

# Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Vessels that don't hold treasure

In the September 9, 2010 issue of *The Christian Century* magazine, Quaker author Parker J. Palmer warns about putting too much trust, or at least the wrong kind of trust, in church doctrines and customs. "All of our propositions and practices," he reminds us, "are earthen vessels. All of them are made by human beings of common clay to hold whatever we think we've found in our soul-deep quest for the sacred or in its quest for us."



**We have this treasure in clay jars [KJV, earthen vessels], so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.**  
—2 Corinthians 4:7

“If our containers prove too crimped and cramped to hold the treasure well, if they domesticate the sacred and keep us from having a live encounter with it—or if they prove so twisted and deformed that they defile rather than honor the treasure they were intended to hold—then our containers must be smashed and discarded so we can create a larger and more life-giving vessel in which to hold the treasure.”

“Doing that is called iconoclasm,” Palmer explains. Then he says something that I wish all Christians would take to heart: that iconoclasm sometimes needs to be done and that it is a good thing when it is done at those times. “Failing to do that,” he continues, “is called idolatry, which is always a bad thing. So even in the church, we need to commit conceptual suicide again and again—if we are serious about the vastness of the treasure in comparison to our flawed and finite words.”

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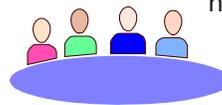
## Texas Connections readers—it's not too late!

I'm excited about *Connections Live!* 2010, the gathering I'm hosting in Temple on Friday evening and Saturday, November 19-20, for Texas *Connections* readers and friends. If you haven't yet signed up but are interested, go to [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org) or contact me at the phone number or e-mail address above to get details and a registration form.



Jim Rigby, pastor of St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Austin, a congregation with unusually inclusive worship and unusually active outreach, will open by speaking on how we can do more to disseminate information and put justice and compassion into practice, starting by inspiring each other.

Saturday's program will alternate between short presentations and discussion in groups. One session will address overcoming resistance to progressive views. The other will focus on moving from beliefs to action. Joining me on panels for these sessions will be David Dykes, whose foundation produces educational videos and seminars; UT journalism professor Bob Jensen, author of *All My Bones Shake*; Julie Fuschak, founder of a women's reading group that sponsored a Jesus Seminar event; SMU theology professor Joerg Rieger, author of *Christ and Empire*; and Glenda Whitehead, founding pastor of a courageous new small church. Authors present will sign, and I'm hoping that my own new book *Misfits* will be out by then as well. And if enough attenders are interested, I hope we can plan a project or two for 2011.



So whether you're a progressive Texan who longs to meet and talk with kindred spirits, or just curious about progressive ideas and interested in hearing from forward-looking people, this is an opportunity that I hope you won't miss. Even if you don't live in Texas, if you want to come, let me know; there might be room for you after I finish getting Texans' registrations. I will take registrations as long as space remains available, until early November, so tell your friends and let me hear from you soon!

themselves, with others, with the world and, I suspect, with God. ... Why do we do it? Because we are afraid. And what we are afraid of more than anything else, I think, is what might happen to us—what demands might be made on our lives—if we set the sacred loose, free it from domestication, and release it back into the wild.”

### An illusion that dies hard

“Of course, we can never imprison the sacred,” Palmer reminds us. “But the illusion that we can dies hard.” The challenge, he finds, is to hold on to the paradox of needing the vessels but needing to stay detached from them. “The vessels deserve our respect,” he assures us, “because they enable us to preserve the treasure over time and pass it back and forth among us. But if we become attached to the vessel in ways that obscure the treasure, we must discard the vessel and create one that reveals more than it conceals.”



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“If we fail or refuse to do that, we are failing to respect the treasure, which is not our possession to have and to hold; it is the love and the power that has and holds us. To forget that fact or defy it is the ultimate disrespect, and it leads not to life but to death, for individuals, for religious communities and for the world.”

### Vessels that need replacing

Many of today’s Christians and adherents of other major world religions seem to be failing to respect the treasure by promoting fundamentalist interpretations of their religions. These interpretations are preserving some vessels that urgently need to be replaced with others, in order to reveal the religions’ treasures more clearly and to stop doing harm.



A short, free, easy-to-read book that can help Christians think about some familiar vessels that now distort the treasure is *Fundamentalism: The Challenge to the Secular World*. It’s by New Zealand Presbyterian minister and theologian Lloyd Geering. The complete book is available free from the internet, at [www.religion-online.org](http://www.religion-online.org). It describes the origins, content, and dangers of Christian fundamentalism and also touches on the other religious fundamentalisms that fill today’s news.

### Christian fundamentalism is recent

Geering explains that the term fundamentalism, as it is currently used, derives not from early Christianity but

rather from a series of twelve booklets published between 1909 and 1915. By the courtesy of two oil millionaires in the U.S., Geering tells us, about three million of these booklets were distributed free to every minister and Sunday School superintendent in America. They were intended to counter the spread of liberal religious thought in the churches of America, which the booklets’ authors and publishers said were undermining what they claimed were eternal Christian truths—“the fundamentals.”



The booklets reaffirmed what their writers considered the fundamental and unchangeable doctrines of Christianity: the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the Virgin Birth, miracles, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the substitutionary atonement theory that says the sinless Jesus was killed as a substitute for sinful humans, saving them from going to the hell they deserve. But actually, Lloyd Geering explains, “the booklets expounded a rather narrow form of Protestantism, which was far from constituting the beliefs common to all Christians.”

### An effort to condemn Darwin’s theory

“They were chiefly concerned,” Geering finds, “to condemn the new biblical criticism and the Darwinian theory of evolution.” The booklets gave rise to the term “fundamentalist,” which was coined by a Baptist journalist in 1920. But soon, Geering tells us, liberals started using this term, which its originators had meant to be worn as a badge of honor, as a synonym for blind ignorance and obscurantism. This usage began because the fundamentalists were rejecting what was fast becoming common knowledge, based on scientific evidence.

After the Scopes trial in 1925, in which a teacher was convicted for teaching biological evolution, fierce



theological battles broke out between the fundamentalists and the liberals in seminaries and churches. With the added publicity furnished by the trial, the term “fundamentalist,” which had started as the name of a Christian phenomenon in America, began to spread throughout the world. The fact that it pointed to something that was not confined to the Christian West became increasingly apparent.

### A church divided into three groups

In the year of the Scopes trial, Kirsopp Lake, an internationally known New Testament scholar, wrote

that the denominational divisions of the church had become obsolete. He saw the real divisions cutting across denominations, dividing them into three groups.

- Fundamentalists, who Lake saw as strong in conviction but spiritually arrogant and intellectually ignorant.



- Experimentalists or Radicals, who were willing to shed all of the inherited and supposedly unchangeable dogmas in order to explore fresh expressions of Christian faith that they thought would be more relevant to the new cultural and intellectual climate.



- Institutionalists, or Liberals, who constituted the main body of the church and opted for a middle way, clinging to a watered-down version of the traditional dogmas.

### A church shrinking from left to right

Then, Lloyd Geering points out, Lake made a striking prophecy. “The fundamentalists will eventually triumph,” he predicted. “They will drive the Experimentalists out of the churches and then reabsorb the Institutionalists, who, under pressure, will become more orthodox. ... The Church will shrink from left to right.”

Geering sees this prediction generally describing the state of the mainline churches today. “It is the liberal wing of the mainline churches,” he sees, “which finds itself in the minority. This is because many of the liberals have been disengaging themselves from the institutional church since it showed so little sign of changing, leaving the conservatives in the majority.”



### A powerful force with deep roots

Fundamentalism, says Geering, is now a powerful force with deep roots. He compares it to the iceberg

that sank the Titanic. In 1900, he observes, the Christian world of the West entered the new century with highly optimistic hopes of where modern science coupled with an ever more liberal Christianity was leading. But wars and other disasters in the nations of Christendom soon strengthened fundamentalists’ convictions that Christianity had lost its way. As a result, they resolved to go on the offensive against modernism. And still today, Lloyd Geering explains, “That is the motivation which lies behind fundamentalism.”



Geering points out that fundamentalism is not one movement but a collection of movements. Some are bitterly opposed to each other, but they have a common enemy, he sees, “and it is that which leads us to the heart of all religious fundamentalism. It believes the modern secular and humanistic world is the enemy of religion and hence injurious to humankind.” As a result, fundamentalisms have launched a war on that enemy, and, Geering warns, “it is a serious error of judgment to dismiss fundamentalists in any cavalier fashion.”

### A second Axial Age

The world that fundamentalists see as their enemy, Lloyd Geering points out, has emerged in large part because of the knowledge explosion. A similar period of sudden cultural change, now called the Axial Age, gave rise to the great world religions, in the few hundred years before and after 500 BCE. Geering sees it as having subordinated ethnic cultures to religious supercultures. Now, he finds, “the Second Axial Period is subordinating the religious supercultures to a new and still emerging culture. This culture does not look to supernatural causes but to natural causes. It is not religious in the traditional way but humanistic. It is secular in the sense that it focuses on this world and this time.”



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, [www.connectionsonline.org](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto:BCWendland@aol.com). Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. For paper copies of any of the 17 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

The Second Axial Age is our age. It began with the 18th-century Enlightenment, when belief in a personal God started being replaced by belief in an impersonal first cause. Dependence on human endeavor and discovery and human religious experience started lessening dependence on divine revelation. Religion started being seen as practical service to others. As a result, Geering tells us, the people who would soon become known as fundamentalists became very afraid, because they started seeing that what they saw as timeless truth might not be true.



This fright is leading today's religious fundamentalists to try to stifle, shun, oust, or even kill those who

don't share their views. It's leading them to try to keep women veiled or at least submissive to men. In the U.S., it's leading them to try to preserve "don't ask, don't tell" in the military. It's leading them to claim that President Obama is a Muslim and was not born in the U.S. In the church, it's leading them to try to keep homosexuals out of the ordained ministry, and to insist that Christianity is the only route to God and heaven.

These behaviors are based on beliefs that aren't fundamentals of Christianity. Some of them actually contradict the essence of Jesus's teaching. They're vessels that won't hold water or treasure.

*Barbara*



## Connections

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## Vessels that don't hold treasure

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Theologian Lloyd Geering points out that fundamentalism, while appealing to the past, is actually a new and modern religious phenomenon that does not faithfully represent the faiths in the way it claims to. It distorts genuine religious faith. Here's how he describes the chief features of religious fundamentalism:

- It rejects the human freedoms which have opened up in the aftermath of the western Enlightenment. It is committed to combat secular humanism and all other aspects of the modern world that it regards as injurious to the spiritual condition of humankind.
- It asserts that humans must submit to the authority of the Divine Being, whose truths and absolute commands have been permanently revealed, in the Torah for the Jew, the Bible for the Christian, and in the Qur'an for the Muslim.
- It leads people to think in black and white. It recognizes little uncertainty and no area for debate and dialogue.
- It distrusts human reason. It is wary of democracy and the assertion of human rights. It does not enter into open dialogue but dogmatically proclaims. It favors strong male, charismatic leadership, both in religion and in society.
- It seeks to exercise control by establishing theocratic societies that conform to divinely revealed absolutes.

