

The Brethren movement from its beginnings in 1708 had always avoided a formal creed, fearing that it would limit the work of the Holy Spirit in shedding new light on Scripture. These statements of belief, therefore, are not meant to be a creed but a milepost in the spiritual journey of The Brethren Church. It is a testimony of this generation's faith and life.

The statements of belief contained within were agreed upon in 1983, and have held to this point as an indicator of what Brethren people believe. Included in this edition are in-depth discussion guides, to help any small group, membership class, or Sunday school class engage with our beliefs and understand our call to follow Christ more fully.

# BRETHREN BELIEFS



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PART ONE:

# **Centennial Statement**



# Background of A Centennial Statement

WHEN THE 1981 GENERAL CONFERENCE directed that a statement of the beliefs and practices of The Brethren Church be developed, a group of volunteers began at once to work. Agreeing that we are a noncredal fellowship, they set out to prepare a centennial statement in honor of the denomination's founding in 1883.

For over two years the task force labored to produce a document that would be a testimony of our beliefs and practices. The 1983 General Conference accepted this statement as "a testimony of the faith and life of The Brethren Church at this milestone in our history."

The statement is in two parts, reflecting the historic stance of our church that faith must be seen in life. Scriptural references are provided for documentation and for more in-depth study.

## **A Centennial Statement**

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The Brethren Church was formally organized at Dayton, Ohio, on June 6-7, 1883. The Brethren movement from its beginnings in 1708 had always avoided a formal creed, fearing that it would limit the work of the Holy Spirit in shedding new light on Scripture. The Dayton Convention reaffirmed this historic position that the Bible, and the Bible alone, is our all-sufficient creed and rule of practice.

With that unchanging creed, each generation of Brethren must struggle under the Spirit's guidance to discern the meaning of Scripture for its life. Such a process has several important values: it can give renewed purpose and direction to the church; it can bring the church to greater unity in thought and practice; and it assists the church in declaring its fundamental beliefs to the world.

This centennial statement, therefore, is not meant to be a creed but a milestone in the spiritual journey of The Brethren Church. It is a testimony of this generation's faith and life.

# The Message of Faith

## The Word

Brethren doctrine centers on Jesus Christ as the living Word of God. The Holy Spirit progressively revealed God's one plan of salvation in Christ from its first promise in the Old Testament to its fulfillment in the New. Given in human words in history, the Scriptures of both Testaments are the inspired Word of God, authoritative, trustworthy, and true in every respect. The New Testament, witnessing to the climax of that history, is the final rule of faith and life for the church. As an expression of grateful love to God, Brethren believe and obey the Bible, for only the written Word reveals to us Jesus Christ, the living Word.

John 1:1-4; John 1:14; 1 Pet. 1:10-11; Gen. 3:15; Matt. 5:17-20; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; John 10:35; Heb. 1:1-2; John 14:15; John 14:21-23; 1 John 5:3; John 5:39; John 5:45-47; Luke 24:25-27; Luke 24:44-47

## The Triune God

The Bible reveals one true and living God in three equal persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This one God is eternal, infinite, personal, and perfect. The description and reality of the trinity transcend human reason, logic, and proof; they remain matters of revelation, confession, and worship. In holy love, the triune God by an act of sovereign will, created the universe and all living things. In this activity, as in everything touching the world of space and time, all three persons of the Godhead participated.

Deut. 6:4; 1 Tim. 2:5; Gen. 1:26; Gen. 3:22; Matt. 3:13-17; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Tim. 1:17; John 4:23-24; 1 Cor. 13:12; Gen. 1:1-23; John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 11:3; John 14:9-12; John 16:13-15

## The Father

Scripture reveals the first person of the trinity as the Father. The created world testifies to Him in both the external order of nature and the internal working of conscience. As the Father of Old Testament Israel, He led the nation with parental love and care, with warnings, chastenings, and promise of inheritance. He sent His beloved Son into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. All who confess Him as Lord, the Father makes a new creation and adopts as His children.

Psalms 19:1; Rom. 1:20-21; Rom. 2:14-16; Isaiah 63:15-16; Isaiah 64:8; Ps. 78:1-72; Ps. 105:1-45; Ps. 106:1-48; Deut. 7:6-16; Matt. 3:16-17; John 6:57; John 8:42; John 17:8; John 1:12; Rom. 8:12-17; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 4:4-7

## Sin

God created humanity, male and female, in His own image with freedom to obey or disobey Him. As a result of their disobedient choice, sin entered our race and its effects of guilt and corruption have passed on to every person. The image of God, though not destroyed, is now distorted. Sin dwells in all people, making them unable to please God or to escape its power in their lives. The penalty of sin is death, but a new, right relationship with God is promised to those who accept life in Christ Jesus.

Gen. 1:26-27; Gen. 2:16-17; Gen. 3:17; Rom. 5:12-19; Gen. 9:5-6; Matt. 7:11; Rom. 3:23; Rom. 7:18-25; Rom. 8:6-8; Rom. 6:23; John 1:12

## The Son

The second person of the trinity is the Son. He is the Living Word, the revelation and revealer of the unseen Father. Although He possessed the divine nature from eternity, the Word became flesh for us and for our salvation. He was born of a virgin and lived the perfect human life upon earth. As Man and God, Jesus lovingly gave Himself for others in a ministry of service and reconciliation. His obedient life led to His sacrificial death in fulfillment of prophecy. Upon the cross He bore sin

and its penalty in our place. He was raised and glorified in the body in which He suffered and died. He ascended as Lord and Savior into heaven, where He continually intercedes for those who are His and from which He will return in glory. Therefore He is the source of eternal salvation for all who believe in Him, submitting to His Lordship.

John 1:1-4; John 1:14; John 1:18; John 14:5-10; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:3-4; Phil. 2:5-11; Matt. 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-35; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; Mark 10:45; Rom. 5:10-11; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Phil. 2:8; Isaiah 53:4-12; 1 Pet. 2:24; John 20:24-29; Phil. 2:9; Acts 1:9-11; Rom. 8:33-34; Heb. 7:25; Heb. 9:24; Heb 9:28; Matt. 24:30; Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:9-10; Heb. 5:9

## **Salvation**

Salvation is both an event and a process: it is an accomplished fact, a continuing walk, and a future hope. Always the gift of God, salvation is received by repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, both witnessed to through water baptism. In faithfulness to His promises, God adopts believers as His children, forgiving their sins and giving them His Holy Spirit. They in turn demonstrate their faith by obeying the commands of Christ and following His example in daily living. Scripture uses various terms to describe aspects of salvation, but ultimately it means Christ-likeness conformity to the image of God's Son by the work of His Spirit within us. To that end we are kept by the power of God, which operates through our faith.

Phil. 1:6; Col. 2:6; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 2:38; Rom. 10:9-10; Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; John 1:12; Gal. 4:4-5; Acts 2:38; Matt. 22:34-40; Eph. 4:17-24; 1 John 2:4-6; Rom. 8:28-29; Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Pet. 1:5

## **The Holy Spirit**

The third person of the triune God is the Holy Spirit. He was active in creation, the history of Israel, the inspiration of Scripture, the ministry of Jesus, and the birth of the church. The Spirit likewise acts today, opening the mind to understand Scripture, calling forth the response of repentance and faith, and giving the desire and ability to grow in

Christlikeness. The New Testament portrays His activity as both event and process: It describes the event using the terms receiving, being filled, sealed, and baptized to indicate that the Holy Spirit comes to the believer at conversion. It describes the process as the Holy Spirit filling and equipping Christians at numerous times for special tasks. He joins them to Christ's church, directs them to a local congregation of believers, and bestows on them spiritual gifts for the church's ministry. The Spirit's indwelling is to make a visible difference in the lives of Christians as they yield to, and cooperate with, His transforming power.

Gen. 1:1-2; Num. 11:16-30; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; Matt. 3:13-17; Acts 10:38; Acts 2:21; 1 Cor. 2:12-14; John 16:7-11; 1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 5:16-25; Acts 8:15; Acts 8:19; Acts 10:47; Acts 19:2; Acts 2:4; Acts 9:17; Eph. 1:13; Eph. 4:30; Acts 1:5; Acts 11:16-17; 1 Cor. 12:13; Acts 4:8; Acts 4:31; Acts 13:9; Acts 13:52; Eph. 5:18; 1 Cor. 12:7-11; 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Cor. 6:17-20; Gal. 5:16-26; Eph. 3:14-19

## The Church

God's purpose in human history is to form a people for His own glory. This purpose, begun in the Old Testament nation of Israel, is continued in the New Testament church, which is founded upon Jesus Christ. He calls it to be a visible body of His followers, extending His own ministry in the world. It is composed of all who have received Him as saving Lord and have committed themselves to being His faithful disciples. This one body finds expression in local communities of believers who are responding to the call of God. Through mutual submission they covenant together for the purposes of worship, nurture, evangelism, and service.

God in His gracious love gave to the church special gifts through His Spirit. These gifts, varied and numerous, have but one purpose: to strengthen the body by equipping each member for ministry. Love is the framework in which the gifts operate and guides their use for the common good.

God also gave to the church ordinances, symbolic rites established by the command and example of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles.

They are pledges of our faithfulness to Him, visible declarations of the Gospel, and necessary expressions of an obedient faith. The ordinances include baptism by trine immersion; confirmation by the laying on of hands; the threefold communion service consisting of the washing of feet, the love feast, and the bread and cup; and the anointing of the sick with oil. The ordinances uniformly testify to the gracious work of the triune God for His people in the past, in the present, and in the future.

Deut. 7:6-8; Isaiah 43:5-7; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; 1 Cor. 3:11; Matt. 5:13-16; 2 Cor. 5:18-20; Acts 2:28-41; Matt. 16:24-26; 1 Cor. 1:2; Col. 1:2; Eph. 5:18-21; Acts 2:42-47; Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:1-31; Eph. 4:7-16; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 1 Cor. 12:7; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 4:12; 1 Cor. 13:1-13; Eph. 4:15-16; John 13:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:26; John 13:15; Matt. 28:18-20; Rom. 6:3-4; Acts 8:14-17; Acts 9:10-19; John 13:1-17; 1 Cor. 11:20-22; 1 Cor. 11:23-29; Matt. 26:26-29; 1 Cor. 10:16-17; 1 Cor. 11:23-29; Mark 6:13; James 5:13-16; 1 Cor. 11:26

## **The Last Things**

By the sending of His Son, God inaugurated the last days. Therefore the church waits eagerly for the consummation of the divine plan in Christ. Prior to that, the human body at death returns to the dust from which it came. The soul of the Christian goes immediately to be with the Lord, while the souls of the unsaved enter into torment. The climax of God's plan will include the personal, visible return of Jesus Christ from heaven as King of kings and Lord of lords; the bodily resurrection and judgment of believers unto eternal life; the bodily resurrection and judgment of the wicked unto eternal punishment; and a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, where the saved will live eternally with the Lord. The Bible does not focus so much on the details and order of final events as on how believers are to live in light of these things.

Heb. 1:1-2; Rom. 8:22-25; 1 Cor. 15:20-28; Gen. 3:19; Ps. 104:29; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 22:43; 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-24; Matt. 16:27; Acts 1:11; 1 Thess. 1:10; 1 Thess. 4:16-17; 1 Tim. 6:14-15; Rev. 19:16; Dan. 12:2; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Isaiah 65:17; 2 Pet. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; 2 Pet. 3:11-15; 1 John 3:2-3

# Discussion Questions: The Message of Faith

## The Word

1. Read John 1:1-4, 14 aloud. What stands out to you about the “Word?” Why does it stand out? How does this shape our reading of the Bible?
2. Respond to the following line: “As an expression of grateful love to God, Brethren believe and obey the Bible, for only the written Word reveals to us Jesus Christ, the Living Word.” What does it mean for the *written* Word to reveal the *Living* Word? How do you read the Bible with “grateful love?”
3. If someone who had never read the Bible asked you where to start reading, where would you have them start? Why do you have them start at that location? How does the starting point inform your view of the Bible?
4. What’s the overarching message of the Bible? How does that shape your reading of it?

## The Triune God

1. Read Genesis 1:26 aloud. What does it mean to be formed/ shaped in “our image?” How are we shaped by the Trinity? How is God three-in-one? Share ways you attempt to wrap your mind around that central Christian truth.
2. How do you comprehend the Brethren belief that the “description and reality of the trinity transcend human reason, logic, and proof” and are only understood through “revelation,

confession, and worship?” If something transcends reason, logic, and proof, then how do you reconcile its validity?

3. In what ways does the Trinity inform your view of yourself, family, friends, community? What does it mean for them to be made in “our image?”

## The Father

1. Read John 8:42. What does it mean for God to be our Father? How does that inform our theology? Why is it important that the first person of the Trinity is referred to by a parental title?
2. Wrestle with the following line: “All who confess him as Lord, the Father makes a new creation and adopts as His children.” How is God both Lord *and* Father? What does it mean for you to *confess* God as *Father*? Describe the “new creation” to which we are made. Think of what adoption looks like in our society and discuss what it means to be adopted by God.
3. What feelings/thoughts are evoked when you think of the role of “father?” How do your earthly models of this role shape your view of God the Father? Discuss the positive and negative implications of such views.
4. If God is the ultimate parent, then how does this shape how you respond to your neighbor? Your enemy? Recall, if it applies, sibling relationships in your own life. How would it be different if we treated others in the world, not just our familial relationships, as siblings?

## Sin

1. Read Genesis 3. Focus on vv. 8-13, 22-24. Amid the judgment that we so often focus on in this chapter, where do you see God’s mercy? How do you think God felt upon hearing of Adam and Eve’s transgression? How is verse 24 a merciful verse in this story?

2. Respond to the following line: “The image of God, though not destroyed, is now distorted.” What is the difference between destroy and distort? How is that significant to our understanding of sin?
3. As we engage in God’s mission in the world, how does the difference between destroy and distort inform our posture? How can we be a people of the “steering wheel” instead of the “brake pedal?”

## The Son

1. Read John 1:1-4, 14. What does it mean for Jesus to be the “Word”? How does this shape your view of the Bible?
2. Discuss the paradox of Jesus fully human and fully divine. Why is this significant to our understanding of Jesus? How is he simultaneously “the source of eternal salvation” and Lord in your life?
3. If God took on flesh, condescended to our level, then how does our witness look different to the world? How does the example of Jesus shape our posture in the world?

## Salvation

1. Read Philippians 1:6. How does the verse speak to salvation? What is the “good work” to which Christ will be faithful to complete? What connections do you make between this and Paul’s discussion of working out one’s salvation with “fear and trembling” (2:12)?
2. Respond to salvation as “both an event and a process.” Do you agree or disagree? How is salvation an “accomplished fact?” What does salvation as “a continuing walk” look like? What does salvation as a “future hope” mean for us today?
3. How does salvation as process shape our witness in the world? Does the process of becoming take a burden off your chest or does it leave things too open for you? What does evangelism look like if salvation is a process?

## The Holy Spirit

1. Read John 16:7-11. What does it mean for the Holy Spirit to be our advocate? How does this shape your understanding of the Trinity? How does it nuance how you see God's involvement in your life?
2. What does it mean for the Spirit to "indwell" us? How is this important for transformation? What is transformation?
3. How do you yield to the Spirit? How do you cooperate with God? Where in your life do you need to yield to the Spirit and allow God to have control?

## The Church

1. Read Exodus 6:7; Deuteronomy 7:6-8; Isaiah 43:5-7; 1 Peter 2:9-10. What is the overarching theme of these passages? How does this theme shape our understanding of the purpose of the church?
2. Answer these questions individually and collectively:
  - 1) *why* does the church exist? 2) *how* does the church behave in the world? 3) *what* should the church look like to the surrounding world?
3. In your answers to question #2, are the answers to the *what* and the *how* congruent with the *why* you've articulated? Why or why not?

## Last Things

1. Read 2 Peter 3:11-15. What does "destruction of the heavens, and the elements will melt in the heat" imply to you? If God created the world (and the universe), how do you reconcile this passage with the groaning of creation in Romans 8:22-25?
2. Why are people obsessed with the timing of the end times if Jesus said that even He did not know the time nor the hour (Mk. 13:32b)? What do you believe about the end times? What Scriptures do you cite for your understanding?

3. How does your view of the end times (eschatology) shape your posture/witness in the present? How does eschatology inform the mission of the church today?
4. What should a church of the eschaton (the “already/not yet) look like? How should this church behave in that tension?

# The Life of Faith

BRETHREN HAVE ASSERTED FROM THEIR beginnings that believers must hold correct doctrinal beliefs and also demonstrate visibly the new life which they have received in Christ Jesus. Thus doctrine is no mere exercise of the mind but a declaration through the entire life that Jesus Christ is Lord. For this reason Brethren life, like Brethren belief, centers on Jesus Christ.

God has made available to us in Christ and the Spirit, in Scripture and the church, all the resources needed to live the life of faith. By His life Christ exemplified the walk to which we are called; by His death He made possible renewed fellowship with the Father; by His resurrection He revealed the power that is available to us. The Holy Spirit now enables us as God's children to live in obedience to Scripture and grow in spiritual maturity. Scripture provides the teaching and example of Jesus and the apostles which we are to follow as a loving response to God and as a means of glorifying Him. The church is the gathered community which nurtures believers in the life of faith. Using these resources, we can demonstrate the new birth through new behavior. What we are by faith in Christ we are to become by faithfulness to our Lord.

## THE INDIVIDUAL

### **Obedience**

Personal obedience is a necessary expression of faith in Christ. We are to obey the teachings of Christ and the apostles not as a means of salvation, but as a grateful response to the grace we have received. Likewise our obedience is not motivated by slavish adherence to external laws, but by inner commitment to love God and please Him in all respects. While

perfection is unattainable in this life, we press on toward the goal of full obedience to Christ.

Rom. 1:5; Rom. 16:26; James 2:18-26; Eph. 2:8-10; Col. 1:9-12; 2 Cor. 3:5-6; Matt. 22:34-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Phil. 3:12-14

## **The Devotional Life**

The devotional life is the practice of private worship. It recognizes that the heart of the Christian faith is a personal relationship between the God of holy love and human beings for whom He cares. For this bond of fellowship and love to grow, the believer must give consistent attention to prayer and to the reading and study of Scripture. In faithful devotional life God meets us and we meet Him. The effect is the believer's deepening trust, growing understanding, and Christlike living.

Deut. 7:6-16; 1 John 4:7-19; Luke 5:16; Phil. 4:6-7; 2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Phil. 4:8-9; Ps. 1:1-6; Ps. 9:10

## **Spiritual Maturity**

Spiritual maturity is the process of transforming the entire character of the believer into the image of Christ. He is the source, the focus, and the goal of this process. Christians mature as they practice a vital devotional life, use their gifts, share their faith, and demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit. The result is a character marked by wisdom, balance, and, above all, love.

Eph. 4:11-13; Gal. 2:20; Phil 1:21; Col. 2:6; Ps. 1:1-6; Eph. 4:11-16; 1 Pet. 3:15; Gal. 5:16-25; Col. 1:9-10; 1 Cor. 13:4-7

# THE FAMILY

## Marriage

God ordained marriage at creation as the lifelong covenant between a man and a woman that creates a new family unit. The New Testament uses the relationship between Christ and His church as the model for the union between a husband and a wife. The love they share is demonstrated through mutual respect and support as each responsibly serves the other. Exclusive to marriage is the sexual relationship. It is God's gift, and is for the expression of intimacy and the continuation of the human race.

Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:3-6; Eph. 5:21-33; Col. 3:18-19; 1 Pet. 3:1-7; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Heb. 13:4; Gen. 1:27-28; Prov. 5:15-23

## Family

The family is ordained by God as society's basic unit. Its nucleus is a husband and a wife and any children they may have. Scripture commands parents to provide the proper environment in which children can grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As an expression of this responsibility, parents are encouraged to bring their children before the congregation in an act of public dedication. By instruction and example, parents are to teach their children about faith in God, leading them toward personal acceptance of Christ as saving Lord. Children are to honor and obey their parents, and so learn to become responsible individuals through their parents' loving support and discipline. All family members share obligation for the care of one another.

Gen. 1:27-28; Gen. 2:24; Deut. 6:5-7; Ps. 78:1-8; Prov. 22:6; Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21; 1 Sam. 1:27-28; Luke 2:22; Matt. 19:13-15; 2 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 3:14-15; Ex. 20:12; Prov. 6:20-24; Luke 2:51-52; Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; 1 Tim. 5:8

# THE CHURCH

## Worship

The church worships when believers gather to praise and honor the living God. His nature and works call forth responses of reverence, submission, adoration, and celebration. These responses take the forms of reading and declaring His Word, praying, singing, giving, and other activities that glorify God. The worship experience should never be taken lightly. It requires preparing the heart, focusing the mind, exercising the will, and the participation of each worshiper. True worship glorifies God and renews His people.

1 Chr. 16:7-36; Ps. 8:1-9; Ps. 100:1-5; Rom. 11:33-36; Acts 2:42-47; 1 Cor. 14:26; Eph. 5:18-20; John 4:23-24; Rom. 12:1-2; Ps. 33:1; Heb. 12:28-29

## Fellowship

The source of Christian fellowship is our relationship with God restored through Christ. Fellowship is the bond that forms as God joins believers to one another in Christ's body by His Spirit. True fellowship is Christ-centered, resulting in a unity which is based on truth, love, and humility. Therefore togetherness without substance, emotion without obedience, or tolerance without caring cannot be fellowship. Genuine fellowship will produce a sense of mutual concern, wholehearted service, and abiding joy. The nearest the church approaches the divine ideal of fellowship is in the experience of the communion service.

1 John 1:1-3; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 4:1-6; Eph. 4:14-16; Phil. 2:1-4; John 13:34-35; Gal. 5:13-15; 1 John 1:3-4

## Discipleship

Jesus calls people to follow Him, learn from Him, and bring others to Him. This lifelong process is discipleship. It begins as the Holy Spirit leads persons to repentance and faith in Christ. It continues as they use the resources available in Christ and the Spirit, in Scripture and the church, to grow in the life of faith. The church is responsible to shepherd and nurture believers in their growth. Discipleship is not optional for the Christian. The life goal of every believer is Christlikeness.

Matt. 11:28-30; Matt. 16:24-26; Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 14:25-33; Phil. 4:19; John 16:13-14; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 10:23-25; Eph. 4:11-16; Matt. 7:21-23

## Stewardship

God has entrusted to all persons resources to manage during their lifetime; for example, life, family, time, abilities, opportunities, and material possessions. While providing these for our enjoyment, He likewise instructs believers to entrust all back to Him, to be rich in good deeds, generous and willing to share. Because our culture has clouded the difference between real and perceived needs, the believer must learn to be content with what God has provided and renounce selfish materialism. Our example is Christ, who, though rich, became poor for the sake of others. Stewards who are found faithful do not put their trust in material possessions; they entrust these possessions to God, using them for His glory and the extension of His kingdom.

1 Chr. 29:14; Ps. 24:1; Ecc. 2:24-25; 2 Cor. 8:3-5; 2 Cor. 9:6-15; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Matt. 6:24-34; Phil. 4:11-13; 1 Tim. 6:6-10; Heb. 13:5; 2 Cor. 8:9; Prov. 11:28; Luke 16:1-13; 1 Cor. 4:2

## **Discipline**

The church is called to be a body which reflects God's character of holy love. Therefore the spiritual well-being of each member is its concern. This concern is shown in discipline that seeks the restoration of members whose behavior is damaging their relationship with God or other people. The primary responsibility for reconciliation rests with the person(s) involved. If this responsibility is not fulfilled, the church must take initiative to effect reconciliation because persistent sin weakens the health of the entire body. If these efforts fail, the final recourse is to remove the unrepentant member(s).

Eph. 1:3-6; 1 Pet. 1:14-16; 1 John 4:7-8, 1 John 4:16; Gal. 6:1; James 5:19-20; Matt. 5:23-24; Matt. 18:15-22; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; 1 Cor. 5:9-13

# **THE WORLD**

## **The State**

God has ordained governments as His agency for maintaining social order in a sinful world. Christians are to submit to governments by obeying their laws, paying taxes, and honoring those in office. We are to pray for our leaders so that we may lead quiet and godly lives. Christians should minister on behalf of the downtrodden, working within the system to bring about justice. When faced with an oppressive social order, they are to respond with love, demonstrating within the church a Christian alternative. Where obedience to Scripture conflicts with the law of the land, believers must be willing to suffer for what is right. Knowing that both individuals and governments are under God's sovereignty, the church summons all to repentance and submission to the Lordship of Christ.

Matt. 22:15-22; Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-15; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; Prov. 14:31; Prov. 19:17; Prov. 22:22-23; 1 John 3:17; Isaiah 10:1-2; Amos 5:10-15; Dan. 3:13-18; Acts 5:29; 1 Pet. 2:20-23; 1 Pet. 4:12-19; Acts 17:30-31

## **Three Negatives**

Obedience to Christ is the center of Brethren life. This conviction has led the Brethren historically to practice non-conformity, non-resistance, and non-swearing. In non-conformity, Brethren have sought to follow the way of Christ in contrast to the way of the world. In non-resistance, Brethren have renounced the Christian's use of violence in combating evil, striving, as far as possible, to be reconciled to all persons. In non-swearing, Brethren have sought to lead such trustworthy Christian lives that oath-taking becomes unnecessary. Every believer must live in a way that exhibits to the world the truth and love of Christ.

Matt. 7:13-14; Rom. 12:1-2; 1 Pet. 1:14-16; Matt. 5:38-46; Rom. 12:14-21; Matt. 5:33-37; James 5:12; Matt. 5:13-16

## **Social Concern**

The church is called to be both witness and servant in society. As witness, the church is salt and light in the world. This includes not only living obediently but also addressing the moral and social issues of the day from the foundation of Scripture. As servant, the church is to radiate God's love manifested in Jesus. Among believers we seek to express this love through mutual aid and care. In the world we seek to minister to the whole range of human needs. Service to others is in reality service to Christ and a necessary expression of our obedience.

Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:12; Zech. 7:8-14; James 2:1-16; Eph. 5:1-2; 1 John 4:7-11; Acts 2:44-45; Col. 3:12-14; Matt. 25:31-46

## **Evangelism**

God has reached out in love through the person and work of Jesus to redeem a lost world. He demonstrated the heart of evangelism by sharing the good news with all whom He met. Christ promised abundant life to those who respond in obedient faith. Following His example, each believer, grateful to God and burdened for fallen humanity, shares with others the new life in Christ. This witness is a natural expression of the total attitude and life of the person under the Lordship of Christ. Empowered and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, believers model and proclaim good news to a dying world for the purpose of making disciples and building the church.

John 3:16; Matt. 4:23-25; John 5:24; John 10:10; Acts 5:24; 1 Pet. 3:15; Acts 1:8; Matt. 28:18-20

# Discussion Questions: The Life of Faith

## PART ONE: THE INDIVIDUAL

### Obedience

1. Read James 2:18-26. How do you respond to the declaration that “faith without works is dead”? How is works to faith similar to the relationship of the spirit to the body? How is it dissimilar? Is James advocating a works-based righteousness?
2. How do you differentiate obedience, faithfulness and discipleship from works-based righteousness? What is the significance of “works” to our theology? What does the Centennial Statement mean when it reads, “We are to obey the teachings of Christ and the apostles not as a means of salvation, but as a grateful response to the grace we have received”?
3. What does true obedience look like to you? How do we guard against blind obedience? What does the phrase “blind obedience” even mean? What makes such obedience “blind”?
4. How does your understanding of the relationship of “works” and “faith” affect your understanding of the work you do on a regular basis? How is your performance on the job a reflection of your obedience to Christ?

## The Devotional Life

1. Read Psalm 1. How does the Lord “watch over the righteous”? In what ways do the wicked experience “destruction” (v. 6)? How does Proverbs 9:10 shape our understanding of this passage? Why is the “fear of the Lord” the “beginning of wisdom” (9:10)? What is wisdom and how does it relate to God’s watchfulness over the righteous of Psalm 1:6a?
2. The Centennial Statement describes a “deepening trust, growing understanding, and Christlike living” emerging from a devotional life. How do you cultivate a devotional life individually and communally? What are the core practices of such a life?
3. In seasons of plenty, what does your devotional life look like? Compare/contrast that with seasons of struggle and crisis? How are they similar and how do they differ?

## Spiritual Maturity

1. Read Ephesians 4:11-13. Define the roles of apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers? Look around your church. Where do you see apostles? Prophets? Evangelists? Shepherds? Teachers? Why does the Apostle Paul identify these roles specifically? How do they help shape a church for spiritual maturity?
2. What does spiritual maturity look like to you? Identify people that you would say are “spiritually mature.” What makes them that way?
3. Did the people you mentioned above embody “wisdom, balance, and...love”? Why are these three qualities important for spiritual maturity?

## PART TWO: THE FAMILY

### Marriage

1. Read Genesis 2:24. What does it mean for the man and a woman to “become one flesh”? How do the two become one? Read Genesis 2:24 in light of Ephesians 5:21-33. How is marriage a sign of Christ’s relationship with the church?
2. What does mutual submission look like in marriage? How do husbands and wives “love...through mutual respect and support”?
3. If the “sexual relationship” is exclusive to the marriage of one man to one woman, then what does intimacy look like for members of the same gender? How do you respond to the married couple who is unable to have children?
4. Why is heterosexual marriage significant to the witness of the church to the world? Why does the Bible make this relationship significant to the point of claiming the marriage of a husband and wife is a model of Christ’s relationship with his church?

### Family

1. Read Deuteronomy 6:5-7. What are the “commandments” of which this passage speaks? What does it mean for them to “be on our hearts”? How do we “impress” these on our children?
2. What does it mean for the family to be “ordained by God as society’s basic unit”? How is the family essential to a healthy, fair and functional society?
3. With Deuteronomy 6:5-7 and Ephesians 5:21-33 as our operating standard, how would you assess your family? The families in your church? Neighborhood? Nation? What does family look like around the world? How might our global neighbors help us better understand the role and importance of family?

## PART THREE: THE CHURCH

### Worship

1. Read John 4:23-24. How do believers worship God in “Spirit and in truth”?
2. How is corporate worship distinct from personal worship? How do we corporately worship in such a way as to transcend personal preferences?
3. What does a “true worship” that “glorifies God and renews His people” look like? Where have you seen it? What are key elements of such a worship life?
4. If worship is a 24/7 reality for the believer, then what is the purpose of gathered worship?

### Fellowship

1. Read Ephesians 4:14-16. Look around your church and assign body roles to specific individuals (i.e., hands, feet, eyes). What does it mean for Christ to be the head of your church?
2. The Centennial Statement makes a bold statement when it argues that “togetherness without substance, emotion without obedience, or tolerance without caring cannot be fellowship.” Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
3. Reflect on the communion service in your local church. How does that service reflect the “divine ideal of fellowship”? What does the communion service represent with its individual parts and in its entirety?

### Discipleship

1. Read Matthew 11:28-30. Where in your life do you find yourself “weary and burdened”? What is the “yoke” of Jesus and how does it provide rest? Why is this yoke important to discipleship?

2. Sketch out your discipleship journey. Make a chart that advances year by year. Where were the high points? What were the valleys? What trends do you see in your discipleship journey?
3. Read Matthew 11:28-30 again with Galatians 5:22-23. How do the fruits of the spirit assist us with growing into Christlikeness? What does the Apostle Paul mean when he writes that “against such things there is no law”?

## Stewardship

1. Read 1 Chronicles 29:14 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-7. How do these two verses, from the Old and New Testaments respectively, shape your understanding of generosity? What does it mean to be a “cheerful giver”? What does it mean for God to be a “cheerful giver”?
2. If all that we own belongs to God, then are we really being generous when we share? What does it mean for you to steward God’s generosity? How does this perspective shape your view of your time, money and possessions?
3. When we discuss stewardship we often discuss finances. What are other aspects of your life that you can steward for God? Take inventory of your time, money, possessions, relationships and ask God how you can better steward such resources for His glory and purposes.

## Discipline

1. Read 1 Peter 1:14-16. Is it possible to “be holy” as God is holy? If so, then how? If not, then how do you interpret this passage?
2. What does it mean for the “spiritual well-being” of each member to be a responsibility that the church shares? What does discipline look like through the lens of such care?
3. How has a broader consumer culture shaped the life of the church? How do we apply discipline in such an environment? If

you believe it's impossible, then how do you obey the biblical call to restorative discipline? If you believe it's possible, then how do you creatively navigate the stressors of our society?

4. From your experience, where have you seen discipline go wrong or too far? Where have you seen it work? What makes the difference?

## PART FOUR: THE WORLD

### The State

1. Read Romans 13:1-7. What is the purpose of government according to this passage? How does the prior chapter (Romans 12) share your understanding of this passage?
2. How do you feel that Christians should navigate their participation with government? How does the Centennial Statement instruct us in such matters?
3. How would you determine that a government is an “oppressive social order”? Where have you seen the church (nationally and globally) “respond with love, demonstrating within the church a Christian alternative” to such political entities?
4. How do you reconcile the call to “lead quiet and godly lives” with the call to “suffer for what is right”? What does this posture look like? What are the dangers of always being quiet or always challenging?

### Three Negatives

1. Read Matthew 5:13-16. What does it mean for the church to be “salt and light”? Why does Jesus use these illustrations to describe the desired witness of his followers?
2. Examine your life individually and the collective life of your congregation. Where in your history have you witnessed

nonconformity? What role has the posture of nonresistance played? Does non-swearing play a role in your life or the life of your congregation?

3. Examine these three negatives as three postures and creatively explore their meaning for today:
  - What does nonconformity look like for you today and why is it essential to following Jesus?
  - Why is the call to nonresistance important for us today and why is it essential to following Jesus?
  - How do we best practice non-swearing in our society and why is it essential to following Jesus?
4. How does nonconformity, nonresistance and non-swearing help us live out the call of Jesus in Matthew 5:13-16?

## Social Concern

1. Read Ephesians 5:1-2. What does it look like to “walk in the way of love”? Explore the imagery that the Apostle Paul uses when he calls the church in Ephesus to model the sacrificial love of Christ that was a “fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”
2. What does it mean for the church to be “both witness and servant in society”? In this central paradox of social concern, what does it look like when we go too far to one side or the other? Why is it important that we are simultaneously witness AND servant of society?
3. How does Matthew 25:31-46 inform your understanding of Ephesians 5:1-2? How is your church living into the kingdom reality of these texts? How are you living into them?

## Evangelism

1. Read John 3:16-17. How does verse 17 inform our posture in being a people of John 3:16? How does reading John 3:16 through the lens of 1 John 3:16 add further clarity to our posture?

2. How do you see yourself modeling and proclaiming good news to a dying world? How is your church doing with these tasks? Why is it important to not separate modeling from proclaiming (and vice-versa)?
3. What does “making disciples” and “building the church” look like to you? Is “making disciples” the same as evangelism? Why or why not? Likewise, is “building the church” the same as guest assimilation? Why or why not?
4. According to the Centennial Statement, what is the ultimate purpose of evangelism? Why is it important for us to monitor our posture as we go?

PART TWO:

**How Brethren Understand  
God's Word**



# Background

IN 1989, AFFIRMING THE RECOMMENDATION of Moderator Kenneth Sullivan, General Conference authorized the formation of a Committee on Doctrine, Research, and Publication. This committee was charged with the responsibility of helping the denomination to “articulate clearly its faith and practice and pass on its heritage to succeeding generations.” The committee first turned its attention to the Brethren approach to Scripture, for this issue is the foundation for all others. Thus began a two-year process, the goal of which became the publication of a statement describing how Brethren understand and use Scripture. The committee sought to make this statement as representative of current Brethren thought as possible by eliciting input from pastors at the 1992 and 1993 Pastors’ Conferences and from the wider church through Leadership Letter and discussion at the 1993 General Conference. That conference accepted this document as a report of the committee and authorized its publication and dissemination.

The committee’s purpose was to create a concise, readable summary of the Brethren approach to Scripture usable by both pastors and lay people. They wanted to produce a document that would enable Brethren to develop a self-conscious, intentional approach to understanding the Bible. Scriptural references are provided for documentation and more in-depth study. A list of resources for further study appears at the end.

The committee affirms the view of A Centennial Statement (1984) that each generation of Brethren must come to terms with the importance of Scripture for its faith and life. This document represents an attempt to express the Brethren understanding of Scripture for this generation.

# The Importance of the Word

BRETHREN HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A people of the Word. Because we affirm Scripture as the rule for our faith and life, we recognize the need to interpret it correctly. Biblical interpretation is especially important for the Brethren, because we have no tradition or official arm of the church to dictate how we must understand the Bible. Since we have never allowed such things to fix the meaning of Scripture, we must try to apply Scripture itself to our lives in each generation.

Biblical interpretation is especially important for the Brethren today. Different views of the nature and interpretation of Scripture are behind the different positions people take on the important issues of our day. We need to understand our biblical heritage in order to discuss these current issues. Such a process of understanding would reacquaint the present generation with the principles that have guided the Brethren in the past. It would also encourage discussion and dialogue among the Brethren as we seek greater consensus on biblical interpretation and application. We must become aware of our own view of Scripture before we can speak effectively to other believers and the wider culture.

## God, the Revealer

The understanding of Scripture begins with the knowledge that God has chosen to communicate with us. Without this revelation, we could not know God at all. God has spoken to us through creation, through human nature, through words, through events in history, and finally through becoming flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.

Much of God's revelation in word, in deed, and in Jesus Christ is recorded in Scripture. This is why we can go to Scripture to understand God's character and will. In fact, it is only in Scripture that we can learn about God's redemptive plan in Christ.

But Scripture contains more than knowledge about God. In Scripture, God speaks to us in love, in order to initiate a relationship with us through redemption in Christ and to bring us into relationship with one another. As we respond to God's loving self-disclosure, we become part of the people of God, a body of believers whose head is Jesus Christ.

## **Jesus Christ, the Living Word**

Brethren affirm that Jesus Christ is the Living Word of God, the one who reveals God fully and finally. In His life, teaching, death, resurrection, and living presence, Jesus has shown us all we need to know about who God is and who we are.

Brethren have believed that Christianity is first and foremost a relationship of loving discipleship to Christ. This relationship with Christ is the first priority in understanding Scripture: it is both the beginning and the end of the process. We must know Christ before we can fully understand Scripture. We then go to Scripture in order to know Him better and to proclaim Him to others so that they might come to know Him too.

Brethren have emphasized that Christ is not just our redeemer but also our teacher and example. The goal of our lives as Christians is to become like Him. The Brethren approach to Scripture thus puts Jesus Christ at the center. It begins with Christ and ends with Christlikeness.

## **Scripture, the Outer Word**

Scripture is the Word of God in written form. The early Brethren called it the Outer Word, the external written witness which, together with the Holy Spirit, the Inner Word, testifies to the Living Word, Jesus Christ. Because Scripture presents God's revelation to us, it is our only reliable source of knowledge about the mind and will of God. The Bible records God's revelation, witnesses to its truth, and explains it to us. Brethren historically have affirmed that the Bible's authority comes from its witness to Christ as the Living Word. The New Testament, because it witnesses most directly to Christ, is the final rule for our faith and life.

The nature of Scripture, like the nature of Christ, is both human and divine. The Bible itself says that Scripture is inspired or breathed out by God. This means that God guided the human writers to such an extent that what they wrote could be considered God's Word written. The Bible expresses God's eternal truth in the words of particular human beings in history. It shows particular events in history that are relevant to people in all times and places. It is a collection of books written over 1600 years by many different people who had their own concerns, purposes, and styles. Yet it is unified by God's unchanging plan through history to reach out to human beings, make peace with them, and call them into a new obedient community, the people of God. The Bible's eternal message must be thought through and restated in each generation to speak to the people of that generation.

The Bible tells us both what to believe and how to live. Besides giving us knowledge about God, it also introduces us to the person of Jesus Christ. Through Scripture, the Holy Spirit enables us to come into relationship with Christ and grow into His likeness. Because of its unique character, the Bible has a unique claim on us. Brethren have always held the Bible to be completely true and completely reliable. Jesus Himself said that Scripture, which to Him meant the Old Testament, cannot be broken.

## **The Holy Spirit, the Inner Word**

The Holy Spirit has a crucial role in interpreting Scripture. The early Brethren called the Holy Spirit the Inner Word who testifies to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, and who helps us to understand the Outer Word, Scripture. Just as the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is necessary in order to understand and obey the Scriptures. This means that only believers can understand the spiritual significance of the Bible. It also means that all believers have the privilege of reading and understanding Scripture for themselves.

Brethren have believed that the Holy Spirit is as active in the church today as in the days of the apostles. We have been confident that the Spirit would illumine the Scriptures for us and guide us into truth. Both then and now, the Spirit testifies to Christ. Because of our confidence in the Holy Spirit's work, we are open to new light on the Scriptures, relying

on the Spirit to give us new insight into God's eternal truth and help us apply that truth to our lives.

Brethren have affirmed balance and agreement between the Inner Word and the Outer Word. The Scriptures do not come alive to us without the Holy Spirit to interpret them to us and convict us of their truth. Likewise, it is difficult and unwise for us to interpret the Holy Spirit's witness in our hearts without the confirming testimony of the Scriptures. Promptings of the Holy Spirit will not contradict the Outer Word. The Holy Spirit and the inspired Scriptures will always agree.

## **Being Conformed to the Word**

The attitudes with which people approach Scripture strongly influence what they find there. As Brethren, we approach Scripture believing that we are not to be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. That is, rather than being conformed to the world, we are to be conformed to the Living Word, Jesus Christ, through obedience to the Outer Word, Scripture.

We attempt to read Scripture with both mind and heart. In order to understand the Bible, we study it diligently, using our renewed minds under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We seek to find the plain sense of Scripture, the meaning that the original writers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, intended to convey. The early Brethren emphasized the simplicity and clarity of Scripture; they pointed out that our greatest problem is not understanding Scripture but obeying it.

In order to understand the Bible, we also read it devotionally, asking the Inner Word, the Holy Spirit, to apply it to our hearts and transform our lives. Brethren have always taken a very practical approach to Scripture, reading it to find God's will and obey it. Bible reading, like all other aspects of the Christian life, should lead to discipleship. Brethren have usually approached Scripture with an attitude of humility and love. Rather than exerting mastery over the Word, we have tried to live under the Word. While regarding doctrine as very important, we have refused to develop doctrines that go beyond what Scripture affirms.

In our interpretations, we have found that the truth is often a balance between extremes. Both in our study and in our devotions, we go to Scripture to be closer to the Lord we love and serve.

## **Being Obedient to the Word**

Because the Christian life is a relationship of loving discipleship to Christ, we as Brethren read Scripture with the intention of obeying our Lord in all things. A commitment to obedience may be the most important attitude with which we approach Scripture. Brethren have held that Scripture can be fully understood only by someone who is willing to obey it. The basis for this obedience is our love for the Lord who has loved us. It is not enough just to read the Bible or hear the Word preached. We must study the Bible and obey it so the Holy Spirit can use it to change our lives and bless us.

Besides obeying the commands of Scripture, the early Brethren sought to follow the example of Christ and the apostles. They practiced a radical obedience, putting into practice what they found in the Bible, regardless of the consequences. They believed that scriptural demands must not be rationalized away. They looked especially to the Sermon on the Mount for the ethics of the Christian life. Complete obedience to the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles is the basis for the Brethren practice of the ordinances, including some practices (such as footwashing and anointing) which other groups regard as nonessential.

## **Being a Community under the Word**

The community of believers is the theme the Brethren have found in Scripture, the context in which we have read Scripture, and the context in which we have put it into practice. The central theme Brethren have found in Scripture is God's eternal purpose through history to form a people for His own glory. God began that purpose in the people of Israel and continues it today in the church, the community that is Christ's body. As His body, we are to grow to maturity in Christ and to be united in mind and spirit. Obedience to the Word is thus corporate as well as individual.

As part of our commitment to one another, Brethren read Scripture together to help one another understand and obey it. The early Brethren would test their interpretations by discussing them with one another and by attempting to live out their decisions together. They were confident that the Holy Spirit would bring them to consensus in matters of faith and practice. They called this finding the mind of Christ. To assist this

process, they practiced mutual submission, encouraging one another and accepting correction. When they could not agree, they would bear with one another and wait for consensus to develop. Thus, in their use of Scripture, they tried to find a balance between the opinions of the individual and the unity of the body.

## **Our Ideas about the Word: Historically**

All readers of Scripture come to the Bible with certain ideas about how to interpret it and certain questions they want to ask of it. The questions they come with partly determine the answers they find. The ideas they bring can make understanding easier or more difficult. Brethren ideas about Scripture have been especially influenced by Anabaptism and Pietism, the two movements that were foundational for the early Brethren. Both Anabaptism and Pietism had a high regard for Scripture, seeing it as God's Outer Word that testifies to the revelation in Jesus Christ. But they also held that the Inner Word, the Holy Spirit, is absolutely necessary in order to hear God's voice in Scripture. For both movements, obedience to the Outer Word demonstrates faith in God and love for Christ.

The early Brethren took very seriously their commitment to Scripture. They understood that Scripture was the primary witness to their living Lord, Jesus Christ. They accepted what they read at face value and sought to obey it fully, as individuals and as a community. Though upholding the New Testament as their final authority, they believed that all Scripture was divinely inspired. They knew and used both testaments.

Over the years, the Brethren have remained fairly consistent in their approach to Scripture. Several changes in emphasis have occurred, however. During the nineteenth century, the traditional order or customs of the Brethren gained an authority almost equal to Scripture.

The "Progressives" (the present day Brethren Church) reacted against this stress on the "old order." In their reaction, however, the Progressives tended to take a more individualistic approach to interpreting Scripture, giving less weight to the need to work for consensus within the community. Likewise, The Brethren Church, with its emphasis on educated pastors, moved toward a more reasoned approach to the faith. At times,

we have tended to shift the primary source of authority from the Living Word, Jesus Christ, to the Outer Word, Scripture.

Recently, as in the Centennial Statement of 1983, we have reaffirmed the primacy of Jesus Christ.

## **Our Ideas about the Word: Today**

Brethren share many ideas about Scripture with other Protestant traditions. For example, we believe that a proper understanding of Scripture must take into account the history and culture behind it, as well as the words and grammar in which it is written. Readers of the Bible must interpret every passage in its immediate context and in the context of the whole of Scripture. Similarly, we should interpret particular statements in light of universal scriptural principles. Like any other book, the Bible should be understood literally unless the language seems to be used in a figurative way. Symbolic passages should be interpreted in the light of teaching passages. These principles are useful in understanding any ancient book. As conservative Protestants, however, we believe that the Bible is more than just an ancient book; it is God speaking to us.

Brethren also differ from other Protestant traditions. Readers from different traditions have different starting points when they read the Bible. Even if they believe the entire Bible to be inspired, they still have their favorite emphases. For example, Lutheran interpreters begin with the distinction between law and gospel. The Reformed tradition begins with the sovereignty of God. Dispensationalists begin with their understanding of the Kingdom and the events of the end times. Pentecostals begin with their experience of the Holy Spirit. Readers from a liberation theology perspective, whether African-American, Third World, or Feminist, begin with the idea that salvation means social, political, and economic liberation. Brethren, like the Anabaptists before them, begin with the person of Christ, especially as witnessed to in the Gospels.

We cannot come to the Bible without any ideas about it; we need a framework of things we already know in order to understand something new. Problems arise when we are unaware of our own ideas or make them so important that we will not let them be challenged or corrected by what we find in Scripture. Brethren have always been committed to

testing biblical interpretations by the standard of Scripture itself. In our faithfulness to the Word, we should abandon any interpretations that do not meet that standard. The best safeguard against imposing our own ideas on Scripture is to be aware of our own approach to Scripture, the approaches of others, and then let Scripture speak for itself.

## **Applying the Word**

In order to apply the Bible to matters of faith and practice, we must decide how to compare Scripture with Scripture. Our starting point and our emphases will influence how much weight we give to the Bible's different elements.

Brethren affirm that Jesus Christ is the center of Scripture, the key to understanding it. The person and message of Christ determine which issues are central and which are peripheral.

Brethren see both continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. God's nature and purpose are eternal. God's revelation of that nature and purpose was gradual, coming to a climax in Jesus Christ. The Brethren understand Old and New Testaments in terms of promise and fulfillment: the Old Testament looks forward to Christ, and the New Testament witnesses to His coming and interprets His work. The Old Testament gives a partial picture of God's character and will; the New Testament contains "the perfection of Christ." Because of the centrality and finality of Christ, the Brethren historically have claimed the New Testament as their only creed.

When the early Brethren studied an issue, they took a harmonizing, Christ-centered approach to Scripture. They used both Old and New Testaments and considered all relevant passages, but they allowed the New Testament to have the last word. Within the New Testament, the Brethren valued the Gospels because their witness to Christ was so direct; they assumed that the rest of the New Testament was consistent with the Gospels' witness. When deciding about faith and practice, they tried to harmonize differing passages. The Brethren practice of three-fold communion, for example, was developed by harmonizing John's account of the last supper with the accounts in the other three Gospels. The Brethren were guided in all their interpretations by the teaching and example of Christ and the apostles. In trying to apply Scripture,

the Brethren have had many discussions about the relationship between scriptural principles and the forms in which they are expressed. As our practice of the ordinances shows, we have followed biblical forms in some instances in which other Christians have chosen to follow only the principles. But we have also acknowledged that eternal scriptural principles may need to be expressed in new ways in new cultural settings. We have not always come to the same conclusions. But we have tried to live out with one another the adage used by the Progressives: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

