

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Does love move us into need?

“Christian love cannot be from our excess.”

“Love is not just letting go of the leftovers.”

“True love moves me into need.”

When I read these observations that Christian psychology professor Richard Beck makes in his book *Unclean*, which I wrote about in the September *Connections*, they gave me a jolt.



These conclusions that Beck says he came to as a result of reading the Bible jolted me because many years ago I'd come to very similar conclusions about what Jesus taught, but over the years I'd kept hoping they were wrong. They surely can't be true, I've kept telling myself. They're not reasonable.

I'm afraid my real reason for wanting to see these conclusions as wrong, however, is that they're a lot more demanding that I'm willing to obey, yet I hate to admit that despite considering myself a Christian I'm not willing to follow many of Jesus's teachings.

Disturbing scriptures



Early in life I started coming to such conclusions about the teaching of Jesus because of scriptures like Luke 3:11. At that time, I assumed that everything in the Bible was an instruction from God,

so the fact that this verse claimed to quote John the Baptist, not Jesus, didn't seem to matter. Besides, what the Bible attributed to Jesus seemed very similar.

What bothered me about Luke 3:11 was



John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, ... “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none, and whoever has food must do likewise.”
—Luke 3:7-11

Too much food!



My husband and I are just home from a ten-day trip during which we ate almost every meal at a restaurant. We always enjoy eating at good restaurants that serve distinctive foods, and we had some wonderful meals on this trip. But well before the trip ended, I felt as if I could hardly face another restaurant meal, because they nearly all included so much more food than I needed, wanted, or even could have forced myself to eat.

A sickening thought

We “eat out” rather often when we're at home, but having too-big servings is rarely a problem there. I nearly always take at least half of my meal home to the refrigerator and enjoy it reheated for a later meal.

But when traveling, the only choice is usually to leave the unwanted part of the meal and know that it will go to the trash.



That's a sickening thought, especially when the news is filled with articles and pictures of people starving in Somalia or the most recent earthquake or tornado location. I assume they'd be thrilled to get what I'm leaving uneaten, but of course there's no way to get it to them or even to hungry people in the city I'm in.

What's the solution?

Choosing smaller items and few courses cuts down on how much goes to the trash, of course. Sharing with a family member sometimes works. Eating more home-cooked meals can help, but it's more work and less interesting, and it's not possible on trips.

What I'd prefer would be for restaurants to offer much smaller servings. And with so many of today's people overweight, many could undoubtedly benefit from that. But giant servings evidently attract customers. And offering smaller servings apparently would save the restaurants little or no money, because actual food is evidently a low proportion of their cost.

So I guess I'll just keep cringing when I see half of a meal going to the trash and think of the starving people I can't give it to. But surely there's a better solution. Maybe our churches could help look for it.

that everyone I knew had several coats, yet they were all churchgoing Christians and I never saw any of them feeling the need to give away all but one coat.

We stick with the easier requirements

Besides not seeing anyone obeying scriptures like Luke 3:11, I never heard anyone ask, “Why are we hearing these presented as if they were instructions from God, yet not feeling any need to obey them?”

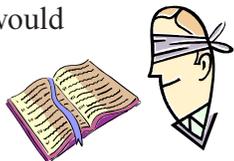


I certainly wasn’t willing to ask. I assumed that whatever was escaping me was obvious to everyone else, so I didn’t want to look stupid or be disruptive by asking about it. I merely stowed such things away in my head and hoped they would make sense to me later.

I recognized that most churchgoers tried to obey *some* scriptures, such as those that seemed to require giving to charity. My churchgoing family and friends all considered themselves charitable. When we outgrew clothes or no longer wanted them for any other reason, we gave them to needy people. I remember Mrs. Centano, who came to my home (only to the back door) once or twice a year from wherever she lived, far across Houston, to get my family’s no-longer-wanted clothes that my mother had been saving for her. But somehow, Luke 3:11 seemed to me to mean something different from that.

We act as if some scriptures don’t exist

Now I think I know what the problem was. Obeying such scriptures would have been too uncomfortable for most churchgoers to be willing to do, yet they wanted to see themselves as Christians, so they acted as if the scriptures didn’t exist.



Most churchgoers still seem to be acting that way. It’s mostly what I’m doing. So I was jolted by Richard Beck’s brave, open admission that he had come to essentially the same conclusion that I had kept coming to but kept trying to ignore: that really obeying Jesus would require giving away more than just what we can comfortably part with.

Beck isn’t alone in observing this, of course. He merely comes at it from an angle different from some

other writers, by focusing on psychological effects. Also, his way of saying what following Jesus requires is more blunt than a lot of other writers.

Real self-expenditure

In Beck’s view, true love of the kind that Jesus advocated is real self-expenditure, a real losing. Beck points out that many churches say you should help people in need, but few add that if you do this in the way that Jesus commands, you too will be driven into need. Instead, many churches give the mistaken impression that Christian love is a cornucopia with which you can meet everyone’s needs and still have all that you need or want for yourself.



In contrast to that view, Beck finds, “true love moves me into need, which is admittedly a very scary prospect. It is an act of faith and it requires a community.”

What are today’s implications?

Ever since Beck’s book brought back to my mind that very uncomfortable thought about the kind of love that Jesus taught, I’ve been thinking about some of its current implications.

• If love that moves us into need is really what Jesus commands, what does that say about the economic issues that are now so prominent in national and world news? What about providing health care for everyone, for example? Should we Christians who now have good health insurance and ready access to the best medical care be willing

[Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”
—Luke 21:1-4



to have less—even to do without some of the medications or treatments that we now consider essential—in order to provide for the people who now have little or none?

... Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, ... then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

—Mark 10:17-22

I'm not willing to do that, and I don't know many—any, really—others in similar situations who would be willing. I'm glad to give *some* help to people who seem to be in genuine need, but I'm not willing to give them so much that it would leave me in

need. That would be going too far!

And it would be counterproductive, wouldn't it? Isn't our aim to decrease the total number of needy people? Making those of us needy who now aren't needy would defeat that aim instead of helping it, wouldn't it?

• Can the church legitimately keep acting as if the "true love" requirement doesn't exist? Many churches seem to be acting that way now. They claim Jesus as their model, but they can make that claim only by ignoring a lot of what he apparently taught. To claim that we're his followers, we have to focus mostly on the parts of his teaching that are about being nice and sweet and comforting each other and going to heaven when we die—parts that, come to think of it, really aren't very prominent in his teaching.



• What would getting honest about "true love" require churches to start doing, that few seem to be doing now? Above all, it would require them to emphasize regularly, in sermons and classes, the scriptures that refer to what Jesus apparently defined as love. And it would require talking openly

in the church about how these scriptures might apply to specific current issues in today's society, such as health care, immigration, and taxes—the kind of issues that many members now see as far too political and controversial to mention in church.

• What effect would that change have on church membership and attendance, therefore on church finances and pastors' job security? This question seems easy to answer. Those would probably plummet, which of course is a big reason for churches' not making the change. Maintaining church membership and attendance numbers and thus financial support requires keeping members comfortable, not making them uncomfortable by calling their present beliefs and habits into question.



• What effect might the change have on the church's credibility with outsiders? I suspect that the change would greatly increase our credibility with a lot of nonchurchgoers. Many, it seems, now see Christians making unbelievable claims that contradict what is now well known about the universe and human beings, but doing little that directly relates to the world we live in. Increasing our cred-



ibility might not add paying members to church rolls, but is that the church's real purpose? Isn't it instead promoting the kind of compassion, justice, and non-violence that Jesus apparently taught?

Isn't it time to be honest?

Specific answers to today's vexing questions of whether and how to provide health care and other necessities for everyone aren't "in the Bible." But principles that we need to consider in looking for an answer, if we want to follow Jesus, *are* in the

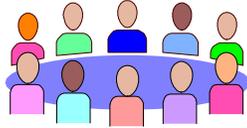
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I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than 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.

Bible. We need to talk openly and often in church about what they are and how they may apply to today's most pressing issues.

If we did that, different ones of us would undoubtedly come up with different opinions and information about the issues. But there wouldn't be anything wrong with that, would there? In fact, hearing a variety of views seems to lead to the most reliable conclusions.



Of course, after discussing the issues openly, most of us might still end up exactly where so many seem

to be now—feeling pretty sure what following Jesus would require but not being willing to do it. But wouldn't even an honest, open admission of that be better than the cover-up we're now presenting to churchgoers and outsiders? I think it would.

And who knows—churches' open, constant presentation of what Jesus apparently emphasized most might even inspire a few people to follow him more closely. It seems worth a try.



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Does love move us into need?

November 2011



My husband and I are just home from 10 days in eastern Canada. After a week sightseeing in the Montreal, Quebec City, Niagara Falls, and Toronto areas, we attended a 3-day conference of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in London, Ontario. The CCPC conference was rewarding for me especially because it was an opportunity to meet kindred spirits and be reminded that even though those of us who live in very conservative areas tend to feel alone in our understanding of Christianity, we're nowhere near alone in the wider world. Many others "out there" have similar views and concerns.

I especially enjoyed meeting and hearing talks by several whom I'd previously known only by e-mail or through their writing. Those included Canadian pastor Gretta Vosper, whose book *With or Without God* I've loved. And Bishop John Shelby Spong gave one of the most inspiring talks I've ever heard, as the Sunday sermon at First St. Andrew's United Church in London. You may be able to find his talk on that church's website soon-- www.fsaunited.com. Another treat for me was meeting Jeff Proctor-Murphy and David Felten, the Arizona UMC pastors who created the excellent "Living the Questions" studies that my local group and many others have liked so well.

If you'd like to get thoughtful articles from progressive Christians, you might like to look at the CCPC website, www.progressivechristianity.ca, where you can find interesting articles in its journal, *Progressions*.

