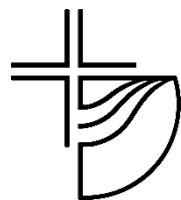


# Compelling Vision

Together, as the Church of the Brethren,  
we will passionately live and share the radical transformation  
and holistic peace of Jesus Christ through relationship-based neighborhood  
engagement. To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and  
equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

## Bible Study Series

Session 3  
Denise Kettering Lane



## Session 3

# Who Are We?

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To move us forward, we will develop a culture of calling and equipping disciples who are innovative, adaptable, and fearless.

### Focus Question

How does scripture and tradition inform our current denominational identity?

### Scripture Texts

Matthew 22:34-40

Supplemental texts: Matthew 5-7, Matthew 25:31-45, Matthew 28:16-20, John 13:1-17, John 17:20-26, Matthew 18:15-22 (35)

### Focus Statement

“For the glory of God and our neighbor’s good” has long been a phrase that Brethren have used to express the two great commandments to love God and our neighbor. This passage, Matthew 22:34-40, stands at the heart of how Brethren have tried to be disciples, obedient to the Gospel message. Examining this passage with other favorite Brethren texts reveals that this emphasis from our tradition remains strongly present in our current denominational identity. The question that Brethren have continued to struggle with over time is how these commandments best describe our interaction with our communities, both local and global.

### Supplies

- Bibles or print out of key text (Matthew 22:34-40)
- Whiteboard or Newsprint
- Paper, crayons, or markers

### Media Suggestions

- **Book:** *Matthew: Believers Church Commentary* by Richard B. Gardner
- **Art:** ["A Mural History of the Church of the Brethren"](#)
- **Video:** ["A Mural History of the Church of the Brethren"](#)
- **Game:** Forerunners Card Game
- **Song:** “If all you want, Lord” by Thomas H. Troeger, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #512

## Reflecting on the Texts

The words “For the Glory of God and Our Neighbor’s Good” reportedly hung on the wall in Christopher Sauer’s colonial American printing shop in Germantown, Pennsylvania. While Sauer himself was not Brethren, his close ties to the early Brethren allowed the phrase to become ingrained in our hearts, minds, and communities. At graduations from Bethany Theological Seminary, this phrase is a part of the charge that the president gives as students receive diplomas. The phrase also frequently appears in our periodicals and history books, a constant reminder of our core values as Brethren.

At its root, this phrase that encompasses so much of Brethren tradition and identity reflects the scripture passage from Matthew 22:34-40. In this passage, the Pharisees are once again questioning Jesus, continuing a pattern throughout Matthew’s gospel. The Pharisees often appear in Matthew as Jesus’ fiercest critics, who challenge him on many points of the law. This particular text falls within a series of debates Jesus was having with religious leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees, around common issues of the day. Here, one of the Pharisees questions Jesus about which commandment is the greatest. This question was not unusual in Jesus’ time as there was much debate around the significance and importance of different parts of the law. By asking Jesus this question, the Pharisees invite him to engage in an ongoing debate. Jesus responds by citing Deuteronomy 6:5 or the command to love God with one’s whole being. When questioned about the second greatest command, he responds by citing Leviticus 19:18 about love of neighbor. According to Rick Gardner in his *Matthew* commentary, Jesus linked these two passages together in a way that was unique in first-century Judaism (329). Jesus emphasizes that everything in the law and prophets that corresponds with these two commands is valid.

At the heart of these texts is the notion of obedience. Loving God with one’s whole being creates a desire to obey God’s commandments. Loving God with one’s whole being leads to loving our neighbor more fully. However, this does beg the question, how do we know what loving God looks like? And, of course, there is the critical question of who exactly is our neighbor?

Brethren have typically interpreted love of God and neighbor through reading the teachings of Jesus found in other Gospel texts. These teachings give indications of what living out love of God and neighbor look like in the world. Brethren have used other scripture to interpret and enliven this key passage about the two great commandments. Primary among these texts has been Matthew 5-7, the Sermon on the Mount. These texts, full of ethical teachings, have served as guiding texts for Brethren positions on peace and discipleship. Matthew 25:31-45 has likewise informed Brethren attitudes towards mutual aid and service in its encouragement to feed the hungry, take care of the sick, visit the imprisoned, and welcome the stranger. Matthew 18:15-22 has provided a way to deal with conflict among neighbors all with the aim of trying to achieve the unity that Jesus prays for in John 17:20-26. These texts have formed a backbone of belief and practice for Brethren, who have sought to live in obedience to these commandments.

Matthew 22:34-40 provides a framework for Brethren belief and practice that remains critical to denominational identity today. The question that remains for congregations and the denomination is how our worship and ministry live out the commandments for the glory of God and our neighbor’s good.

## Gathering

Introduce the theme of today's session using one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—What scripture passages do you think have been central to Brethren life in the past and today? Why do you think those texts are so important?
- *Option 2*—Invite participants to draw a scene from Brethren history or an image that they associate with the Church of the Brethren. Allow 5-7 minutes for drawing. Invite participants to share their creations, what biblical passage they might associate it with, and why it is significant.

## Discovering God's Story and Vision

Read the text using a modified *lectio divina*. Have all participants read Matthew 22:34-40 silently, using either their own Bible or a handout of the key text. Provide 3-5 minutes for participants to read the text silently. Invite them to read slowly and note words or phrases that jump out in the passage.

Next, have a volunteer read the passage slowly out loud. Invite listeners to focus on the words or phrases that stand out to them.

Invite participants to take turns sharing the words or phrases that stood out to them in the passage. Leaders can list these words or phrases on a whiteboard or newsprint. If meeting online, the leader could list key words or phrases using a document share. Invite participants to spend 2-3 minutes in silent contemplation of the list and their own reflections.

## Exploring God's Story and Vision

Dig deeper into today's text(s) with these questions.

- Jesus uniquely combines these two commandments in ways that differentiated him from his contemporaries. Why do you think that Jesus identified these commandments as the two most important commandments? What might that tell us about Jesus' life, ministry, and mission?
- How do you understand the relationship between the command to love God and neighbor? As a Christian, how does loving God and neighbor show up in everyday living?
- Where do you find yourself in this passage? Where do you find the Church of the Brethren in this passage?
- What other texts do you think inform or enhance our understanding of Matthew 22:34-40? What light do these other texts shed on the great commandments? Why did you select those texts? (Feel free to use the list of accompanying texts above.)
- Earlier generations of Brethren interpreted these passages as a way to be obedient to the Gospel. What does it mean to be obedient to the Gospel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How do you feel about the concept of obedience? Why? How does this passage help us understand obedience?

## Responding to God's Story and Vision

Either in small groups or a whole group, make a list of ministries in which your church participates. Consider ministries in your local congregation, district, and the denomination. You may also want to include ecumenical or interfaith ministries. Think about ministering to members (worship, education, visitation, etc.) as well as outreach ministries (food pantry, disaster ministry, etc.).

Then go through your list and label whether you think that each ministry demonstrates love of God most prominently, love of neighbor, or both.

Share your lists if you were in small groups. How do you think the Church of the Brethren lives out these two commandments in its ministries? Do Brethren tend to emphasize loving God or loving neighbor more? Or are they held in a balance? Looking at your lists, which do you emphasize more? If you see an imbalance, how might you correct it? What new ministries might you engage with or begin that would demonstrate love of God and neighbor? Where is God leading you?

## Empowered by God's Story and Vision

To wrap up, choose one of these activities.

- *Option 1*—What are two ways that you can live out love for God and neighbor this week in your life or community? What do you need to do in order to make these two things happen?
- *Option 2*—Divide into groups of 3-4 people and brainstorm for 2-3 minutes how you might enliven or develop a current or new ministry in your congregation to better exemplify love of God and neighbor. Come back together as a whole group and share ideas. Pick one idea and develop an action plan to work on in the coming week about how together you can make the ministry be more “for the glory of God and our neighbor’s good.”

## Sending

Close with the hymn, “If all you want, Lord” by Thomas H. Troeger, *Hymnal: A Worship Book*, #512.

If the group is hesitant to sing the hymn, consider reading it as a litany or use it as a closing prayer.