

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A hard job that requires a choice

Why do churches that claim to follow a messiah who ate with tax collectors and sinners so often exclude people? Why do so many Christians retreat into the quarantine of gated communities? Why is it so hard to create missional churches? These questions kept baffling Richard Beck, who is Chair of the Department of Psychology at Abilene Christian University and is active in the Church of Christ. He wondered why Christians found real hospitality so hard to put into practice.



Qualities that pull in different directions

Seeking answers, Beck especially noticed Matthew 9, in which Jesus tells some Pharisees to go and learn what it means that he desires mercy, not sacrifice. Beck wondered why such tension appears in this scripture, between mercy and sacrifice. He concluded that something intrinsic to their relationship brought them into conflict and made them pull in different directions. He came to see that it was the ever-present psychological experience of disgust.



If your reaction to that statement is like my initial reaction, you're thinking, "Wha-a-a-a-t???" But before I got very far into Beck's gripping new book *Unclean: Meditations on Purity, Hospitality, and Mortality* (Cascade/Wipf and Stock, 2011), I was thinking "Yes, yes!" and not wanting to put the book down. For me, what Beck was saying was making sense of unchristian behaviors—mine and other people's—whose harm I had noticed for ages but whose causes I hadn't fully recognized. His intriguing book offers help for avoiding these behaviors and making the hard choices that following Jesus requires.

How do we reconcile purity with compassion?????

Christian psychology professor Richard Beck's attempts to answer that question led him to see the powerful role that the psychological experience of disgust plays for individual Christians and for the church. In important ways, he finds, disgust protects us from danger and defines our communities by establishing needed boundaries. But too often, he observes, it keeps us from practicing the kind of love that Jesus taught and demonstrated: love that must cross or even ignore personal and cultural boundaries.

The relative weights we give to purity and compassion influence our stands on current important issues within the church, including whether to let non-heterosexual people participate fully and whether to let people with minority interpretations of the Bible and doctrines be heard. Are these people whom we should drive out, or people we should welcome? But our way of balancing purity and compassion also heavily affects our positions on current national issues: immigration, health care, taxes, education, unemployment benefits, food stamps, and more. I'll be addressing this further in future *Connections*.

As [Jesus] sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when he heard this he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

—Matthew 9:10-13

Now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one. ... Drive out the wicked person from among you.

—1 Corinthians 5:11-13

Boundaries of exclusion and inclusion

Richard Beck explains that the reference to sacrifice in Matthew 9 relates to the purity impulse. Ancient Israel felt commanded by Yahweh to follow many procedures that were defined by the purity codes that are now described in Leviticus, for handling potential contaminants. These included certain physical substances as well as certain behaviors that were said to contaminate Yahweh's people. To cleanse themselves from these, the Israelites followed purification procedures that included ritual washings, offerings of certain kinds, and animal sacrifices. So sacrifice marked off a zone of holiness, admitting what was classified as clean and excluding or expelling what was considered unclean.



Mercy, by contrast, required bringing clean and unclean into contact with each other. One impulse—the desire for holiness and purity—erects boundaries, while the other—mercy and hospitality—crosses or ignores those boundaries. And it is very hard to both erect and dismantle a boundary at the same time, Beck reminds us. What's more, when



someone sees more need to erect a certain boundary and someone else sees more need to dismantle it, there can seem no way to compromise.

Disgusted by what is exterior and alien

We experience disgust whenever we see certain substances, objects, or behaviors as exterior and alien. Even the very same substance can seem okay to us when it is inside us, but repulsive—disgusting—as soon as it leaves our body. Think of saliva.

Everywhere, researchers find, disgust causes the same distinctive facial responses—wrinkling the nose and raising the upper lip. But what we do and don't consider disgusting is heavily influenced by acquired cultural differences. Think of the cultures in which insects are eaten.

Several levels of disgust



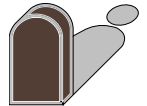
Disgust is an expulsive reaction, Richard Beck points out. It makes us want to push away what disgusts us, to avoid or forcefully expel it. And we experience disgust at several levels.

- At its root, disgust involves monitoring what we put into our mouths. This includes but is not limited to food. This “*core disgust*” monitors the borders of the body, particularly its openings, with the aim of preventing harmful things from entering.

- Another level, however, is what psychologists call *sociomoral disgust*. It centers on making judgments about who and what we consider proper and who we will associate with—who we see as part of our group. In Matthew 9 the Pharisees are shown experiencing this aspect of disgust. It often motivates us to disobey the teaching of Jesus.



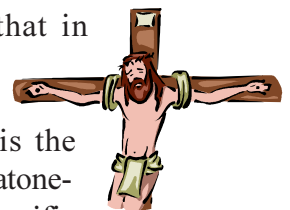
- Still another level is *animal-reminder disgust*, the existential aspect of disgust. It is triggered by whatever reminds us of our animal nature or of weakness, decay, and death. Gore, deformity, and poor hygiene, plus some animal behaviors, disgust us. Anything that highlights what we have in common with other animals or reminds us that we will die can cause a feeling of disgust and degradation to sweep over us.



Overemphasis on purity metaphors

The Bible and Christian history and doctrine include many symbolic ways of referring to physical and spiritual purity and cleansing, thus to what we see as disgusting and so feel the need to avoid or expel from our midst. Richard Beck reminds us, however, that some Christian communities heavily emphasize some of these metaphors and ignore others. This causes these communities to ignore or even oppose important parts of Jesus's teaching.

One purity metaphor that in Beck's view (as in mine) gets disproportionate emphasis in many churches is the metaphor of substitutionary atonement. It portrays Jesus as sacrificially substituting himself on the cross for sinners. This theory says he voluntarily let himself be punished—killed—for sins against God, which he had not committed but all human beings had. It claims that this sacrificial shedding of his blood, like the animal sacrifices that ancient Israelites saw as a way to purify themselves, has perfectly and finally washed away the effects of believers' sins.



Theological “junk food”?

Like the way a “sweet tooth” can lead us to eat foods that taste good to us but aren’t healthy, Richard Beck sees the purity metaphor of substitutionary atonement functioning as a kind of theological “junk food.” It is appealing and alluring and can seem to be intuitive. It is psychologically “sticky”—hard to dislodge, and easy to remember and transmit—but it has harmful effects when overindulged.



Beck finds that relying so strongly on purity metaphors causes us to become morally lax and self-satisfied, less willing to practice compassion and mercy. We rely on what we see as a personal guarantee of cleanliness at the expense of the kind of social and political engagement that following the teaching of Jesus requires.

Does holiness require quarantine?

Overemphasis on purity at the expense of mercy, warns Richard Beck, can shut down conversation altogether in the church. This is due partly to how we see divinity and our relation to it, and to what disgusts us about what we see as disrespect for divinity by the people we consider impure.



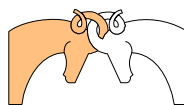
Many Christians see the need to keep the holy and the profane separated. When purity is the main metaphor in a church, Beck observes, holiness requires quarantine—keeping not only the pure people but also God separate from what is seen as impure. Also, divinity and purity become associated with “up” and contamination with “down,” with humans in between—above the beasts but “a little lower than the angels.” Or divinity is seen as found in the vertical dimension and humanity in the horizontal.

Which moral foundations matter?

Beck finds that our judgments of what is right or wrong, pure or impure—of whether a behavior disgusts us and makes us want to avoid or oust people who practice it—generally appeal to one or more of five moral foundations:

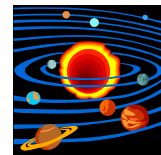


- Does the behavior express harm or care?
- Does it reflect fairness or reciprocity (sharing, egalitarianism, justice)?
- Does it support the in-group (through loyalty, patriotism, cooperation)?
- Does it respect and obey culturally significant groups, institutions, and authority figures?
- Does it protect and reward purity (dignity, holiness, sacredness)?



Even within any one church or culture, however, people don’t all give the same importance to all of these. Some observers feel that liberals see mainly or only the first two as important, while conservatives rely on all five and thus are disgusted by a wider range of behaviors. In many moral situations, say these observers, liberals will shrug indifferently while conservatives will fume.

However, it seems to me that what conservatives often see as liberals’ failure to acknowledge a sacred dimension of life refers mainly to the liberals’ having a different understanding of how that dimension manifests itself. Is it as a being who speaks through certain religious documents, doctrines and practices, or is it as something more like all-pervasive cosmic principles?



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. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 18 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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.

A dumbfounding experience

Richard Beck believes that disgust, with its associated feelings of degradation, is a response that heavily influences our views of purity and sanctity. This response establishes boundaries for us, and some of them are needed but many of them, especially at the sociomoral level of interaction with other people, are harmful. Our disgust response makes us try to achieve personal purity and to avoid contact with people we consider impure. It therefore too often keeps us from practicing the kind of boundary-crossing love that Jesus modeled and taught.

But Beck sees disgust as a dumbfounding experience. Its judgments are largely in the eye of the beholder. It isn't derived rationally and can't be effectively dealt with through publicly available arguments. Little by way of conversation or discussion can rescue us from it, Beck finds, and we can't eliminate it. The best we can do is to regulate it, and the church urgently needs to help us do that.

Beck says the church already has a procedure for doing it, yet we don't make good use of it. Can you guess what it is? I couldn't. More later, about it and about how we do harm when our disgust isn't regulated . . .



Barbara



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September 2011



If you're in the Houston area . . .

you're invited to attend the September 14 luncheon lecture of the Foundation for Contemporary Theology, at which I will be the guest speaker.

The meeting will be at The Forest Club, 9950 Memorial Drive, Houston, from 11:30 A.M. to 1:00 P.M. on Wednesday, September 14. Cost is \$25 per person if you register by Monday, September 12. There's a \$1 surcharge for walk-ins.

You can register and pay by credit card at 713-668-2345 or on the Foundation's website, www.contemporarytheology.org.



I hope you'll come. I'd love to see you there!

