

# connections

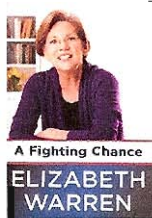
Calling the church to faithful new life



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## Fighting injustice by making it public



Several recent books have presented thought-provoking views about current national and world conditions that would evidently have to change in order for the world to reflect what Jesus advocated, what Christians ask for in the Lord's Prayer.

... Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. ...

For me, by far the most gripping of these books has been *A Fighting Chance*, by Elizabeth Warren, a U.S.

senator from Massachusetts (Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt, 2014). Warren's book describes her efforts to make injustices public as an essential step toward getting them eliminated. Her field is one that I usually find deadening to read about—finance and economics—but I kept reading this book for hours at a stretch and finished it in only two sittings.

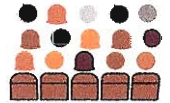
## A woman's compelling personal story

It held my attention for several reasons. One was personal. In addition to finance, economics, and politics, the book is also about Warren's brave refusal to conform to her family's and society's expectations about what women should do. That struck a very responsive note with me.

Elizabeth Warren grew up in Oklahoma, where ultraconservative politics and religion were in the majority, just as they are in most of Texas, where I've spent my life. Her parents and grandparents, like mine, had no inherited money and, at least in their early years, had to work very hard for life's bare necessities. In other ways, however, her growing-up years were very different from mine. She had three older brothers, but I'm an only child. Her father always had blue-collar jobs, but my



## ALEC: a secret legislature?



Are you aware of ALEC? Every U.S. citizen needs to be. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) influences or controls many of our state legislatures. But much of its influence happens behind the scenes and is kept secret, which makes it unusually dangerous. What ALEC does needs to be made public.

ALEC claims to be a non-partisan association of state legislators, but in fact it promotes a highly partisan agenda. It is heavily funded by corporations, and both its award recipients and the speakers featured at its meetings have consistently been leading conservative Republicans.

## Task forces write state bills behind the scenes

From 1981 onward, task forces affiliated with ALEC worked directly with the White House to develop policies favorable to the Reagan administration. In 1986, ALEC started forming internal task forces to develop policies covering virtually every responsibility of state government.



These task forces gradually became "model bill movers." Their members work together to create, develop, introduce, and enact bills establishing many of the conservative policies that have now become state law. Such ready-made, pre-prepared bills—cookie-cutter bills, ALEC's critics call them—make it easy for state legislators to avoid having to consider other sides of issues or design their own bills. Through redistricting and voter I.D., typical bills also seek to limit wider public participation.

## Corporate donors pamper state legislators

Journalists report that ALEC gives legislators and their families expense-paid trips to events at which they rub shoulders with wealthy "captains of industry" who are ALEC's main donors. Bills promoting the free market and limited government are developed in secret meetings. Critics say such bills benefit mega-corporations' bottom lines at public expense, by opposing regulations that would protect individual consumers and small businesses.

But don't just take my word for it. Look at [alec.org](http://alec.org) and [alecexposed.org](http://alecexposed.org). Find videos from Bill Moyers and Frontline on [pbs.org](http://pbs.org). Find out which of your state legislators are ALEC members. Then bring their secret into the light.

father's jobs were all white-collar after he graduated from college. And during her childhood, her parents struggled financially much more than mine did, at least as far as I was aware.

## Brainwashed on the role of women

What made Elizabeth Warren's personal story so compelling for me despite these differences was that, although she was born sixteen years later than I, in our formative years both she and I were firmly brainwashed with the belief that, no matter what a woman's abilities and interests might be, the only right thing for her to do if she could afford it — that is, if her husband earned enough to support the family, as all men were supposed to do — was to be a full-time, stay-at-home wife, mother, and doer of unpaid background jobs in the church and community. But much earlier in life than I, Warren realized that this belief about women's role was not only mistaken but also harmful. Most important, she mustered the courage to ignore it and strike out in other directions.



That brave step led to her becoming a lawyer and then teaching in law schools. Then when she saw how little was actually known about why people went bankrupt and how bankruptcy affected not only those individuals but also their families and our whole nation, she dared to investigate. As a result, she became recognized as one of very few experts on the subject of bankruptcy. That eventually led to a job in Washington and finally to her becoming a U.S. senator.

## Working world closed to women?

At various points along the way, guilt feelings about not meeting her family's and the wider society's expectations still nagged at her, and difficulties made her want to give up. When her first efforts to find a job with a law firm were turned aside because she was pregnant, she thought the possibilities she had previously seen had evaporated. "I believed the working world was



now closed to me forever," she felt — much as I felt when I quit my job as a mathematician in order to marry and enter what I saw as the required women's role.

But unlike me, she pressed ahead anyway and played all the roles simultaneously.

She became a law school professor while also carpooling, being a Girl Scout leader, and teaching



fifth-grade Sunday School. But even though her husband didn't openly complain when she didn't get dinner ready on time or worked into the night grading exams, she tells us, "I thought he felt I had reneged on our unspoken deal that he would work and I would take care of the house and children. I also thought he was right." She knew that the girl he had married hadn't grown into the woman they both expected. Divorce soon was the result.

I, too, felt that pursuing a career after marriage would have been reneging on the "unspoken deal" that was part of marriage, but unlike Warren, I continued to see that deal as a requirement, so I stuck to it. I didn't even seriously question it, in fact, until midlife. Her story of a more daring response was thus gripping for me despite also being painful.

## Conversational, not academic

I also enjoyed Warren's writing style. Despite having been in the academic world for many years, she writes in easy-to-read conversational language, not scholarly jargon. Her book has many detailed notes at the end, and within the text it names names and gives dates and other pertinent facts. But readers don't have to be as knowledgeable as Warren is about economics and bankruptcy, or Washington politics, in order to get her message.



In addition, Warren weaves her personal story and others' into her larger points. "This book," she says, "tells a very public story about fraud and bailouts and elections. It also tells a very personal story about mothers and daughters, day care and dogs, aging parents and cranky toddlers." In the course of revealing a lot about how Congress, political campaigns, and government agencies operate, Warren tells how personal experiences motivated her to enter the world of law, finance, and politics.



Warren describes not only the obstacles she encountered along the way — the armies of lobbyists and photographers that banks hired to oppose her, and the behind-the-scenes political maneuvers of opponents — but also the tactics by which she sometimes was able to overpower or go around them. She quotes many of the individual citizens who have described their personal experiences to her — how they were mistreated by big banks or government agencies, and how that mistreatment seri-



ously damaged their families' lives. She has seen, for example, that hard-working people who had unexpected major expenses such as medical bills were seriously harmed by an industry-backed bankruptcy bill that Congress adopted by large majorities.

## TARP bailouts had little oversight

Another key focus of her criticism was Congress's authorization of the Troubled Asset Relief Program, TARP, to bail out the financial system. Democratic Senate leaders asked Warren to join a five-person Congressional Oversight Panel, COP. It was created by the same bill as TARP, to monitor how the Treasury Department handed out the \$700 billion of bailout money.

"COP—what a great name!," Warren thought. "I can't wait to meet the Treasury people to talk about how they plan to use the money," she told her husband. But to her dismay, COP's authority was very limited. It had no power to subpoena witnesses or, she says, "to blow a whistle to stop the flow of money if we thought something shady was going on." It did not require the Treasury secretary, Timothy Geithner, to explain his strategy. Instead, Warren says, "it looked like the law setting up COP envisioned that its role would be to write boring reports that would gather dust while the economy tumbled over a cliff."



Meanwhile, the tumbling continued. New mortgage products popped up like weeds. Slick salesmen offered families complicated loan agreements full of unfamiliar terms they didn't understand. Down payments shrank. Credit-card lenders gave deceptively low introductory rates. Interest rates were in effect no longer regulated. Lenders no longer investigated borrowers' ability to repay. And penalties and fees grew, increasing profits to the financial industry and pain to consumers.

To find out the rest of Warren's experiences with COP, "Too Big to Fail," and becoming a senator, you'll have to read her book. I can't even touch on any more of them here. I can only say that her book made the U.S. financial situation and some aspects of the political system clearer to me than any news reports I've read or heard.



## Passion, not just statistics

Warren includes statistics to support her views, but she does much more than just cite the work of other academics and politicians. She also communicates the passion that she feels for what she's trying to accomplish.

I was also impressed by Warren's apparently having written this book herself rather than using an "as told to" author or ghost writer, as many politicians and celebrities do. To me, that says something favorable about both her ability and her authenticity.



She may have written this book with a view to a campaign for higher political office. But even if that's true, I don't think it's a bad thing. It's easy to understand her wish to get elected to a position in which she might help even more to bring about long overdue changes.

## The public is where the real power is

I especially appreciate what Elizabeth Warren says she has come to see as an essential truth: "When you have no real power, go public—really public. The public is where the real power is." Describing her COP efforts, she says, "We worked hard to become the eyes and ears and voice for a lot of people who had been cut out of the system."

That's what I've tried to do about the church system through *Connections*. I believe all Christians need to do more to make injustice public, in all the

Many back issues, a list of back issues, and a list of books I've written about, plus more *Connections*-related information, 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). 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 21 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.

systems that we're part of. After all, isn't that what Jesus and the prophets did?

## Prophets speak out on behalf of justice

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos —how often did they proclaim that Israel had forsaken God and failed to protect the weak, the widows, the orphans, the strangers? Why did Jesus overturn the tables of the moneychangers, making public his opposition to what they were doing?

... what you have whispered behind closed doors shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.  
—Luke 12:3



Our views may be in the minority. We may even feel that we're alone in them. But we're undoubtedly not alone, and being in the minority doesn't mean that we're wrong—far from it. How often were the biblical prophets, the voices for the common people, minority voices crying in the wilderness?

So when you see where change is needed, I hope you'll take Elizabeth Warren's advice (and mine). Speak up. Don't be silent. Go public!

*Barbara*



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## Fighting injustice by making it public

May 2014

**"Vote for you? Why, exactly?"** Columnist Barbara Johnson asks this in the May 3 *Dallas Morning News*. "A handsome, well-dressed man knocked on my door recently," she writes, "and handed me a glossy flier that pictured him and his even more beautiful wife and adorable children. He ... asked for my support in his upcoming political quest. ... I noted that he took the time to tell voters that he loves his family, ... teaches Sunday school ..., hunts animals and has traditional values."



What puzzles Johnson is that so many candidates use expensive ad space for such things that have little to do with their political goals or how they would do the job. That puzzles me, too. What I want to know about them is, for example, whether they want conservative Christianity promoted in public schools, denying the religious freedom the Constitution guarantees. If they claim to want "limited government," I want to know if that means hands off women's bodies. Does the candidate want every citizen to be allowed to carry a gun everywhere? Does he or she want corporations to have the same rights as individuals? Believe that health care is only for the rich? Want political contributions to be kept secret? Sell clean air and water to the highest bidder? If candidates want our votes, why don't they tell us why?

"I don't care how sporty or beautiful a candidate is on the outside, or how gorgeous and loving the spouse and children are," Barbara Johnson says. "I care about what the candidate will do in office, because that is what is going to affect the residents of the community they serve and determine whether our country can move in a direction of liberty and justice for all."

That's what I care about, too. I want candidates to make public their intentions, not just their love for their families. How can individuals and congregations help press candidates to be more open and honest about their real views?

