

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Purpose driven? Undriven?

Still thinking about making disciples as I considered readers' responses to the recent *Connections* on that subject, I read two newspaper articles that made me think even more about it. One article was about a fierce conflict in a Mississippi Baptist church, resulting from the use of aggressive evangelism methods advocated by Rick Warren, author of the popular book *The Purpose Driven Life*. Advocates of using these methods, the article explained, "credit it with energizing congregations, doubling the size of some churches and boosting the number of 'megachurches' of more than 2,000 members." Yet in other congregations Warren's methods are causing large membership losses.



The other article reported the decline of Zoroastrianism. This religion originated in the Persian empire and once dominated the ancient world. Scholars believe it predates both Christianity and Islam and influenced both of them and Judaism. But an Illinois Zoroastrian priest quoted in the article says that although there once were fifty million Zoroastrians, there are now less than 200,000 and the religion may be gone in a hundred years.



Very different results

Warren's aggressive evangelistic efforts and Zoroastrians' non-efforts are getting very different results. The attitude I see in many mainline church members is more like the Zoroastrians'. Will our churches keep declining as a result? Or would we lose even more members if more congregations adopted Warren's methods? Would other methods be more effective than either of these? Do membership increases result mainly from deliberate evangelistic efforts or from something else? More important, do membership numbers reflect faithfulness to the church's purpose?



An ancient religion still lives

When I read about the decline of Zoroastrianism in the U.S., I was surprised not by its decline but by its current existence. I had known only that it existed centuries ago in faraway parts of the world, but now I find that it is still practiced worldwide, especially in Iran and India. With these countries so prominent in today's news, I wanted to know more.



Zoroastrianism, I learned, was the dominant world religion during the Persian empires, 559 B.C.E. to 651 C.E., which includes the lifetime of Jesus. Zoroastrianism calls the supreme being Ahura Mazda, which means "wise lord." He is believed to be the all-good creator of the world and all good things, including people. He is opposed by a destructive spirit who embodies evil and is the creator of all evil things.

Zoroastrianism was founded by the prophet Zarathushtra, known to the Greeks as Zoroaster. He lived and preached in Asia, probably about 1200 B.C.E. He is believed to have received his revelations directly from Ahura Mazda and his archangels, and Zarathushtra believed he had been entrusted with a message for all humankind.

Fire, a specially esteemed symbol

The main scripture of Zoroastrianism is the Avesta, about a thousand pages long. Its most sacred but most enigmatic sections are the Gathas, seventeen hymns of Zarathushtra. They are passionate utterances expressed in an ancient poetic form. Zarathushtra's teachings were handed down orally until they were written down during the third Iranian empire in the Pahlavi or Middle Persian language.



Fire is a special symbol of Ahura Mazda's truth, called Asha. Prayer is often done in front of a fire, and consecrated fires are kept burning in major temples. Two sacred garments are emblems of the religion. One is retied several times daily in a cleansing ritual accompanied by prayers, as a sign of faith.

Some of these features resemble Christian beliefs and symbols, reminding us that many of our ways of picturing and worshiping the sacred aren't unique.

Familiar reasons for decline



Many Christians would undoubtedly attribute Zoroastrianism's decline entirely to the fact that Christianity has the truth and Zoroastrianism (like every other non-Christian religion) doesn't. But it seems to me that what we know about the impossibility of any religion having the whole truth or the only truth keeps that explanation from being valid.

Thus there must be other reasons, and the article I read in the September 6 *Austin (Texas) American-Statesman*, based on one from that day's *New York Times*, gave some clues as to what those reasons may include. It describes today's North American Zoroastrians. "Their mobility and adaptability have contributed to their demise. They assimilate and marry outside of their faith, virtually disappearing into their adopted cultures. Many Zoroastrian

women are now professionals who have few or no children. ... Most Zoroastrians are well-educated and well-traveled professionals, earning incomes that place them in the middle and upper classes." That sounds like a description of many mainline church members in the U.S.



A palpable panic

"There is a palpable panic among Zoroastrians today," the *American-Statesman* article continues, "not only in the United States, but around the world—that they are fighting the extinction of their faith." When I read that, I thought, "We could replace 'Zoroastrians' in that sentence with 'United Methodists,' or probably with 'Episcopalians' or 'Presbyterians' too, and it would still be true."

No compulsion

As for beliefs, "Zoroastrians believe in free will, so in matters of religion they do not believe in compulsion. They do not proselytize. They can pray at home instead of going to a temple. ... And their basic doctrine is a universal ethical precept: 'good thoughts, good words, good deeds.'" Ironically, those attitudes are a lot like my own and those of many other church members I know, with regard to our Christian faith.



Reasons for reluctance

Our reluctance to evangelize aggressively comes mainly, it seems to me, from believing that no religion has a monopoly on the truth, that what happens after death can't depend on professing belief in a particular religion, and that we became Christians mainly because of where we happened to be born. Thus we feel little motivation for trying to make anyone adopt our religion instead of another.



Our reluctance comes also from simply not wanting anyone to try to "make" us into anything, a disciple of Jesus or anything else. Because I don't want anyone to try to make me into anything, I'm not willing to try to make anyone else into anything. It seems like an offense against the other person.

For some Christians the idea of making disciples recalls appalling stories of 19th-century Christian missionaries to Africa, Asia, and the South



Pacific, who made the "natives" wear the clothing typical of early America or England and often forced them to abandon their family ties and language too. These well-meaning Christian missionaries mistakenly assumed that being Christian required following their cultural

customs. Today's evangelistic methods may not be that extreme, but in trying to make disciples some Christians still push mere cultural traditions instead of the just and loving behavior that is the real essence of following Jesus.

Information without pressure

Instead of trying to *make* disciples, I wish we'd let people know what we consider the requirements and advantages of being a disciple, but leave them to decide whether they want to be one or not. I think we need to say more widely and clearly what we know about Jesus, but also to say that we can't be sure of all that he's claimed to have done and said. I wish we'd make clear what is known about the nature of all sacred documents (including the Bible) and about the kind of language in which they're typically expressed. We also need to make known the origins of Bible documents, the influence of the cultures in which they arose, the contradictions they in-



clude, and the changes they've undergone to reach the Bible's present form. We also need to make clear that ours isn't the only religion that has the whole truth about God or gives access to God.

Above all I believe we need to make well known why we believe the teachings and example of Jesus are worth following. We need to say how we think they apply specifically to today's controversial issues. We need to make clear that following Jesus can often mean opposing familiar customs and breaking rules, even church customs and rules. I wish we wouldn't just portray Jesus as we now so often do, as sweet and comforting and easy to emulate merely by being nice and by conforming to all that our churches and society expect.



Would it be enough?

I suspect that if we publicized Christianity in this way, some thinking people who aren't now persuaded that it is worth following would become persuaded. We're turning off a lot of those people now, and I hate for us to keep doing that. They could have much-needed influence for good in our world.

Would doing these things be enough to keep our churches alive? Would it restore or even increase their influence in today's world? Or would it let Christianity fade away in the way Zoroastrianism is apparently fading away in the U.S.? I'm not sure, yet those are the only kind of disciple-making efforts I feel right about supporting.



Playing hardball with whiny members

Rick Warren's methods go much further. The article I read in the September 5 *Wall Street Journal*

reports that his church draws 20,000 people each weekend, and the church and its nonprofit arm have trained 400,000 pastors worldwide. Part of the training teaches pastors how to deal with opposition to the changes Warren's methods will require in their churches. There the methods get mean. The *Journal* article tells about a trainer telling pastors to "speak to critical members, then help them leave if they don't stop objecting." That's not all. If the members join a different church after leaving, "pastors should call their new minister and suggest that [they] be barred from any leadership roles." "There are moments when you've got to play hardball," the article quotes another trainer as saying. "You cannot transition a church ... and placate every whiny Christian along the way."



Other alternatives exist

With its use of these tactics, according to the *Wall Street Journal* article, the purpose-driven movement is dividing evangelical U.S. Christians. Critics object especially to the movement's heavy or even exclusive emphasis on reaching adults in their 20s and 30s with modern music and marketing techniques and a casual style. Warren, the *Journal* reports, preaches in sandals and a Hawaiian shirt, in a theater-style auditorium. So do many other pastors now, of course, not just those Warren has trained. "He encourages ministers to banish church traditions such as hymns, choirs, and pews. He and his followers use 'praise team' singers, backed by rock bands playing contemporary Christian songs. His sermons rarely linger on self-denial and fighting sin, instead focusing on healing modern American angst such as troubled marriages and stress."



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 14 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

Many Christians are asking whether the wholesale adoption of such methods furthers the church's purpose or hinders it. What about the people for whom rock music hinders awareness of God instead of promoting it? What about those who aren't married or whose marriages aren't troubled, and those whose days aren't spent in a rat race? What about those unconvinced by religious claims expressed in the words, concepts, and customs of earlier centuries?

Can't we offer worship services that reflect today's language and today's understanding of the universe and human beings? Can't we feature the

great music of all time? Can't we present informed discussion of today's crucial issues, instead of merely ancient stories about shepherds and fig trees? Can't we focus on the inherent goodness in people instead of seeing them as inherently evil? Can't we emphasize what Jesus called people to do on earth, instead of culture-bound rules and the fear of what we imagine could happen after death?

If we did these things I believe we'd be portraying Christianity more accurately as well as making more people want to be part of it. To me that seems a worthy purpose to be driven by.



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Representative responses to the October *Connections*, about no longer attending worship services—

"I'm 'home churching'—stopped attending services 3 years ago."

"We found that in our church dissenters were given the cold shoulder, especially by the pastor."

"Just yesterday I discussed these issues again with my S.S. Class. Many of them have similar sentiments."

"It is very helpful to hear someone saying what has been going through my mind, that I can share with so few people."



"Wow! You've expressed our feelings and current position almost exactly. For more than 2 years we have attended S.S. at the United Methodist church we joined years ago, then returned home or worshipped elsewhere. Two months ago I withdrew from my Emmaus group of 18 years because it had become too painful. Now we have found a progressive Presbyterian church we intend to join. Its pastor has been in conflict with the Presbyterian 'powers that be' several times."

It's sad when thinking, committed Christians feel they must stop attending a church because what they hear in it is unbelievable to them. It's even sadder when they're given the cold shoulder in their churches and can't find anyone there who shares their concerns. When this happens, the individuals, the church, and the world suffer.

