

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Jesus's way of life is what matters most



At this time of the year, Christians tend to focus mainly on the death and resurrection of Jesus, but historical-Jesus scholar Stephen J. Patterson believes that Jesus's life is what makes his death and resurrection important. In his book *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Fortress, 2004), Patterson explains his view.

"To celebrate his death apart from the cause for which he lived," Patterson believes, "would be ridiculous and meaningless. Yet that is what we have done for the most part." Patterson observes that Jesus's earliest followers were profoundly devoted to his way of life, and they used his death to call attention to his way of life. "They did not see his death or his resurrection as events significant in themselves. They were the fitting end of a life of extraordinary power and vision." It was a life to be embraced and remembered as revealing God.



The ultimate weapon of terror

Stephen Patterson finds that in order to see what Jesus's death meant, we need to get clear on what crucifixion was like and on what role it played for people in the Roman Empire of Jesus's time. The Romans didn't invent crucifixion, but they perfected it as the ultimate weapon of terror and intimidation, Patterson tells us. It was Rome's trademark means of executing slaves and peasants involved in treasonous activity against the Empire, especially in outlying districts. Sometimes rebel peasant leaders were crucified individually, and sometimes groups were crucified *en masse*. Crucifixions happened in plain sight, so that the gruesome display



Life questions our answers

"Life is where you get your answers questioned!" says Bill Moyers, as quoted by retired UCC pastor Chandler W. Gilbert in his book *Seed Pods and Periscopes: Stories and Reflections About Living Deeply and Living Well* (privately published, 2008, tuckgilbert@verizon.net).



Many people become especially aware of life's questions in the Easter season because of what they hear churches say about death then. "My guess," Chandler Gilbert says, "is that there is more doubt hovering around in crowded sanctuaries on Easter Sunday than on any other Sunday in the year." But he doesn't see doubt as a negative activity. Rather, it is "often a positive prod to get on with the search."

Going against the grain or with it?

Like my questions and those of many other thinking Christians, many of Chandler Gilbert's questions are about God. "What if God is not a separate 'being,' " he wonders, as I do, "but a more or less impersonal force of some sort? ... What if God is more like some sort of energy, a creative force at loose in the heart of the universe—more like radio waves or television signals that are invisible but real, ... just waiting to be tuned into? What if the good life, the abundant life, the most fully-developed human life consists of finding ways to connect with that energy? What if God is something like the grain in a piece of wood, and the goal of life is to find ways to move with the grain rather than against it?"



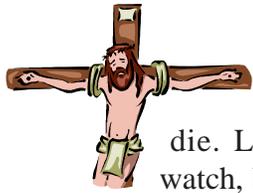
"You can't go against the grain of the universe without getting splinters," Gilbert observes. "The 'will of God' and the 'grain of the universe' are really one and the same thing. One of the secrets of life is to discover which way the grain goes and then to line up with it." That requires asking questions, even about beliefs that many other Christians don't seem to question, and even at times like Easter—especially at times like Easter, in fact. And churches need to help people ask. "Churches should not be seen as places to get answers," Gilbert warns, "so much as communities which encourage us to ask the right questions and to seek for more answers than we already have."

would demoralize observers and break their will. This way of killing peasant nobodies was used to warn others not to do what these nobodies had done.

We tend to picture Jesus and the two thieves on isolated crosses, but apparently that's unrealistic. Evidently there were often hundreds or even thousands of crosses just outside cities' entrances, to be seen constantly by the populace as a deterrent to rebellion and crime. "Crucifixion was highly organized, massive state terrorism, intended to intimidate the vast peasant and slave populations of the Empire into passivity," Patterson explains.



A slow, agonizing, public way to die



Stephen Patterson reminds us that crucifixion was a very slow, agonizing, public way to die. Loved ones and others could watch, but they couldn't help the victim, and guards were posted to prevent rescue. By the time the victim's body was removed, little of it was left. And what little remained would have been piled with other victims' remains so that the dogs and ravens could finish the work already begun on the cross. "This, too, was the point of crucifixion," Patterson explains. "The victim was not properly buried. ... This was, to ancient sensibilities, the curse of eternal shame." (Doesn't this information, along with other discoveries of recent decades, make literal interpretation



of the gospels' burial, resurrection, and ascension accounts unconvincing? For me, it does.)

The challenge for Jesus's followers when he was killed, therefore, was to find meaning in what had happened. Because they kept experiencing what they felt was his presence, they believed that his spirit was not dead—that his death had not been the final word. They felt sure that this man whom the Empire had treated as a nobody was not a nobody.

Examining three ancient Christian ideas

Stephen Patterson focuses on three separate but related early Christian understandings of Jesus's death: Jesus as victim, Jesus as martyr, and Jesus as sacrifice. Patterson says that in examining these an-

cient Christian ideas, he finds a lot that unfortunately has been "long forgotten and lost under the great pile of medieval atonement theology with which most Christians are burdened today."

■ Jesus as victim

Jesus was born, Patterson reminds us, into an age of peace and security such as the world had never known, led by the Roman Emperor Augustus. But instead of thriving in this age, Jesus ran afoul of it and became its victim. His talk of another empire—one for the beggars, the hungry, the depressed, and the persecuted—was a crime. He became the victim of the Roman Empire as an example to anyone else who might dare to imagine another empire under another God.



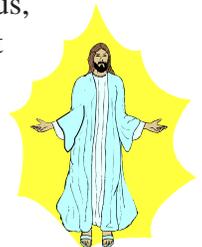
"If we miss this harsh reality and rush immediately on to the resurrection," says Patterson, "we risk eviscerating our faith before we ever really take to heart the challenge with which the Christian faith began. It began with the death of a victim."

■ Jesus as martyr

The followers of Jesus, however, Stephen Patterson points out, "came very quickly also to understand that Jesus's death was not merely that of a victim. It had a purpose." Jesus came to be seen as a martyr.

"To die nobly for a cause, to remain true to one's principles to the very end," Patterson explains, "was a time-honored ideal in Hellenistic culture. ... The martyr asks of his followers only that they live as he lived, that they embrace the values he embraced, even if it should mean death in the end."

Seen like this, Patterson tells us, "death is not a disaster, an ending. It is salvation. In this tradition, death is changed from defeat into victory. In fact, a noble death may become the capstone to a well-led life, one that transforms that life and makes it ultimately more useful to others."



In Patterson's opinion, this view of the noble death, for which Socrates was a model, influenced Jewish writers of the early Christian period. In early

Christian writings, therefore, we find many of the ideas associated with martyrdom.



The martyr's death is ultimately an act of freedom from fear. "Once one has learned to face death without fear," Patterson explains, "then there really is nothing to be feared."

"Jesus's death, as a martyr's death," Patterson continues, "is one that frees one from fear—not only the fear of death, but all such fears that would dissuade one from embracing Jesus's unusual way of thinking about human life and relationships. In this sense, the power of death, and of those who wield its instruments, is vanquished."



For me, seeing this as the sense in which Jesus overcame death was an eye-opening and helpful result of reading Patterson's book. The claim that I've always heard in church, that somehow Jesus's death and resurrection overcame death for all those who merely say they believe in him, and guaranteed that they will go to heaven, has never been convincing for me. I can see, however, that really resolving to *live* in the way that Jesus lived and taught could overcome the fear and therefore the power of death.

In Patterson's view, "This is the power of the martyr's death. It enables one to live faithfully to God, free from fear of the consequences that might come from such an act of defiance. The martyr's death is an act that conquers the power of death itself, by showing that death is not to be feared. The martyr frees one to live the martyr's life ..."



"The martyr's death," Patterson explains, "is only the final act in his or her life. ... Martyrdom is not, finally, about death. It is about living life meaningfully, fully devoted to the things one believes in most deeply, free from the various fears, both profound and petty, that would usually dissuade one from such a course."



■ Jesus as sacrifice

As Stephen Patterson reminds us, "sacrifice is not a ready metaphor in our cultural parlance," and the very idea of sacrificing animals is repulsive to most of us. But sacrifice was everywhere in the ancient world in which Christianity arose. Virtually all red meat eaten in a Hellenistic city was sacrificial meat, and in later Roman times, too, the distribution of meat reflected the top-down system in which peasants were at the bottom. "A sacrifice," Patterson observes, "expresses and reinscribes the ordering of a community through the most elemental of human necessities: food."



Jewish practice, he finds, differed only in that the foundational sacrifice was a whole burnt offering consumed entirely by the altar fires as a fragrant gift to satisfy Yahweh. However, other frequent offerings were made from the sacrificial slaughter of animals and were designed to purge the community of the polluting effects of transgression or irregularity.

In ancient cultures, sometimes only a human sacrifice would do, Patterson tells us, and most ennobling was a person's voluntary sacrifice on behalf of his or her people. Seen in this context, Patterson therefore observes, the martyr's death not only bears witness to a cause. It can also be a sacrifice reconciling sinners with their God, and this is how fol-

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



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.

lowers of Jesus came to understand his death. However, “the saving aspect of the martyr’s death cannot be separated from the exemplary aspects of his life.” Paul speaks of the reconciling power of Jesus’s death, Patterson reminds us, but says it is by his *life* that his followers are saved.

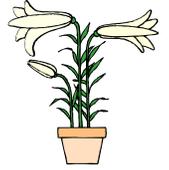
If while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.
—Romans 5:10

Like sacrifices did in ancient societies for their gods’ followers, Stephen Patterson believes, Jesus’s

death created of his followers a community who would be devoted to the same things to which Jesus devoted himself. But by choosing not to sacrifice, the earliest Christians refused to place themselves within the web of social, political, and hierarchical assumptions that bound imperial society together. Jesus’s death therefore became an anti-sacrifice for his followers. It inspired them, says Patterson, “to consider their place in the world and to question it.”

Maybe that’s the main thing we need this Easter season to do for us.

Barbara



Connections

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Jesus’s way of life is what matters most

April 2009



Texans—remember these important opportunities!

If you live in central Texas, I hope you’re planning to attend the Jesus Seminar on the Road program that I wrote about in [last month’s Connections](#). If you haven’t yet decided, it probably won’t be too late if you act as soon as you get this *Connections*. The program promises to be intriguing, and visible support for such progressive expressions of Christianity is especially needed in central Texas. The JSOR event will be Friday night and Saturday, April 3-4, at St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, 14311 Wells Port Drive in north Austin. That’s just west of I-35 exit 247, across I-35 from Pflugerville. To get detailed driving directions, let me know. Presenters are Thomas Sheehan and Roy W. Hoover. The topic of their lectures and workshops is “Jesus in the First and Twenty-first Centuries.” You can get full information at www.westarinstitute.org and register there or register at the door.

Another don’t-miss opportunity coming soon in Texas will be a seminar presented by the Dykes Foundation. Featured speakers will be progressive Catholics Sister Joan Chittister and Father Richard Rohr. Their topic will be “The Human Spirit and the Times We Live In.” This seminar will be in Houston on April 29-30 and in San Antonio May 1-2. To register and get complete schedules and other details, see www.faithandreason.org or phone (800) 882-7424. Cost is only \$35 per person for the Houston event, and optional for San Antonio!

