

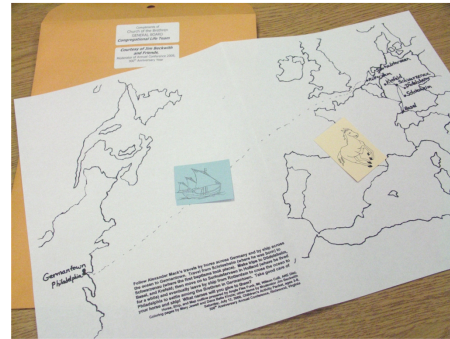
Saturday, July 12, 2008, Annual Conference Sermon based on Philippians 3:7-11
James M. Beckwith, 2008 Annual Conference Moderator

Begin with Surrender

They were young. Married, yes. Parents already. But young! 27 years old Alexander was; Anna Margaret only 25, when they had to flee their home because of their faith. Can you imagine wrestling so earnestly with scriptural teaching, wanting so very much to obey Jesus that you choose to act in ways that turn your whole world upside down!



Children's Packet



Map with horse and ship

The children tonight have a packet of materials created by the Congregational Life Team, which includes a map with a little horse and a little ship to trace the routes that Alexander and Anna with their two small sons followed, as they fled their hometown of Schriesheim in August of 1706, as depicted in this drawing by Mary Jewell in Myrna Grove's book for the children entitled, *Alexander Mack: A Man who Rippled the Waters*.



They left family and friends behind to flee, perhaps to Heidelberg, eventually moving with other Pietists to the isolated village of Schwarzenau, where in 1708 they would engage in illegal baptism. And why? Because they had studied the Bible for themselves and were beginning to understand that baptism should only take place when a person is old enough to be a believer, not when they are first born. Alexander and Anna counted the cost. Surrendered all they had known. And sought to follow Jesus faithfully.

With the Apostle Paul, they were beginning to realize that everything else in life is mere rubbish compared to gaining Christ, being found in Christ, and having a righteousness through faith in Christ.

*Überschlag die Kost, spricht Jesu Christ, wann du den Grund wilt legen.
(Geistreiches Gesang-Buch vor alle liebhabende Seelen der Wahrheit, 1720)*

*Christ Jesus says, "Count well the cost when you lay the foundation."
Are you resolved, though all seem lost, to risk your reputation, your self, your wealth,
for Christ the Lord, as you now give your solemn word?*

If that hymn written by Alexander Mack does not catch your breath and widen your eyes, you haven't quite paid attention. Following Jesus is risky! Living out the teachings of the New Testament brings conflict, struggle, and tensions ... within ourselves and between us and others. People often feel uncomfortable with someone who echoes Jesus' command to love our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us, to turn the unsmitten cheek to an attacker and allow him to smite that cheek as well. "Ridiculous!" friends and neighbors may well say. "Unpatriotic!" "Stupid!" Has anyone taken offense recently because of *your* commitment to follow Jesus?

Überschlag die Kost! Count well the cost! And lay a foundation ... the foundation of Jesus Christ ... upon which you build your entire life.

Oh, there are other foundations that we sometimes try to use.

When it was announced that I was on the ballot for the office of Moderator-elect and therefore might help lead this historic 300th Anniversary Annual Conference, my father's first cousin wrote to remind me that the legend within our family is that her grandmother, my great-grandmother, was a Vetter, descended from Lukas Vetter, one of the first 8 Brethren baptized in the Eder River at Schwarzenau in 1708. Quite a connection, if it be true.

Many of us claim a Brethren pedigree. Others are descended from "convinced Brethren" – you know, those who came into the church by their own choice, like my mom, often more fully committed to the "Brethren ways" than those who were "carried into the church" as infants. But neither ancestry is the true foundation, of course – there are no coattails to ride into the kingdom of heaven. We must make our own individual commitment to follow Jesus faithfully.

Nevertheless, in a few short weeks I will stand in special awe on the banks of the Eder River in Germany as I ponder that one who might be my great-great...(however many greats)-grandfather ... actually stood shivering on the banks of that same river 300 years ago, risking his life to declare his conviction that babies should not be baptized and that baptism should express complete surrender of all that we are, all that we have, all that we ever hope to be ... complete surrender, full immersion, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Awesome!

Radical discipleship, we call it – risking our reputations, our very selves, our wealth ... to make clear to ourselves and to everyone else that we'd rather have Jesus ... more than anything else in all creation! ... that we'd rather "be found in him," as the Apostle Paul says, not thinking we can control how our lives are made right with God, but trusting Jesus to make us right in God's sight ... to teach us the right way to live and feel and think and act. We must surrender to God.

"Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss," Paul exclaims, *"for the sake of Christ!"* All the "credentials" so honored by the religious people of his day – proper circumcision, superb ancestry (Paul came from the tribe of Benjamin, lineage of Israel, a "Hebrew of Hebrews!"), diligent zeal to obey the Law (*"faultless,"* Paul says, in *"legalistic righteousness"*) – all of that prestige, pedigree, and accomplishment no longer valued, Paul writes, *"compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!"* *"I consider them rubbish,"* Paul writes – garbage, trash – not because they are worthless, I would say, but because they mustn't get in

the way of our being able to "*be found in*" Christ – fully/totally enmeshed in the work that Jesus is doing in the world, doing our part in carrying out his purposes, including "*the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,*" in order to be raised from the dead.

That's radical – giving up life-as-it-has-been so that God can bring forth Life-as-God-knows-it-must-become. Radical discipleship – that's what the first Brethren were about. Immersing their whole selves, surrendering absolutely everything in their lives to God in the waters of baptism. They *began with surrender*, allowing God to make of them what God wanted them to become.

They were determined to live out the teachings of the New Testament, most particularly the things that Jesus specifically tells us to do: be baptized when we are old enough to believe, wash one another's feet, turn the other cheek Sometimes it seems like it should be just so simple. Do what Jesus says to do. Take the scriptures very seriously. And yet we find it difficult, don't we? That's why we gather for Annual Conference year after year ... because there are issues to discuss, to pray about, to study scriptures over, as we seek to follow Jesus together.

One of the phrases that etched its way into my soul at Bethany Seminary was spoken by David Wieand, Professor of Biblical Studies, in the midst of a class conversation about scriptures we found difficult. "If it is in the Bible," David Wieand said, "we must take it very seriously." Alexander Mack might say, we must find a way to live it out together.

Such radical discipleship brings real struggle in the church. Let me cite three current examples:

- (1) Some among us are convinced by Acts 10 that we must count the cost in order to welcome into the church people whom others do not accept. Acts 10, you will remember, describes how Peter learns to treat Gentiles as brothers and sisters in the faith, even though welcoming Gentiles clearly contradicts what Peter has learned from scripture. Peter knows God wants him to accept these Gentiles because the Holy Spirit is clearly evident in the Gentiles' lives. Peter's obedience to accept all whom God accepts, along with Paul's boldness to not require Gentiles to be circumcised in order to become Christians, transformed the early church. And some among us seek to live out this scripture by welcoming homosexual persons into the church, believing the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives without them needing to change their sexual lifestyle.

Others among us are convinced by 1 Corinthians 6 and other scriptures which state that specific patterns of behavior must change in order for people to enter the Kingdom of God. Sexual patterns of behavior are specifically addressed in 1 Corinthians 6, with a description of the transformation that took place in people's lives as they became a part of the family of faith, such that they did not continue in a former lifestyle. Those with this perspective call for self-discipline to not live out instinctive patterns of behavior, including certain sexual impulses, as we follow Jesus together.

Now both of these groups seek to be faithful to the scriptures as they understand them. Both believe that the church will be further transformed when we fully surrender to what the Lord asks us to do. But each side has very different understandings regarding what it means to surrender to God and be transformed in Christ. I know it resolves very little for me to state what I observe about our impasse on this issue at this time, but I would like

for you to at least acknowledge that some on each side, some on each side are earnestly seeking to follow Jesus and live out the teachings of the scriptures.

- (2) Another struggle for us as we seek to be faithful to the scriptures surfaces when we talk about relating to people of other religions.

Should we expect them to reject the religion in which they grew up in order to affirm that Jesus is "*the way, the truth, and the life*" through whom alone people may come to the Father, as John 14:6 declares?

Or should we find ways to build upon the patterns of faith they have already experienced, as Paul does in Acts 17:23, when he tells the people of Athens, "*I looked carefully at your objects of worship*" and found reference to an unknown God, whom I now want to help you understand is the Lord who made heaven and earth and who raised Jesus from the dead to become the One to whom we all must answer. From this perspective, we learn from other religions as well as sharing with them our convictions.

Very different attitudes about other religions, affecting not just our church life, but our witness in this tumultuous world. How shall we live out the teachings of the New Testament as disciples of Jesus together?

- (3) Third example: we also struggle to be of one mind with regard to mission philosophy. To my way of thinking, it is as if we accent a different word in the plea recorded in Acts 16:9 which the Apostle Paul heard in a vision: "*Come on over to Macedonia and help us.*"

Macedonia can represent any place outside of our home area, and the issue seems to be whether we hear the call to "come and help **us**" or to "come and **help** us."

Some believe the church must surrender its own agenda and only be concerned to help people elsewhere do what *they* feel called to do – to build *their* church alongside them according to their request.

Others believe the scriptures call us into gregarious mission that goes to *help* wherever our skills and knowledge can be useful, inviting others to become part of *our* church in their land.

I find it striking that the early Brethren struggled with some similar issues as they sought to discern how to put into practice what they felt the Lord was leading them to do in their time –

Sexuality was an item of discussion among the first Brethren as they tried to figure out whether abstaining from sexual relations within marriage was a holier way of living, something Conrad Beissel invited Brethren to practice at the Ephrata Cloister later on.

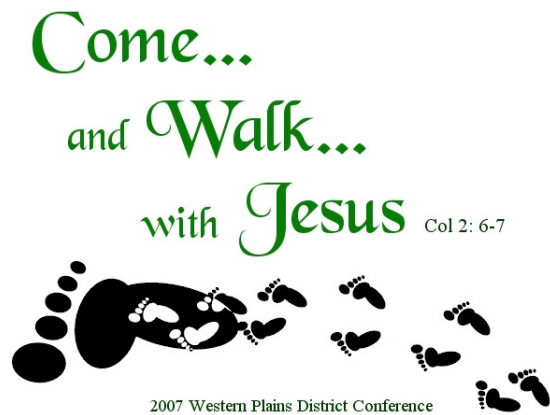
Struggling over how to relate to members of another faith tradition brought tremendous turmoil to the Krefeld gathering of the first Brethren, as they disagreed vehemently over how much discipline to impose in response to the marriage of a Brethren minister to a Mennonite woman (interfaith marriage). Factions formed. Some followed Peter Becker

to America, where their slowness to re-organize as a congregation may, in part, have been caused by emotions still tense from that earlier conflict.

It is so very difficult when people are so earnest, so sincere about wanting to live out the teachings of the scriptures, eager to do what Jesus says to do, risking everything to be obedient, while still wanting to do so in fellowship, in mutual accountability, with brothers and sisters in God's family ... it is such a challenge when brothers and sisters in Christ simply do not see eye to eye on what the Lord requires of us.

How shall we learn to surrender together to God, that we might be transformed together in Christ and empowered to be the Body of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit?

I want to share with you a drawing that caught my attention this past year. It was drawn by Connie Rhodes from the Newton congregation in Kansas and served as the logo for the Western Plains District Conference held in McPherson.



You see the big footprint of Jesus and all the little footprints moving to stand in the big footprint. To me, this portrays our calling as followers of Jesus – to place ourselves into his footprint, to become the impression on this world that God wants to make through us. The District Conference scripture theme upon which this logo is based was Colossians 2:6-7, *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”*

We are to be like Jesus. We are to be his Body, the very presence of Jesus in this world. We are to continue the work of Jesus. But none of us can fill that footprint all by ourselves. None of our footprints are big enough to completely fill the footprint Jesus wants to make upon the world. So we stand beside others who stand in slightly different places within that same footprint. We don't all make the same emphasis. But we are all needed to fill in the footstep of Jesus, to make a true and full witness to the Way of Life revealed through Jesus Christ.

To take the logo even further, I expect that Jesus has a left foot as well as this right footprint – perhaps it stands in other places around the world. Some of Jesus' footprints are in Africa, some in India, some in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Brazil, all across the United States, Germany, and around the world. And all of those footprints lead to the cross. We are called to walk in Jesus' steps together – with many diverse people in a wide variety of cultural settings.

This week, especially in tomorrow's "Experience of Brethren Faith Journeys," we will consider the courage and commitment of some of the diverse people just within our own Brethren heritage – John Kline, Sarah Righter Major, Mattie Dolby, Wilbur and Mary Stover, Cyrus Bomberger, Dan West, Ted Studebaker, Anna Mow, Mai Sule Bui – and ever so many more, who have walked in the footsteps of Jesus, who have sought to follow Jesus faithfully over the past 300

years. And you will know "unsung" heroes who will not be mentioned this week, but who are precious in God's sight and in your hearts. I challenge you this week to consider *your* courage, *your* commitment ... to walk in the footprints of Jesus ... and to ponder what it means to make the impression of Jesus upon the world with those who stand in different parts of his footprint.

Now those little footprints all had to leave somewhere else behind in order to stand in the footprint of Jesus. Paul writes about that which must be left behind or at least no longer depended upon, if we are to be "found in Christ." We must surrender our pride, our pre-judgments, our efforts to be in control by our own strength, by our own knowledge. All of that must be surrendered to God in order for us to attain to Life with God! Our aim must be to become like Jesus in his death. Begin with surrender ... with surrender to God!

As we enter this week of deliberations and as we prepare to enter the fourth century of Brethren discipleship, I want to proclaim three affirmations of the Gospel that may help us find ways to follow Jesus together:

1. First affirmation: We are to make disciples of all people, regardless of what their lives have been like in the past. Absolutely everyone is welcome to follow Jesus with us! Most of you know that I have been speaking this message everywhere I go. The challenge was set before us last year at Annual Conference to get our congregations in gear to make disciples of all nations – both in response to the reality that we are not producing 8-10 children per family any more and therefore must invite people outside our biological families to follow Jesus with us if we are to grow as a church, and also in response to the vision of Rev. 7:9 that we are to gather around the throne of Christ with "every nation, tribe, people, and language" – so let's start doing that now! Every congregation is to report on its progress next year again, same as this year, via Standing Committee. Invite absolutely everybody to follow Jesus with us. All are welcome!
2. Second affirmation: Everyone who follows Jesus will be transformed. That is the heart statement of the Gospel. Jesus began his preaching by saying, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand ... repent – turn away from all sin – believe the Good News: God wants to give you new life in the power of the Holy Spirit! Immerse all that you are in full commitment to the Lord who created you, who redeems you with saving grace, and who will empower and guide you with the Holy Spirit. No one dare say, "you have to accept me the way I am." We shall all be changed. We may debate what that change will be like – whether we are to be transformed into using the impulses of our lives in holy ways or whether we are to be transformed into not using the impulses of our lives in order to be holy – but we cannot debate the reality that we shall be transformed in Christ.
3. Third affirmation: The Lord is the One who does the transforming. Not us. It was the Pharisees who tried to control what God's people must be and do. And Paul considers those regulations mere rubbish by comparison to what Jesus Christ does to people. Only when God's people truly share in Christ's sufferings and become like Jesus in his death ... only then can we hope to attain to being raised from the dead. It is only by the act of God that we are made right in the midst of our efforts to forget what is behind us and strain toward what is ahead, pressing on toward the goal of being called heavenward in Christ Jesus. *God* does the transforming as God sees best for each of us.

We may not feel very comfortable allowing others to discern exactly what transformation God wants to work in them. We may ask one another, as fellow disciples, "how do you take this scripture or that one into account." And we may need to make decisions now and again as to how we will set guidelines for various aspects of our life together. But ultimately, any true transformation in individuals or in the life of the church can only be the work of the Lord. We must be clear that the only call we dare issue is for each to surrender to God, not to us. It is the Lord alone who can transform us.

Throughout history, this has been very difficult for many in the church – to recognize that people must surrender to God instead of to church authorities. Our own church began in opposition to religious and governmental authorities who refused to let the first Brethren surrender to God in the way that their understanding of scripture compelled them to do! And our heritage calls us now – (1) as radical Pietists, to yearn to be obedient in every way to the Lord, and (2) as Anabaptists, to ask fellow believers to hold us accountable to our commitment to the Lord without forcing each other to surrender to anyone except to God. This is our heritage of radical discipleship; this is what the Lord calls us to do: Begin with surrender ... surrender *to God!*

We dare not determine for ourselves what our surrender will be, any more than anyone else can determine it for us. We must surrender *to God* and allow God to pull out of us what God wants us to become.

Our 300th Anniversary scripture makes this vivid: "*Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed; but if it dies, it produces many seeds.*" If the seed is determined to remain as it is, it will die. But if it dies to its current shape in life, giving itself fully over to God, the Lord can bring forth a whole new life form from its DNA and make it a blessing to the whole world.

I wonder what it will mean for our church to surrender to God, like a harvested seed at the end of this growing season of 300 years. How shall we humbly pray, yearn, seek to discern what God wants us to give up, what God wants us to take on, so that God might pull out from us whole new ways of being that will help us continue the work of Jesus most faithfully – launching the fourth century of the Brethren!

When I was a high school student in Jos, Nigeria, the chaplain of Hillcrest School, Doc Shank, from the Ashland Brethren, invited us to place a piece of wood into a sacred campfire and explain what it meant to us. Now I might not remember any of this, except that Uncle Doc asked my permission a couple days later to share in a sermon what I had said at the campfire that night. The fact that he found my comments significant made that experience indelible in my memory. This piece of wood, I said, is a symbol of parts of my life that I am just now discovering as a teenager, parts that I could not consecrate to the Lord when I was baptized at age 11, because I didn't know they were a part of who I am. And now I need to turn these parts of my life over to God, too, so that God's will can be done in all of my life.

So ... what will *you* surrender to God tonight? What impulses, what memories, what hurts or angers, hopes and dreams, what gifts and skills will you turn over to the Lord, to shape and mold, to transform as God knows will best shape your life as a radical disciple of Jesus Christ?

How will our church surrender to God together ... how will we allow God to place us into Jesus' footsteps together? How will we follow Jesus' footprints to the cross, through the cross? How will our rich heritage become like a seed planted, so that God can bring forth all that God wants the Church of the Brethren to become – transformed in Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

New Life awaits us! And it begins with surrender.

So I challenge us to *begin* this 300th Anniversary Annual Conference ... *with surrender*.

In the silence of these next few moments, surrender your self ... surrender the church ... to God.