

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

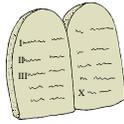
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## What kind of God?

If God has no limits, we can't portray God adequately in pictures, words, or concepts. Maybe that's why one of the Ten Commandments forbids making "graven images" of God. Yet because we're human, in order to conceive of God we have to use comparisons and mental pictures that we believe come close to describing God.



Several years ago a church event named a Re-imagining Conference enraged some church members because they wrongly assumed that imagining God meant saying that God was imaginary, and because some images at the conference differed from the church's usual ones. However, since we can't actually see God, we have to depend on imagining what God is like. We have to form mental pictures of what we believe God is like. And it's important to reconsider, revise, and vary them, because no image can fully describe God.



Many Christians claim that Jesus is a complete picture of God, yet even the picture we get from Jesus is limited by his human form. Surely God isn't a man, doesn't speak in Aramaic, and doesn't observe all the cultural practices of the first-century world the earthly Jesus was part of.

## Explicit and implicit images

Most worship services present many descriptions of God. Some are explicitly stated. We hear God called "father" or said to be all-powerful. Other descriptions, however, are only implied. We speak as if God were up in the sky or cared only about people like us. We're often unaware of those implicit portrayals of God, and our lack of awareness makes them especially likely to mislead us.

It's important to think about what characteristics we attribute to God, and to reconsider some of them occa-



## A notable anniversary

Fifty years ago this month the Methodist Church gave women full clergy rights. Several United Methodist Annual Conferences (regional divisions) will celebrate this anniversary during their annual meetings this month or next.



Progress has been slower in some parts of the church than in others, but we've made a lot of progress in these fifty years. A high proportion of students in mainline seminaries are now women. Many churches have women pastors, and some denominations have women bishops. Lay women also are now in leadership roles that weren't open to women fifty years ago.

## We're not there yet

The church has gained by recognizing that God calls women to leadership roles, but it suffered from waiting so long to make that change. It still suffers from being so inhospitable to clergywomen that many quit or move to other kinds of assignments after serving only a few years as pastors of congregations.



Paying clergywomen less than clergymen and appointing few clergywomen to lead large churches is hurting the church too, as is many congregations' continuing reluctance to have a female pastor.

Portraying all women as second-class by portraying God only as male in our worship language is hurting the church, too. Varying our language would help members stop seeing maleness as a characteristic of God. It would also help create a more welcoming climate for clergywomen. And having more of them as leaders would give us some of the additional female images of God we need to see regularly.

## Why did it take so long?

What needed changes will the church have made fifty years from now, that it is refusing to make now? Will it actively oppose war? Emphasize environmental concerns? Allow people of every sexual orientation equal rights? If so, Christians may ask then about these changes, as some ask now about our unduly slow recognition of women's rights, "Why did it take us so long?"



sionally, in order to become more able to recognize God's presence. It's also important for us to be given a variety of descriptions of God. Otherwise we may wrongly assume that our personal, self-centered view of God is actually a perfect picture.

### Common but contradictory descriptions

Some of our most common descriptions of God contradict others. We may give lip-service to the belief that God has no gender, but in scriptures, hymns, anthems, prayers, and other parts of worship we portray God as male by our almost exclusive use of masculine pronouns and male metaphors such as king, lord, and above all, father.



Jesus apparently called God "Father," but being his disciples means copying his ways of treating people, not his cultural practices or personal human features. Thus we don't have to call God only "Father" or to see the maleness of Jesus as revealing a



trait of God. Besides, Jesus didn't just describe God in male terms. He compared God to a woman looking for a lost coin, and to a mother bird. He also treated women as important and spoke about the value of all people. To feel

that we have a relationship with God, we may need to use human traits for describing God, but it's important to remember that none of them provide perfect descriptions or can be taken literally.

### We know some of God's will but not all

From reading the Bible we presumably know a lot about what God wants. Especially from reading what Jesus said and did, we learn that God wants us to treat all people with kindness, justice, and compassion. We learn that God wants us to help the poor, the sick, the hungry, those who are being oppressed, and others who are suffering.



In addition, some people whom we call prophets seem to have unusually great God-given ability to discern specific things God is currently doing in the world, and all of us can discern some of those things if we're open and seeking. However, some people act as if they know exactly what God wants for all people in all situations, and that's unreasonable and uncon-

vincing. God's messages always come to us filtered through our own interpretation or that of other humans, so we can never legitimately assume that our perception of them is totally correct.

Realizing that we can't know God's will perfectly leads some Christians to another kind of unreasonable conclusion, however. When an unusually young person dies, for example, some claim that God caused the death for a reason that is part of God's plan but that we can't know.



It seems, therefore, that our beliefs about knowing God's will vary according to what seems most reassuring in the particular circumstances we happen to be facing. That says more about us than about God.

### We're not always on God's side

Another misleading assumption Christians often make about God is that because God opposes evil, God opposes our enemies. In wars, we assume that God is on our side and doesn't care about the people on the other side. In the church, we're often given the impression that being church participants automatically means we're on God's side and doing what God wants. Yet churches are made up of humans, so what they do is a mixture of good and bad.

Similarly, in the church we're given the impression that God is accessible only to Christians, yet that view of God won't hold up to real examination. Hitler claimed to be Christian but practiced genocide, while Gandhi, a Hindu, risked his life practicing nonviolence. Awareness of contrasts like this one, between Christians and non-Christians, leads many thinking people to shun the church.

### God speaks in all times and many ways



Still another unreasonable impression we often get in the church is that God wrote a book that is a unique, literal, complete, and final description of God, human beings, and the whole universe. This view ignores all that God has communicated in later centuries and in many other ways, and is still communicating. It also ignores what is known about how the Bible reached its present form, and it ignores the similarities between the Bible and the writings considered sacred by non-Christian religions.

Many English-speaking Christians even act as if God wrote the Bible in the language of the King James Version. Also, we're often given the unreasonable impression that speaking to God requires us to use that language, too. We hear it constantly in worship services, especially in prayers, hymns, anthems, and other songs, even modern ones.



### God isn't "out there" or "up there"

Using a special language also keeps us from remembering that God is near us and readily accessible. We picture God as "out there" somewhere (usually above us, as if we didn't know the earth wasn't flat), separate from us and the world we live in. That can lead to mistreating our natural environment. If we picture God living somewhere else and giving it supreme importance, we don't see this world as a place God lives in and cares about.



### Contradictory characteristics

Throughout Christian history many Christians have recognized the impossibility of believing that God is both all-powerful and all-loving or all-good, yet we rarely hear that impossibility acknowledged in our worship or even in Christians' conversation. Also, we constantly hear that God is totally in control and can suspend "natural law" and sometimes does suspend it. However, these claims raise big problems if we think seriously about any disaster that strikes human beings, especially if they're Christians.



If Christian people are killed by a tornado, which we often call an act of God, does that mean God didn't love them and want the best for them? Or if



God loved them but the tornado killed them anyway, wouldn't that mean God couldn't keep the tornado from happening—that God isn't all-powerful?

If God can suspend natural law but doesn't, in a situation that harms people, what does this say about God's loving intentions? God may well be all-loving, but reconciling this with being all-powerful raises questions the church needs to address openly.

### Easy beliefs for comfortable people

Explaining why someone dies despite our prayers requires some big mental contortions. So does believing that God provides for us and protects us. For people who have everything they think they need, believing in God's providence is easy, but it can be hard for those who lack basic food, clothing, and shelter. And believing in God's protection is easy enough if we're safe and healthy, but a victim of severe physical abuse could have a hard time seeing God as his or her protector.

### Unconvincing descriptions for many

Most of the descriptions of God I've mentioned here appear in the Bible. They're reinforced by the words of many hymns and choral works, and by some of the creeds and prayers we hear constantly in worship services. The Christians who take isolated Bible verses out of context, interpret them literally, and ignore their contradictions can therefore fairly easily claim that all these descriptions of God are accurate. So can the churchgoers who mistakenly assume that the Apostles' Creed was

written by the original apostles, and that our most familiar English translation of the Lord's Prayer came from the mouth of Jesus.



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](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto: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.

For many people, however, that way of interpreting the Bible doesn't work. Our churches are therefore losing a lot of those people. Isn't it time to work on stopping this loss? We might lessen it by acknowledging the inconsistencies in some familiar portrayals of God, and by presenting a greater variety of pictures.



### Countless descriptions to choose from

The Bible contains many different descriptions of God, and throughout later centuries, inspired people have described God in additional ways. Why not include more of those descriptions in our wor-

ship services? In a future *Connections* I plan to suggest some ways of describing God that might make our expressions of faith more convincing to people who can't take the church's most common descriptions of God seriously. Also, for some of the Christians who are still attending our services but only reluctantly, presenting more variety in what we say about God might replace boredom with interest and with greater commitment and enthusiasm.

Since the God we worship is limitless, why should we limit the ways in which we describe God?

*Barbara*



### Connections

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## What kind of God?

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In a church group I was in recently, participants listed these as the pictures of God they get from the worship services they attend. Notice how some of these contradict what we say we believe, and some seem mutually exclusive.

male  
father  
judge  
king on a throne  
like a person  
totally in control  
all good and all loving  
all powerful and in control of everything  
suspends natural law at times  
all knowing



unchanging  
will or mind is known  
has a plan but we can't know it  
at war with evil  
opposes our enemies  
partial to churchgoers  
accessible only to Christians  
present everywhere  
out there  
above

provider  
protector  
creator  
gives what you ask for  
wrote a book that says it all  
speaks in 17th century English  
needs our prayers and adoration  
isn't finished with us



If you were making such a list, what would you put on it?  
How might we need to change the impressions of God that we give in our worship services?

