as a church is to help people learn to know Jesus, to take the step of entering a relationship with Him and to grow in that relationship. The Brethren in Christ Core Value we’re exploring today is, ***“Experiencing God’s Love and Grace.”*** And the statement explaining this value is, ***“We value the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.”***

Your first response upon learning that “salvation” is one of our Brethren in Christ core values might be, *“Isn’t that a no-brainer? I mean, what is our faith if not for salvation?”* You’d be right if you thought that, because apart from salvation there really is no Christianity. And yet the concept of personal salvation through experiencing God’s love and grace has held a special place for the Brethren in Christ since our denomination’s founding in the late 18th Century.

Before I talk specifically about how the value “experiencing God’s love and grace through salvation” has impacted and continues to shape the BIC today, I want to give a 30,000 foot overview of the Church and the emphasis it has placed on salvation through its history.

The growth of the Church during the first 300 years after Jesus’ resurrection was amazing. We get a glimpse of that growth in the New Testament as the church grew from 150 to over 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost (considered the birthday of the Church). And then after persecution broke out in Jerusalem following the execution of Stephen—the 1st Christian martyr—followers of Jesus took the Good News all over the world. Many things happened in the Church during those 3 centuries, but the two most prominent realities were intense persecution and phenomenal growth. Emperors within the Roman Empire authorized the torture and execution of thousands of followers of Jesus, but in spite of the persecution, the Church grew rapidly. The Church’s amazing growth in the face of persecution caused Tertullian, a 2nd Century church father, to say, *“The blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church.”*

Early in the 4th Century an event occurred that changed Christianity forever. Following a dream in which he allegedly saw a cross and heard the instruction to go to battle under the symbol of the cross, the Emperor Constantine had crosses placed on his soldiers' shields. When his army was victorious in that battle, Constantine declared Christianity the state religion of Rome. The emperor's decree brought an end to most persecution and the Church grew, but over time the church's vitality waned—as it was assumed that everyone was a Christian and the emphasis on individuals committing their lives to Christ weakened.

Like all eras in church history, there was a mixture of good and bad between the 4th and 16th Centuries, but some serious problems developed during these 1,200 years. The marriage between the church and the state blurred the lines between citizenship in a country and membership in the church. The priority of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ was in many cases lost and replaced by religious ritual and formality. There was widespread unrest in the Church all over Europe at this time, but it was a German monk named Martin Luther, whose 95 theses—criticisms of the Church—ignited what we now know as the reformation. While eventually there was a split between what came to be known as the Catholic Church and a new wing of the Church called Protestantism, Martin Luther never wanted to divide the Church. Luther started the revolution, but soon other reformers arose who weren't content to move at a slow pace and who believed that only a clean break from the existing Church would lead to the kind of reform that needed to occur.

Like many modern day churches, the roots of the Brethren in Christ, lie in this Reformation period. Those who thought Martin Luther and his followers weren't moving fast enough came to be known as Radical Reformers. Among the radical reformers, in places like Switzerland, Germany and Holland lived people known as Anabaptists. The prefix "ana" means "re", and as their name indicates, the Anabaptists practiced re-baptism. They believed the New Testament taught that baptism was a choice made by those who had placed their faith in Christ, not something done for an infant by their parents. Adding to their sense that baptism needed to be reformed was the reality that at that time baptism was both a civil and a religious practice. At baptism a child became both a citizen of the state and a member of the Church. It's not surprising that the Anabaptist's views on baptism brought severe persecution. Re-baptizing

was viewed as rebellion against the state, not just an unusual religious belief. From the 16th to the 18th Century thousands of Anabaptists were persecuted and killed for their faith. When given the opportunity, many of these persecuted people came to the New World in the hope of starting fresh with the freedom to worship as they chose.

In the late 1700's a small group of Anabaptists in Pennsylvania had a desire to start a new movement combining elements of Anabaptism and Pietism. Pietism was a revival focused movement, which began in Europe and emphasized personal salvation and faith in Christ. These people initially hoped to link up with the existing Mennonites or German Reformed Church, but when that didn't materialize, several of them baptized each other in the Susquehanna River in Lancaster County and took on the name, River Brethren. The group later adopted the name, Brethren in Christ, when they registered as a Conscientious Objector Church at the start of the Civil War. This new group was founded by people who valued the Anabaptist emphases on peace, separation from government, and Christian community. But they were also attracted to the Pietistic focus on a personal experience of salvation and holy living.

So, there you have it, 2,000 years of church history in about 5 minutes. I thought it was important to lay that out for you, to give you some context for the importance of salvation in the history of the Church and specifically, the priority that salvation and a personal experience of God's love and grace has had historically, and continues to have, for us as Brethren in Christ.

I'd like to look now at the Bible's emphasis on God's love and grace and the salvation He makes available to us. In spite of the misconception that the God we find in the Old Testament is a god of wrath and judgment who enforces strange rituals and rules, God's reaching heart of love is seen throughout the Old Testament. God chose the Israelites to be a people set apart for Him who would be established as a holy nation of people, who through their lives pointed surrounding nations to the love of their God with the goal that the whole world would be blessed.

God's reaching heart of love for all people was brought to fullness in the New Testament through the birth, life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. In the letter of Colossians, the Apostle Paul says this about Jesus...

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers

or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and **in him all things hold together**. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. **For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.** Colossians 1:15-20

If you want a clear picture of who God is, look at Jesus. He is the image of God; in Him all things hold together; all God's fullness dwells in Him; and, through Jesus, God has chosen to reconcile all people and everything to Himself.

Jesus demonstrated his love for people and his desire for them to be in relationship with Him in all of his life and ministry. When He called his first disciples, Peter and Andrew, they were fishing—that was their occupation—He told them to follow Him and He would make them fishers of people. And throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus' deep heart of love for people that moved Him to compassion. Matthew chapter 9 verses 35-38 is one example that if you've been around McBIC for long, you've probably heard me speak about before.

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:35-38

When Jesus saw the crowds of people—harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd—he had compassion on them. The word translated *compassion* refers to a deep feeling of hurt within one's stomach—almost a physical sickness. And then Jesus said, "**The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.**" He urged his disciples to pray that people would answer the call to go out and bring people into a relationship with Him.

Last Sunday I shared with you a number of things that I'm excited about—places where I see God at work in our church—and I also shared with you things that I'm praying about in 2018. The things we're celebrating—God meeting our staffing needs, people embracing missional living, strong finances, bridges being built with our community and pastors and churches collaborating, are important things—things we've been asking God for that He has

allowed us to accomplish. But the things I sense He has put on my heart to be praying for this year are things only God can do—salvations, freedom for individuals from addiction, reconciliation in marriages and physical healings.

McBIC is doing a lot of good ministry locally, regionally and globally. We have a reputation as a serving church that wants to bless others and isn't consumed just with building our own church. I'm convinced that our focus on serving others is at least part of the reason God is blessing us with the platform He's giving us in this community. That's awesome! But as your pastor, I want to make sure we stay focused on helping people experience God's love and grace so that they can experience his free gift of salvation and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. It's easy for us to become complacent and get off track. **Building relationships and serving and meeting needs are all vital, but I never want us to lose sight of the fact that people experiencing salvation that results in their lives being transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, is the goal.**

In John 10:10 Jesus said, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* John 10:10 When we look around us we see that the enemy is having a field day stealing, killing and destroying. Those of us who know Jesus are the ones He has called to share Jesus' full life with others in the midst of the enemy's attempts to steal and kill and destroy. God's desire for all of us is that we would personally experience his love and grace and that we would in turn help others experience his love and grace. If you're here today and you've never taken the step of receiving Jesus' gift of salvation by inviting Him into your life, I want to ask you to consider doing that today. One of the prayer team people along the sides of the church or one of our pastors would be happy to pray with you. And if you're here today and you know Jesus, I encourage you to re-commit yourself to being one of the workers Jesus prayed would be sent out into the harvest field.