

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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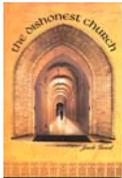
Churches hiding the truth

Many pastors avoid saying a lot of what they know about Christian history and the Bible's origins. They try to justify their silence by saying they don't want to destroy the faith people depend on, even if the pastors see parts of it as baseless. Some pastors feel, too, that we need to keep everyone attending church in whatever way we can, so they'll stay available for new information, experiences, and insights.



We wouldn't accept these kinds of explanation, however, to justify perpetuating other kinds of baseless assumptions or self-defeating behaviors, and it's really not convincing in the church, either. Saying things we know or suspect to be untrue isn't doing our hearers any favor. It's hurting them, in fact.

Harming individuals and the church



I've recently discovered a book that in an especially powerful, clear, and easy-to-read way addresses this situation. It's *The Dishonest Church* (Rising Star Press, 2003), by Jack Good, a United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor. He describes our churches' failure to report the best available information about the Bible, Jesus, and church traditions, and to encourage members to examine the relation of their religious beliefs to today's knowledge from other fields. That failure, Good sees, is harming individual members and the church as a whole.

Jack Good is both sad and angry about this situation. He's angry because he finds so many Christian churches to be stale and boring places. "Energy goes exclusively into reinforcing old dogmas," he finds. "Seldom is anyone challenged to think a new thought, or encouraged to see religion as a stimulating search for truths that will never be entirely known."



The wrong kind of enabling

If our church congregations were composed mainly of alcoholics, we wouldn't present speeches to them every Sunday morning about how enjoyable and relaxing alcoholic drinks are, and claim they help people cope with problems. Neither would we have the congregation sing and recite statements that affirmed and celebrated the benefits of alcohol.



If we treated alcoholics like this, we'd be what therapists call enablers. This kind of enabling aims at keeping abusers or addicts from getting upset and maybe violent. It encourages them to continue a habit they need to stop. It may provide temporary comfort for both the addict and the enabler, and thus seem helpful, but it's actually harmful, because it keeps the offender from seeing the need to change.

Comfort at the expense of truth

We're being this harmful kind of enablers in the church. We're not encouraging alcoholics to keep drinking, of course, but we're encouraging people to keep relying on beliefs that today's knowledge of the Bible, the universe, and history has shown to be baseless.



Every Sunday we're being enablers by using hymns, anthems, creeds, and rituals whose words make claims that in any other setting would be considered delusional. We're keeping many members comfortable with these tactics, but in a harmful way. We're also driving other members away and giving outsiders the mistaken message that Christianity has no truth or real help to give today's world.

A better kind of enabling

Isn't it time to become instead the kind of enablers who encourage and help people to seek truth instead of avoiding it?

Isn't it time to help today's church to become more nearly the world-changing and life-changing force God evidently calls it to be?



Two styles of Christianity

Good feels that damage is being done by the growing division he sees between two styles of Christianity. He feels that in academic circles an arid, intellectual style is emerging, while an egocentric, superstition-filled, miracle-based religion is increasingly becoming the faith of the masses. Psychological and



commercial factors push us toward the second of these, he observes, because it emphasizes Christianity's rewards for the individual but says little about its challenges.

Reaction to the popular style inevitably spawns a counter-movement. Called progressive Christianity in its current form, it seeks to bridge the gap between the academic and popular styles, to preserve what Good calls a more intellectually muscular form of faith. It stresses the needs of the community over those of the individual and calls for spiritual growth even when growth is painful.

Jack Good wishes, as I do, that more pastors would act as bridges between the popular style and the academic style, but he finds that most have chosen instead the role of sentinel, guarding the laity from what the pastors know. He finds this ironic because many pastors' faith has developed only after what Good calls "an intense and sometimes painful time of questioning, dismantling, and reconstruction." These leaders have found that the temporary pain of spiritual surgery is much easier to live with than the constant ache caused by non-sustainable belief. Yet they assume that lay members are unwilling or unable to survive a similar process.



Chaos-tolerant and chaos-intolerant

Good observes, however, that people differ greatly in the amount of disorder in the world at large they can tolerate. He finds that although most long to press experience into shapes that make sense to them, this organizing urge is much stronger in some than in others. Those who can't tolerate much chaos or uncertainty want a Bible that is the literal word of the divine, a power that micromanages every detail of the universe. They want a theology that

was given by God in correct form to ancient church councils and is right for all times and places. They want assurance that ultimately good things will happen to good people and not to others.

Thinking-oriented, chaos-tolerant people, however, aren't willing to be mere passive recipients of beliefs like these, that contradict their understanding of how the world works. These people are hungry for a spiritual home, and honesty is an essential element of the home they seek.



In Jack Good's view, the fundamentalist churches have aimed their message precisely toward chaos-intolerant persons, and they meet genuine needs of those who are at a particular stage of religious growth, thus these churches grow. "Their message may stretch mental credulity at many points," observes Good, "but it is stated with clarity." Mainline churches, by contrast, try to appeal to everyone. They dilute their message in the hope of offending no one, but that means it may not strongly attract anyone.



Learning where the Bible came from

Jack Good believes, as I also do, that at the root of many Christians' failure to relate religious beliefs to what is now known from other fields of knowledge is the failure to realize what kind of document the Bible is and how it reached its present form. In worship services, having pastors hold it up and say "This is the word of God" gives many hearers the wrong impression. They assume that means the Bible was dictated by God word-for-word, or at least that everything it says represents God's view. They don't see that its contents reflect writers' or compilers' personal agendas, cultural practices, human errors, and ancient levels of knowledge, in addition to timeless truth.



When we learn how the Bible became what it now is, what a variety of views it actually contains, and how churches' views differ about what belongs in it, we're likely to come to a very different conclusion about it. We'll still see truth in it, but of a kind different from what we previously assumed it contained.



Our family album



Jack Good calls the Bible the family album of our community. Like our cherished personal photo albums and scrapbooks that cover many generations, the Bible contains pictures of some people we find admirable and some we don't. It tells about experiences whose meaning was misunderstood at the time they were happening. It includes mementos from painful experiences as well as cherished ones, and behavior we can be proud of but also some that's shameful. It shows outdated customs. And like what's in our personal albums, much of the Bible's content is similar to what's in the albums of other families in some ways but different in others.

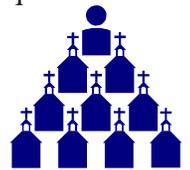


The Bible, in Jack Good's view, is the family album of the family Christians join through baptism. He doesn't believe anything magical or supernatural happens in baptism. "Along with many other Christians of today," he writes, "I have given up any idea that people are born with a stain of sin that must be washed away in the waters of a baptismal font. Instead, baptism is an affirmation of a person's primary identity as a child of God. The ritual marks the beginning of participation in an ongoing religious tradition." In Good's view it's a symbol of being embraced by a new family that's defined by its search for the ultimate truth.

I know that this understanding of baptism differs from the official United Methodist position, but I find it more believable. And I wish we'd be honest enough to admit that we're just one of many faith families searching for the truth and finding some of it, instead of claiming that only the Christian family or our part of it has the whole truth.

Clergy and laity are both responsible

In *The Dishonest Church* Jack Good mainly emphasizes pastors' role in encouraging church members to keep reevaluating their beliefs. I suspect he's wise in doing this, because many lay church members see pastors as the only qualified and authorized source of information and guidance about the Bible, the church, theology, and spiritual growth. Some pastors see themselves that way, too. But hearing only from pastors can be misleading to churchgoers. Whether deliberately or unconsciously, pastors sometimes provide only the views and information likely to preserve the church status quo and thus pastors' job security.



We need vocal lay members

Lay members are more numerous than clergy and have opportunities that clergy don't have, however, to speak with lay people. Thus their role is crucial in furthering honesty in the church, so I appreciate Good's acknowledging that, too. He's dismayed by the many lay members who sit passively each Sunday in church but only until they think the pastor is about to stray from what they learned as children. Then they enlist others and try to get rid of the pastor or take other steps that don't address the real problem, which is their need to examine their childhood views in light of today's knowledge and adult thinking.

Good finds that in the same congregations are usually members offended by pastoral timidity and eager to move beyond childish thinking. Yet many of them say nothing and don't join each other to seek change. They simply fade away slowly and silently. Many react this way because they think they're alone, but as Good assures us and I've also

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 13 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.

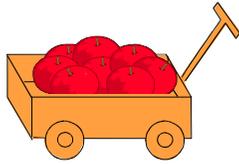


I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people 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.

consistently found from *Connections* readers' responses, they're far from alone. The church and the world need to be hearing from these lay Christians as well as from pastors.

A movable apple cart

Jack Good acknowledges that churches don't always welcome views like his. People who espouse ideas similar to those in his book, he recognizes, are often accused of being troublemakers and trying to upset the apple cart. He's confident, however, as I am, that "the apple cart cannot be protected by locking its



wheels. Apple carts are constructed so their life-giving fruit can be moved from place to place, offered to a variety of people in a variety of settings."

"In most congregations," Good observes, as do many other church observers, "a shift from duplicity to honesty will cause some measure of distress. For a few individuals, the discomfort will be extreme." However, "the vast majority will do more than survive; they will grow spiritually. More than that, an honest presentation of faith might draw back some who have drifted away." I suspect he's right about that. I wish more churches would try it.

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Could we revise our understanding of God and Jesus and still be Christian?

In the next *Connections* I plan to write more about what our churches might need to be saying specifically about the nature of God and the role of Jesus, that would differ somewhat from what we most often hear now from the lips of Christians and the contents of worship services. I'll include some thoughts about this from *The Dishonest Church* and also from John Shelby Spong's *The Sins of Scripture*.



For example, Spong discusses the difficulties inherent in theism, the picture of God we most often get in church. It portrays God as a supernatural being who rules this world from a position outside of it and periodically invades it in miraculous ways. Spong finds this picture of God impossible to believe, as I also do, though as he reminds us, not believing in this kind of God doesn't mean not believing in God. In Spong's view, "those who embrace the modern world recognize that there is no theistic God who exists to take care of you and me. There is no God who stands ready to set aside the laws by which this universe operates to come to our aid in time of need." Spong observes, however, that theism speaks to people's security needs as no other picture of God does. We'd all like to be able to count on an all-powerful being who wants the best for us and will come to our rescue when threats appear. Thus enormous fear is loosed when theism is challenged, and Christianity would be very different if it stopped presenting the theistic picture of God. Would it survive?

