

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

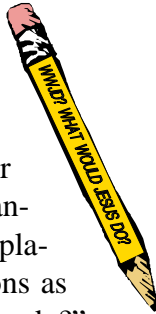
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WWJD

You've probably seen it somewhere—WWJD. It's on pencils, bracelets, pins and pens, and lots of other things. One of the U.S. presidential candidates even offered it this fall as an explanation of how he would make decisions as president. It stands for "What would Jesus do?"



WWJD?



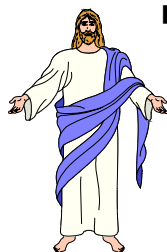
Having WWJD on things we see regularly is evidently meant to remind ourselves and other people to ask themselves that question before making the decisions of everyday life. That seems like a wise policy, but applying it can be hard for several reasons.

■ Twenty-first century culture is very different from the culture in which Jesus lived. We can only guess what Jesus would do about TV or organ transplants.

■ We don't know everything Jesus did and said. We know only what the gospel writers chose to record. Besides, we don't know how much their personal blind spots, biases, or wishes influenced them, and we don't know what changes editors and translators may have made over the centuries.



■ A lot of the displays of WWJD seem to apply it only to one-to-one encounters between individuals—being nice to everyone, as I heard a recent speaker say. These WWJD users ignore social-justice issues and questions about how to spend time and money, yet Jesus strongly emphasized those.



■ If we knew everything that Jesus did, and if we followed WWJD in all areas of life, we'd have to make big changes in our churches and our personal lives. That's the hardest thing about using WWJD.

A good time to ask

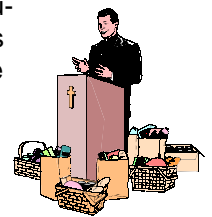
This time of year when churches give special attention to the coming of Jesus is an especially good time to reconsider how Jesus's teaching and example apply to the world we live in. It's a good time to ask, "WWJD in today's world?". However, at Christmas it's easy to miss the point about Jesus. When we see him as a cute baby, we may forget what he grew up to be and do.



Focusing on the baby Jesus can help us remember, instead, if we let it. It can remind us of the great potential that all babies represent. It can remind us of the need to care for the many babies and children in today's world who won't realize their true potential without our help. If focusing on Jesus as a baby has that result, it can help us follow Jesus more closely.



Buying Christmas gifts for babies and children in our families can also be a helpful reminder if we let it. Our Christmas gift-giving to friends and family can easily be an end in itself, but it needs to be instead a reminder to help the children and adults whose needs are much greater than those of our immediate family and circle of friends. It can remind us of the love and justice Jesus called his followers to show to the world. And the help that's needed is usually more than giving Christmas gifts to needy people. It's likely to include working to change the conditions that cause people to be needy.



Looking for God's answer

Baby Jesus was probably cute and cuddly like most other babies, but that aspect of Jesus isn't what's important for our faith and our efforts to follow him. Baby Jesus was important not because he was cute and sweet, but because he became the adult who brought salvation and showed the world what God was like. That's why Christmas is an especially good time to look at the world around us and ask ourselves what God wants us to do about what we see. If we're willing to hear God's answer when we ask what Jesus would do, we may see Christmas in a new light.

WWJD?

Would Jesus do anything just for fun?



How would Jesus spend his time if he lived in the everyday world of today's U.S. church members? Would he do any of the kinds of things we do for enjoyment? I'm not sure, but I'm afraid the answer is no. I try to assure myself that there's nothing wrong with doing some things just for enjoyment, as long as I'm also doing things aimed at making needed contributions to the world I live in, but I doubt that Jesus would endorse that attitude.

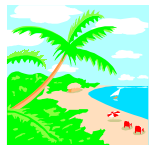
From reading the gospels, I get the impression that Jesus never spent even a small part of his time doing anything just for fun. He seems to have used every bit of his time for doing his ministry. In the Bible we see him visiting friends' homes, attending a wedding, and circulating among the crowds in the marketplaces, but he doesn't seem to have done those things to enjoy himself or to be sociable. He seems to have gone to those places in order to deliver his message and minister to the people who were there.

He'd go where people gather

What would serve that purpose for him if he lived in the U.S. today? Maybe he'd walk around in malls, but I don't think he'd be shopping. He'd be there to engage people in conversation instead, trying to convince them to change their ways of living. He might attend sports events, but not because he wanted to see the athletes perform. I think he'd attend only because it would give him access to the people he'd find there. He might therefore spend all his time talking at the refreshment stands instead of sitting and watching the game.



I can't imagine Jesus spending time traveling for sightseeing, yet that's one of my frequent and favorite occupations. Jesus traveled a fair amount, but in his day that meant mainly walking, so it didn't allow covering much territory. And his traveling, like his socializing, wasn't done for enjoyment. Unlike my purpose in traveling, his wasn't mere curiosity or the desire to enjoy scenery, food, or art. When he traveled it was apparently for the same reason he did everything else—to get access to people so he could deliver his message to them.



He'd go where people work

Would Jesus spend time reading magazines and newspapers? Would he watch TV or movies? He might, but probably not just for enjoyment or idle curiosity. I suspect he'd see such things strictly as ways to learn what was going on in the society, as a basis for talking with people about the changes that were needed for making the society more loving and just.



If Jesus were in our world I suppose he would spend a lot of his time in offices, schools, hospitals, factories, military bases, airports, fast-food restaurants, and other such places where a lot of people go every day. This would give him the opportunity to talk to them and to use familiar examples from their lives as the basis for teaching them about the love and justice that God wants us all to practice and to promote. That's evidently how Jesus functioned in the first-century world. He spent time with shepherds, fishermen, and soldiers, and he expressed his message in terms of their work.



He associated with social outcasts

In his choice of companions Jesus didn't follow accepted rules and customs. He talked with women and treated them as equals with men, a definite no-no in his day. In the Bible we find him often talking with beggars, so I imagine he would spend a good bit of time with homeless people today. He evidently spent a lot of time with other social outcasts, too—lepers, tax-collectors, prostitutes, and Samaritans.



Would Jesus go to church?

According to the gospels, Jesus took part in some traditional religious practices. He was baptized, and he went to the synagogue. Today's church leaders say that shows that following Jesus requires regular church attendance, but I'm not sure that's a valid conclusion to draw. I get the impression that in synagogues Jesus didn't just follow their leaders and traditions. Instead, he boldly advocated change. He evidently



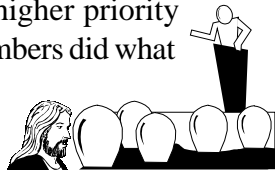
When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom.

—Luke 4:16

went for the same reason that he went everywhere else—to deliver a message.

Would Jesus go to today's typical Sunday School classes and church meetings? If so, it would be only to tell us to make big changes in them fast or to get out. I heard about a

church board meeting that spent forty-five minutes discussing whether to replace the parsonage's broken disposer. I think that if Jesus had been there he would have spoken very strongly about the need to use meeting time only for much higher priority subjects. If pastors and lay members did what Jesus would do, we'd challenge this kind of use of church time, too. If we really wanted to follow WWJD, we'd probably have to get rid of a lot of church buildings and meetings and spend our time out in the world instead.



I'd have to give up some things

What does all this mean for me? I'd rather not know! If I followed WWJD I'd have to speak more often and more strongly about changes I think are needed in the church. I'd have to associate with people I don't like being with. Like a lot of the other church members I know, I'd also have to make some big changes in how I spend money. Even though I don't think I'm extravagant in buying clothes, I'd have to own fewer and less expensive ones. I'd have to move to a smaller and less comfortable house, too. I consider air-condition-

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

—Mark 8:34

ing and a washer and dryer and lots of other appliances essential, but I'm pretty sure Jesus wouldn't.

Doing what Jesus would do is radical

If Jesus lived where we live he'd probably address some problems that didn't exist or at least weren't widespread or widely recognized in the first century—pollution, road rage, destruction of forests and wildlife, and many others. I expect Jesus would also have a lot to say about our day's controversial subjects like racism, sexism, abortion, and homosexuality, even though he evidently said little or nothing explicit about them when he lived on earth. I suspect that following WWJD with regard to these subjects would require taking stands that quite a few church members now oppose.



More than having and expressing certain beliefs or following religious or social tradition, Jesus emphasized rescuing people who were mistreated because of economic conditions, social customs, or physical differences. People are still mistreated for these reasons, and Jesus still calls his followers not just to do good deeds for suffering individuals but also to work actively toward eliminating the causes of their suffering. That's undoubtedly a big part of what Jesus would do in our world and therefore wants us to do.



How much would we have to change?

I'd have to make very big changes in order to do what Jesus would do. I'm not willing to make those changes, and I don't think I'm the only church member who isn't. But is there another side to this issue?

Maybe so. We're all called to some kind of ministry but we aren't all called to the same kind. The

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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. Some readers make voluntary financial 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 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

fact that we have different spiritual gifts and different talents, skills, and experience evidently means that God doesn't call us all to do the same thing. I may be just rationalizing, trying to avoid feeling guilty about not following Jesus in ways that I find uncomfortable, but I don't think so. I simply don't think I'm called to the one-to-one ministries that so



many of the displays of WWJD emphasize, and I doubt they're called to write and speak publicly about change in the church as I feel I am.

I'm inclined to think, however, that even though God doesn't expect all of us to do the same things as

our main ministries, God wants each of us to do one-to-one ministry when the need for it arises in our daily lives. I believe God also wants each of us to speak up about the need for change in the world and the church, whenever we're in situations that need changing in order to become loving and just.

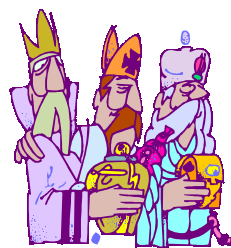


What would Jesus do? It's a tough question, but I hope you'll reconsider it during this Advent season.



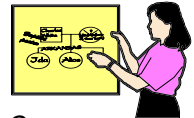
Barbara

Next month . . .



**Pilgrimage—
wise travelers
seeking God**

I'd appreciate your help . . .



If you've used the method of sharing "spiritual family trees" that I described in the July and August *Connections*, I'd like to know about your experience with it. I'm writing a book about using this method, and I might like to include some of your impressions of it.

My coauthor is Larry Easterling, the United Methodist clergyman who suggested using this method in our Sunday School class. Our book is being published by The Alban Institute. It's due to appear late in 2001.



We'll start writing shortly after Christmas, so I need to hear from you soon. If you'll phone me (254-773-2625), fax (254-773-2923), snail-mail (505 Cherokee, Temple TX 76504) or e-mail (BCWendland@aol.com), I'll contact you. Thanks!

