

“Core Christianity”
“Just Do It!”

It was Oxford University in England, 1729. Four young men met each evening from 6 to 9 o'clock. They prayed, they sang, they studied the Greek New Testament or some classical Christian writing. They fasted. Each of the men rigorously examined his own life and they tried to help each other develop a serious Christian lifestyle. In addition, the men gave a good part of their money and goods to the needy. Since many in England at that time were thrown into prison for minor violations, then forgotten, the members of this group would visit in jails and witness to prisoners, also teaching them to read, often giving them books on Christianity. They used their own money to pay off prisoners' debts when they could. These four men in that little group also cared for the sick and offered remedies for healing. They set up a school and gave free tuition to poor children who otherwise wouldn't have gotten any education.

One of the men in that group was *John Wesley*. Through him God would birth the Methodist movement and eventually the Methodist Church. This group's passionate desire *to deepen their inward relationship with Christ and to put their faith into action in society* set the tone for the Methodist movement in England. Through Wesley and the early Methodists, God brought a revival to England that not only renewed the church, but *transformed English society*.

I'm continuing this series of messages on core beliefs of Christianity. One of the fundamental foundations of our faith is that *our faith has to be put into action*. I've borrowed the Nike slogan, “Just Do It” as the sermon title.

In the Bible, faith is never just personal and private, it always has implications for our public life in society. Genuine faith is always expressed in good works! The Book of James in the New Testament probably conveys this truth more than any other book of the Bible. Look at these words from the second chapter of James: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm, and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith...for just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead" (James 2:14-18, 26).

Faith and good works go together. It's not enough just to believe – we have to put our belief into action. Faith without works is dead. As one looks at the way Christianity has evolved over the last century or so, there has been this division between “evangelical” churches and more liberal “social action” churches. Evangelical churches focus on the need for a personal relationship with Christ, and on the task of witnessing to people so they can be saved. More liberal churches focus more on social action – addressing issues like hunger, poverty, racial injustice, minority rights, etc. We've had this split between the two camps. But, fortunately, many Christians today are realizing that both of these strands are at the heart of our faith.

Our United Methodist heritage provides a marvelous example of how personal faith, and social action, can be linked together. The United Methodist Discipline comments on this: “We insist that personal salvation always involves Christian mission and service to the world. By joining heart and hand, we assert that personal religion, evangelical witness, and Christian social action are reciprocal and mutually reinforcing...scriptural holiness entails more than personal piety; love of God is always linked with love of neighbor, a passion for justice and renewal in the life of the world.” In other words, both bringing people to personal commitment to Christ, and addressing the needs of society, are integral to our life as followers of Jesus.

Let me say more about these two aspects of putting our faith into action. ***First, we put our faith into action through a fervent evangelical witness.*** John Wesley, Jacob Albright, Philip Otterbein – giants in our United Methodist tradition - had a burning desire to share the message of Christ with others. This obligation to share the gospel of salvation with unbelievers comes from Jesus Himself! Right before He left His disciples to go back to heaven, He told them: "You shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). He also *commanded* them: “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19).

John Wesley was a priest in the Church of England. He never intended to start a new church, but the Church of England in the 1700’s was spiritually dead. Those in the established church couldn’t tolerate Wesley’s evangelistic zeal. More and more he was forbidden to speak inside churches. As the doors of the Church of England closed on him, he began to preach to people outside the church – the masses of common people ignored by the institutional church. John Wesley was so reluctant to preach outside church buildings that he once said he almost thought it a sin for somebody to be saved outside a church! But he had a heart for the lost! So he went where the people were! It was an extraordinary sight: this small, scholarly man, standing on a mound of dirt outside the mines, preaching in his clerical robe to crowds, sometimes in the thousands. Often he was interrupted by hecklers. Yet many were converted! You could see coal miners, tears streaming down their blackened faces, shouting with ecstatic joy because they had found the Lord!

Later, when the Methodist movement spread to the United States, that same passion to share Christ with the lost was part of our history. For example, there were the Circuit Riders, who followed the westward growth of our young nation in frontier days. These Circuit Riders spent a good part of their lives in the saddle carrying the gospel to pioneers through all kinds of weather. The job was so demanding and dangerous that over half of these Circuit Riders died before they reached the age of 30! That same evangelistic zeal marked the other groups that eventually formed the United Methodist Church – the Evangelical Church, the United Brethren Church.

At the central core of the Christian faith, when we are at our best, is a heartfelt desire to share Christ with those who don’t know Him! I dedicated my life to Christ and answered the call to ordained ministry under a pastor who preached with evangelistic zeal and gave altar calls on Sunday mornings. I went to camp meetings and revival services and grew as a new Christian. I realize, some of these methods may no longer be effective today, but it was that evangelistic fire that won my heart for Christ and grew me in the faith. Somebody cared enough to share

the good news of Jesus with me!

Why would we want to keep our faith to ourselves and not share the hope we have in Christ? One day when our children were still young our son Kraig came home from playing an ice hockey game with a big smile on his face. I figured they must have won. Well, they didn't. They lost 7-0. But at the ice rink where his team was playing he saw two of the stars on the Philadelphia Flyers, Mark Howe and Bill Barber, standing close by along the boards. I'm sure our son couldn't wait to get home to tell us he was that close to these hockey heroes. Now Jesus is a lot more important than a couple of hockey players. When we get close to Jesus and He saves us, it brings a joy we should want others to experience.

Christians are people who put our faith into action through an evangelistic concern for lost people! But we can also put our faith into action by ***addressing the physical and practical needs of people and the conditions of society***. You remember Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment - the parable of the sheep and the goats? When judged by the Lord, one group is welcomed into the kingdom. Why? "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35-36). They say, "When did we do that?" Jesus replies, "When you did it to one of the least of these people, you did it to me."

Those in the other group are shut out of the kingdom. Jesus says, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (Matthew 25:42-43). When did we not do this for you Lord? they ask. When you did not do it to one of the least of those people around you in need! Notice, judgment here is not based on what they *believe* – but *what they do or don't do* for the needs of the people around them.

When the Church has been at its best, it has always had a concern for the social and economic wellbeing of people, as well as for their souls. People can get hurt when they get trapped in social or economic structures that are unjust and unfair. Quality of life can be diminished by bad laws, unfair policies, political greed and corruption. God cares about what this does to people!

Soon after I came to a church as the new pastor a leader in the congregation phoned me, and began to criticize the former pastor because he pushed what she called the "social gospel." She said, "I don't believe in all this social gospel stuff." Well, first of all, I'm wary when someone puts down a former pastor. I have found that often it isn't long before that same person is criticizing *me* for something. Besides, I thought, "Lady, you don't understand the Scriptures. Your interpretation of the church's mission is too narrow and limited".

The previous pastor she was roasting was a colleague who had a wonderful gift of mobilizing a congregation to get involved in the community. He had initiated a Meals on Wheels program in that small town. He organized lay visitation to a nearby nursing home. He contracted for a Head Start program to meet in the church. There were members of the church employed at a

local printing firm working horribly long hours – and he went to the management people at that company and went to bat for those beleaguered employees. When he moved from that church and went to another community he did much the same. He was at that church for many years, and during that time was recognized by one of the social service agencies for his outstanding work. I think he was even given a “Man of the Year” award. I’ve often envied him for his skill in inspiring a congregation to address critical social issues.

James says, “Faith without works is dead” (James 2:26). Christians are people of action! Churches tend to get stuck emphasizing either “saving souls” or social action, but *both* are authentic expressions of one's Christian commitment.

One of the highlights of my years of pastoral ministry has been how God called me to mission work in Kenya. Late in my ministerial career I was serving a church that was experiencing significant growth. Lots of good things were happening. But I felt the need to expand our concern beyond our community to the world. About that time, I decided to offer a preaching course for lay people in the congregation. One of our staff members sent a news release to the local newspapers. The Lancaster newspaper picked up on that and sent a reporter to interview me and do a story. As a result, quite a number of people from all over the county signed up for the course, including a native of Kenya now living in Elizabethtown, Eric Wanga.

After the first session of the preaching course as I was walking along in the church lobby Eric approached me and said, "You know, you ought to teach this course in Kenya, where most of the pastors have no formal education." Well, I was close to retirement, and Kenya wasn't on my radar screen! But I was open to what God wanted, so I said, "Let me think about it and pray about it." Eric said nothing more to me, and prior to the last session of the course, I said, "God, if you want me to go to Kenya, have Eric say something to me again - I'm not going to say anything to him." After the last session, as I was walking out of the class, Eric came up to me and said, "Have you thought any more about going to Kenya?" I took this to be God's sign that He wanted me to go! The rest is an amazing God-story throughout!

One other man from our congregation went with me, plus Eric and his family. I was determined from the start on that first trip to not only teach the preaching course and address the spiritual needs of pastors and the little church that we went to, but also to address the practical needs of that little village named Musese. I thought again about the words of the Book of James, that faith without works is dead.

So, the night before left the village and the church in Kenya to return to the U.S. the other man and I sat down with the pastor and several other leaders in the church in Musese, and asked, “How can we help?” Their response was that it was hard to know where to begin, there were so many needs. The community had no water or well. There were medical needs. Vocational training was needed, since many adults and most graduating students cannot find a job. Other possibilities were mentioned. Once we returned home we decided in the church to begin by digging a well, so that the community would have a fresh water supply, which was critical to a community's well being. It took 1-2 years to get done, but a commercially dug well was put on

the church grounds. Soon afterwards some acreage next to the church went up for sale (a God thing!) and our congregation gave money for the church in Kenya to buy that ground. Since then, two buildings have been erected to house a medical clinic, a trade school, as well as meeting space and educational rooms for the church. We bought some dairy cattle, who graze on the church grounds, providing milk for the local people. Part of the property is farmed, making food available for villagers. That little church in Musese has become not only a spiritual center for the village, but a lifeline to provide practical services to enrich the lives of these people.

This is what the church is about! This is what our faith is about! Christians are so good at *talking and discussing things* – I think sometimes God says to us: “Just do it!”

But this kind of “Christianity in action” isn’t just for mission work overseas – it can take place in our own communities. I would love to see this church more involved in reaching out to the community. We serve a meal several times a year in Lancaster at First Reformed Church, and that is good. I’m sure some of us are involved personally in areas of serving, perhaps confronting some unjust situation, or helping to make life better for some people. I realize we are an older congregation and that may place some limitations on us, but I think there are things we might do.

Let’s not forget that at the core of our faith is a mandate from Christ to be people of action! To “just do it!” To talk about Jesus and invite people to turn their lives over to Him, and to reach out to people who are hurting or getting the short end of the stick and try to help where we can.

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