



**Brethren in Christ U.S.**



# WEEK OF PRAYER AND FASTING

JANUARY 8-15, 2023

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AND FASTING **2023**

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## **Identity in Action: Practicing the Core Values of the BIC**

In May of 1999, fifty-one people from throughout the Brethren in Christ of North America gathered to answer one simple yet critical question: what are our most central beliefs and values and how do we articulate them? After three days of lively discussion and Spirit-filled debate, they emerged with the ten Core Values.

Our identity in Christ precedes every other aspect of who we are and what we are called to do as God's people. This Christ-centered identity impacts how we interact with the world and our fellow brothers and sisters in the faith. The ten Core Values help guide us in that pursuit, and all point to Jesus as the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

This year's Week of Prayer and Fasting theme – Identity in Action – invites us to take a closer look at these Core Values. Since there are ten, we are going to split them up over two years: the first half now in 2023 and the second half in 2024. To fill out our full week of devotionals, we have added three topics that coincide with and support the themes found in the Core Values.

We hope that as you prayerfully reflect on these values over the course of these eight days you will find yourself drawn closer to Christ and continue to become more like him.

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## Day 1 – Rooted in Identity

By Rob Patterson

### Scripture meditation: John 13:1-17

Rightly or wrongly (and of course I believe rightly) the world around me appears lost. I've written before regarding my alarm at the soaring indicators of a population in distress. A new term I recently discovered is "deaths of despair." Researchers are reporting that deaths from suicide, drug overdose, and alcoholism are largely responsible for a consecutive three-year decline of life expectancy in the United States. More informally, a friend who works as a custodian at a local community college recently told me: "Every night I clean piles of fingernails from the carpets. The students are biting their nails every day, all day."

My suspicion is that a significant underlying cause for this surge in anxiety and self-destruction is a lack of roots. Roots provide us with purpose, stability, connection, strength, and resilience. They give us a foundation to build on and a direction for daily living. But if we have no context for where we came from, why we're here, and where we're headed, it's easy to be disoriented, disheartened, frustrated, and greatly stressed. It's natural to look for peace and purpose in all the wrong places when that is your reality. We think we know what we want, we think we know what will satisfy, and we get hungrier and hungrier instead.

In John 13, during the Last Supper, Jesus was preparing his disciples for his impending departure. Verses 3-4 read, "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist." Note that Jesus' capacity to love to the end, to complete his mission of ultimate sacrifice, was rooted in identity. He knew he came from God, and he knew he was returning to God. With that knowledge firmly established, he offered himself.

One of my frequent prayers is a request for the Holy Spirit to do a mighty work of awakening. I ask our Father to graciously send his Spirit as a light to reveal to us whose we are, why we're here, and where we're headed. Then, in that confident place of strength, stability, and humility, I ask him to lead us to love purposefully and sacrificially. It's not always easy. It's not always pleasant. But living for a reason higher than and outside of ourselves does seem to be fulfilling.

**PRAYER** - *Father, please pour out your Spirit and show me my true identity. Help me to establish deep roots in Christ and live a fulfilling life of love and service for your sake. Thank you! Amen.*

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## Day 2 - Core Value: Experiencing God's Love and Grace

By Ron Bowell

### Scripture meditation: 1 Timothy 1:15

The first Brethren in Christ Core Value reads: "Experiencing God's Love and Grace - We value the free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit." What does that mean as we begin this new year?

Jesus was very clear in his purpose statement for coming to Earth. He declared it boldly in Luke's Gospel. "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

Paul the Apostle came to fully understand this purpose statement. In a letter to his spiritual son, Timothy, he wrote, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." (1 Tim. 1:15)

Paul realized that the worst of sinners required the greatest of Saviors. And that the greatest of Saviors, who came to us as a baby in Bethlehem, revealed himself to Paul in power on a dusty road to Damascus. Paul was not only saved because of that encounter; he was transformed. He discovered a salvation that is more than just an event. The Holy Spirit transformed Paul's entire life. He became a delivered disciple.

Evangelism and discipleship have always been important to the Brethren in Christ. As a believers church, both coming to Christ and living for Christ are important to us. We not only want to help people find Jesus; we want to help them follow Jesus.

Have you experienced the gift of salvation in Christ Jesus and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? If not, seek God's grace today. Like Paul, allow the Lord to change your life's direction.

And if you have experienced God's grace, find ways to let Jesus live through you in the year to come. Live as a delivered disciple.

**PRAYER** - *Lord, help me to value the free gift that you so lovingly gave to me. Help me to allow my salvation to transform me through the work of your Holy Spirit. Thank you for this new year of life. And thank you for the life of Jesus that leads me not only here on Earth, but into eternity. Amen.*

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## Day 3 - Core Value: Believing the Bible

By Lynn Thrush

### Scripture meditation: Acts 17:11

She said a friend of hers had given her a Bible which had explanations of its meaning written on the pages to help her to understand what she was reading. She told me that she had never read the Bible, but she seemed pleased to start that journey. She figured I would also be pleased.

That brief exchange occurred at an early morning CrossFit class. I was encouraging to her. "That's good!" I said with true gladness. At the same time, however, I was thinking about the very long trek to where it can be accurately said of us that we are making it a practice to believe the Bible. "Believing the Bible" is such a wax nose. If it is not anchored in identifiable practices, it is practically a meaningless expression.

If believing the Bible is to be true of us, we will practice the same behaviors as did a group of Jews from Berea in Acts 17. Paul was talking to them about the Messiah of God dying and raising from the dead. Neither dying nor raising from the dead was on any Jewish radar about the Messiah. However, these Jews from Berea had two noble prior commitments: a) a deep eagerness and openness to receiving communication about the Scriptures, and b) a regular practice of closely examining the Scriptures, so as to make an informed response to whatever they were hearing. As a result of these practices, many Berean Jews believed that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. (Acts 17:12)

My friend, Gary, whom I have gotten to know through the New Vision BIC Church in Pewaukee, Wisconsin, is like a Berean Jew. I have written on the Revelation and asked Gary if he would read my work. He has those same two commitments as did the Berean Jews. His Berean posture has inspired me to likewise be open and diligent in studying the Scriptures.

I hope my friend at CrossFit becomes like my friend, Gary, and I wish the same for you!

**PRAYER** - *Father, help me grow in my commitment to believing the Bible. I want it to be said of me that I am like the Bereans, who received communication about your Word with great eagerness and closely examined what is being said about the Bible through careful study. Amen*

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## Day 4 - Keeping Jesus at the Center

By Jonathan Lloyd

### Scripture meditation: Colossians 2:6-7

In my role, I have the incredible privilege to know and work with people around the world who keep Jesus at the center of their lives. D. and M. meet the practical needs of refugees but also take time to teach them to discern the voice of Jesus. Brian and Rochelle Myers minister to individuals and families impacted by incarceration, leading men and women to dependence on Christ for the strength needed to build a new life outside of prison. Newly deployed missionaries Yolanda Rice and Jenna Martin listened to Jesus and made significant career shifts to follow his lead.

Sometimes it's tempting to think that keeping Jesus at the center is easier for people in full-time ministry like missionaries or pastors. But we can all keep Christ at the center in our daily lives; and all of us, just like the people in Colossae to whom Paul is writing, sometimes need reminders.

In Colossians 2, Paul encourages his readers to live like they belong to Christ, and he begins with back-to-back word pictures: a well-rooted tree and a building under construction on a solid foundation. Take a minute to picture yourself and your church community as these things. What does that secure root or foundation mean for your individual life today as well as for your church?

Then Paul reminds us that we have been taught how to be strong in the faith. What important faith lessons have you learned from others that can help you be strong today? Who are you helping to grow strong in their faith?

Finally, Paul instructs us to overflow with thankfulness. Colossians is full of practical ways to live like Jesus is at the center. But it is this truth of our rootedness in Christ that makes the practical things possible. And this is cause for great thankfulness.

**PRAYER** - *Father, thank you for Jesus. Thank you that he is the solid ground and a good foundation on which I am growing and being built up. Thank you for the people who have taught me how to grow strong in my faith. Thank you for filling my life with your love and your grace. Help me to remember that this solidly-rooted, well-built building is who I am. Amen.*

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## Day 5 - Core Value: Worshipping God

By Warren Hoffman

### Scripture meditation: Philippians 2:5-11

We have just come through the time of year when churches mobilize musicians, singers, actors, artists, and readers for Christmas pageantry. The purpose of this recurring, seasonal worship is to announce the wondrous good news of Christ's birth.

In the spring, we renew this celebration of good news in the weeks – particularly the final week – leading up to Easter Sunday. With exuberant worship of Jesus, we joyfully observe the resurrection of our Savior and Lord.

The message of good news is perfectly encapsulated in Philippians 2:5-11 and can be traced throughout Scripture. God was born human (John 1:14; Galatians 4:4-5). If Jesus had come to earth as God alone, he could not have shared the limitations of human experience. To be born human and no more, he could not have shattered those limitations. Simultaneously, this one human was God (John 8:58). Only one born with a divine life of infinite value could compensate for the enormity of human sin with his death. Only a human, dying in our place, could bear the punishment for all humankind.

It took the power of an indestructible life for Jesus to be raised from the dead (Hebrews 7:16). It required his bodily resurrection to open the way for every human who believes to receive eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:14-21).

This good news is the heart of our worship all year long! In every season, week by week, we sing, enact, and declare the good news that our incarnate Savior is alive, transforming the world by the power of his resurrected life and redeeming love.

When we do this—in any style or venue—our worship will be heartfelt, God-honoring, Spirit-directed, and life-changing.

**PRAYER** - *Father, only you can quicken my mind and heart to recognize and receive this wondrous good news. As I worship, week by week, renew my wonder, awe, and gratitude for the grace I receive through Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

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## Day 6 - Core Value: Following Jesus

By Aner Morejon

### Scripture meditation: Matthew 16:24

Jesus leaves no confusion as to what he expects a disciple to do when determined to follow him, noting all that is involved in denying ourselves and taking up our cross. This is exactly what he did when he left his throne to come and set an example for us.

In the Gospels, we find different texts that talk about the requirements to follow Jesus. If we minimize what these requirements mean, we are left with a diluted gospel and lack of commitment. I have always preached: “If following Jesus has not cost you anything, you should take a good look at who you are following.”

In countries that do not offer freedom of religion, I have seen the sacrifice and commitment that it takes to follow Jesus. In my case, living in a Communist country, I felt mocked and insulted for being a Christian. I still remember when I was forced to join the army in Cuba. One day in front of five hundred soldiers, a general asked, “Who here believes in God?” I raised my hand, and they got mad at me. But later, like Joseph, I ended up working as part of the general’s staff because they needed my services. I was the only Christian among all the Communists.

Jesus’ words in Matthew 16:24 are echoed again in Luke 14:26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.” These are strong words, but they are for strong disciples as well.

Followers of Jesus have always been called disciples, and this word, among other definitions, means; “someone who aspires to become like his teacher, who closely follows his footsteps.” Jesus promised his disciples that he would be with them every day until the end of the times. In the 21st century, he continues to hope that each one of us is determined to follow him amid any situation.

**PRAYER** - *Father, thank you for the opportunity of a new year. May I follow your footsteps more closely every day, so that on that day you can say: Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness. (Matthew 25:23) Amen.*

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## Day 7 - Going Directly to the Word of God for Guidance

By Heather Beaty

### Scripture meditation: Luke 6:46-49

Walking along the beach, we stop to watch a young father and his children build a beautiful sandcastle. Admiring their work, I smile to myself at the enthusiasm and pain-staking care the family is investing in creating such a masterpiece. I also feel a tinge of sadness at the thought that the changing tide will wash away such a fine structure by morning.

In Luke 6, Jesus compares building a house to consistently hearing and applying his words to our lives. “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but do not do what I say?” he challenges. He follows this question with a declaration that those who hear his words and put them into practice are not like this sandcastle. Rather than being washed away by changing tides, those who study the Word and apply it to their lives will be strongly rooted and able to withstand any storm that comes their way.

What a comforting thought. Yet, this statement comes right after some of the most difficult teachings of Jesus: loving our enemies, finding contentment and comfort in Christ, and forgiving others rather than judging and condemning them. Obedience is not always easy, but God’s guidance is always best. What is more, our commitment to live in a manner consistent with the teaching of Jesus is foundational to our witness as Brethren in Christ believers.

For as long as we have been a family of believers, we have prioritized the studying of God’s Word together as we seek to submit our lives to the authority of Scripture. Today, we continue to gather for the preaching of the Word. Families and friends discuss the Word of God around the dinner table or in small groups. We discern our responses to cultural conversations in light of biblical truth.

In community, we seek God’s guidance for all things – living with integrity, making life decisions, and pursuing healthy relationships. We recognize that our lives are most solid and joy-filled as we obediently and consistently live according to his Word. Like a house built on the rock, we too will be able to withstand the tempests that come our way when we are firmly rooted on the truth, finding direction in God’s Word.

**PRAYER** - *Father, thank you for your Word. May my life be firmly founded on your truth. Speak to me, guide my steps, and help me to be obedient in all of my actions, responses, and decisions. Amen.*

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## Day 8 - Core Value: Belonging to a Community of Faith

By Bryan Hoke

### Scripture meditation: John 17:23

As the creation story unfolds in Genesis 1, there's a rhythm to Creation. At its essence, it unfolds like this: "And God said, and it was so, and God saw that it was good." Move to chapter 2 of Genesis and it zeros in on the crown jewel of all creation: people. But after a person was created, this wonderful rhythm stopped because an aspect of creation was not good. In chapter 2, the first part of verse 18 says, "The Lord God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone.'"

Even more astounding is that God did not address the "not good" by pouring more of himself into the situation. Instead, God created another person. He created human relationship and community. Apparently there is something so vital about relationships with other people that not even God himself chose to fill the gap with more of himself. This demonstrates that relationships are imperative and woven into the very fabric of who we are. We are designed to live in vital connectedness with others – in community.

This idea is central in what we as a church family value together and is our fifth Core Value: "Belonging to the Community of Faith - We value integrity in relationships and mutual accountability in an atmosphere of grace, love, and acceptance."

Jesus prays that the disciples might be one. His close friend, John, records Jesus' heart for us in John 17:23: "May they [the disciples] be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me ..." Our connectedness and community are critical to the reason Jesus came among us. It directs a spotlight on God's love for all people.

There is also an inherent challenge to community. It is full of people – people just like you and me. And anything that is full of people, also needs to be full of grace, love, and acceptance as modeled by Jesus. Mutual relationship and community are impossible without them.

Are you and I engaged in that type of interdependent community? If so, do we contribute grace, love, and acceptance or do we detract from it? We must remember that God's love for those around us will become more or less clear based on us and how we live life together. Is our community sharpening the clarity of his love?

**PRAYER** - *Father, please fill us and flow through us in such a way that we and those around us will know you better as we experience you firsthand.*

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