

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 50 - DECEMBER 1996



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Reminders of the early church

It's easy to think that our current ways of observing Christian sacraments and rituals are the only right ways. We too easily assume that what's familiar to us is what Christians have done ever since the church began. A recent trip to Greece and Turkey reminded me how untrue that assumption is.



Many of the places that were most important in the early church are now in those two countries. Seeing some of those sites and being reminded of how they were used brought to my mind a lot of questions about how we worship today.



The experience also triggered some questions for me about how Christians should treat people whose religious beliefs differ from theirs.

It reminded me, too, that many of the words we consider Christian came from secular or pagan aspects of the Greek and Roman society in which the church began. In addition, visiting archaeological sites reminded me that many extensive, advanced civilizations have fallen, and that we can't count on ours lasting forever.

Messages in the ruins

Ephesus is one of the early-church sites in what is now Turkey. Visitors can walk among numerous large ruins and reconstructions of homes, public buildings, and streets that were in use in Ephesus when the apostle Paul was there. With other tourists I visited the amphitheater where he denounced the silversmiths who made and sold shrines of the Greek goddess Artemis (Acts 19).



Can Christians find value in non-Christian art works?

Touring Greece and Turkey recently, I was saddened to realize how many irreplaceable works of art and architecture have been destroyed by Christians who believed they were doing God's will.



Masterpieces destroyed by Christians

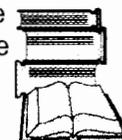


I saw ruins of architectural masterpieces that Christians had deliberately destroyed because the buildings were temples to Greek and Roman gods and goddesses. I heard about huge marble statues that were landmarks in the history of art but that no longer exist, or that exist only as a few broken fragments. The statues were destroyed to get lime for plaster, or broken into pieces to be used in the walls of Christian basilicas, by Christians who believed they should stamp out everything that wasn't Christian.



I saw mere fragments that were the only remains of giant bronze statues portraying Greek gods, and of exquisite pieces of gold jewelry used in non-Christian worship. In the early centuries of the church Christians had melted the rest of these art works, in an effort to prevent the worship of the gods they represented.

Christians weren't the only culprits, of course. I also saw the former storage place of the irreplaceable library that was amassed by Alexander the Great but was later destroyed by a Moslem ruler. He believed the Koran was the only valid source of knowledge and thus the only book that anyone needed.



Misguided efforts?

I believe we need to speak up about beliefs and behavior that we consider wrong, but destroying artistic or intellectual works that we disapprove of seems misguided to me. Do Christians do that today when they try to get rid of books or movies they consider sinful? Is a work that promotes immoral behavior worse than one that promotes a religion we consider false? Can we appreciate a work's artistic, intellectual, or historic value without approving its intended message or its creator's religious beliefs? I'm not sure. What do you think?

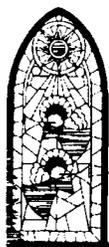
My tour group also visited the remains of a basilica in which the apostle John is said to be buried. Our guide, a Christian ancient-history specialist, described the Christian worship for which the basilica was used in the 5th century when it was built, as revealed by ancient inscriptions and other archaeological records. As he talked I couldn't help thinking how different that early Christian worship was from what happens in many of today's churches.



A building that delivered strong messages

The outside of this basilica, like many others in the same time and place, was originally quite plain. The inside, by contrast, was ornately decorated with paintings and mosaics covering the walls and ceilings, to convey some deliberate messages.

▪ A message about heaven and earth



The contrast between the inside and outside of the basilica pictured the contrast between the world of everyday human life and the spiritual world in which God ruled. The mere act of entering the building, therefore, gave worshipers a powerful message about God.

▪ A message about salvation

In the years when the basilica was in use, non-Christians could not go beyond its narthex, an entry area that was separate from the sanctuary. And people were given a strong message in the entry. It was filled with graphic illustrations of the tortures that Christians believed non-Christians would be subjected to in hell.



▪ A message about Christ's authority



In contrast, the main sanctuary—the nave—showed Christians what they could expect. (The Greek equivalent of "nave" was the word for "temple" and was also used for the temples of Greek gods and goddesses.) At the top of the dome was a representation of Jesus as ruler. Immediately below were pictures of the gospel writers and other Christian saints. Then came illustrations of stories from scripture. These pictures made clear that Christ ruled the entire cosmos.

▪ A message about not being alone



These pictures were not idols. They weren't seen as objects of worship. Instead, they were like windows that not only let their subjects be seen but also made them actually present to worshipers. The pictures helped worshipers realize that they were in the presence of God and of the entire "company of heaven"—the saints of the past and present.

Worship that delivered strong messages

In the worship at this early Christian basilica, the order of worship and the ways of observing sacraments and rituals also helped to deliver the gospel message. Early in the service the worship leader read scripture from the back of the sanctuary, and he moved forward toward the altar as the service progressed to the celebration of the sacrament of communion.



▪ A message about insiders and outsiders

After the opening scripture readings and the sermon (when there was one, which usually was only when an outstanding leader was present to give it), the worshipers who had not yet been baptized had to leave, and the sanctuary doors were closed. Not only the building, therefore, but also the worship that took place in it emphasized the difference between Christians and non-Christians.



▪ A message about God's presence

Rather than casually drifting into the main sanctuary a few at a time, as most of us do when we come to worship on Sunday mornings, the worshipers at this 5th-century basilica would all have had to wait outside or in the entry until time for the worship to begin. Then they would have entered the sanctuary as a group, ready for something important and exciting to start.



Like the visual contrast between the outside and the inside of the building, this contrast between the beginning of worship and the time that preceded it gave worshipers a message about the difference between being in God's presence and being anywhere



else. How different this is from today's worship services that start with mere announcements of the coming week's activities, spoken by someone who has to say "Good morning!" several times in order to get attenders' attention.

▪ **A message about new life**

One of the most striking contrasts between the worship that took place in this 5th-century Christian basilica near Ephesus and our worship today was the way in which baptism was done. Here as in many other times and places during the earliest centuries of the church, the method of baptizing made clear to everyone present that being baptized was a life-changing step.

A long period of preparation was required of everyone who was to be baptized. It included self-examination and spiritual guidance, in addition to learning about scripture and Christian beliefs. Most often the period of preparation began several weeks before Easter, and baptism took place on Easter. During the weeks of preparation, the candidates for baptism could enter the sanctuary but only for the early parts of the worship service. They could not stay for communion.



The baptistry of the basilica I visited at Ephesus was a rectangular pit in the marble floor, with steps at each end. The person being baptized would walk down into the water-filled baptistry and be submerged three times as the baptizer laid hands on him or her and spoke ritual words of baptism. Sponsors who had been the candidate's guides through the preparatory time stood by and assisted.

In baptism as in many other parts of worship in the early church, actions and visual symbols reinforced the message that was being conveyed in words. Each candidate was baptized nude. (Men and women were baptized separately.) The candidate's clothing, representing his or her old life, was removed just before he or she entered the water. As the newly baptized person emerged from the water, the sponsors put a new white robe on him or her to represent the new life he or she had received. Then he or she participated in the full worship service for the first time.

"... be baptized, and have your sins washed away ..."
—Acts 17:16



We can't go back

What a powerful message this process of baptism must have given! Yet some parts of this method would be unthinkable in today's churches (and let me assure you that I'm not suggesting that we start using it), and few of today's Christians have even been told that this method was the usual one in the church's early centuries.

Like nude baptism, many practices that were common in the early church would be considered inappropriate by our culture's standards. And to today's people those practices wouldn't even give the same messages that they gave to the people who lived in the first few centuries after Jesus died.

Distortions don't need to be preserved

Besides, the early Christians' methods didn't all present the gospel accurately. In the worship at the basilica I visited, for example, a sharp distinction between laity and clergy had already begun. The laity had to stand around the sides of the sanctuary; only the clergy could enter



You're always welcome to make copies



Several readers have recently asked if it would be okay to copy some recent issues of *Connections* to distribute to church groups. The answer to that question is always "Yes!" You have my permission to make copies of *Connections* anytime you want to, for such purposes. I write *Connections* in an effort to stimulate thought, discussion, and maybe some new insights among church members, about the topics I'm writing about, so I'm always glad for readers to help *Connections* reach more people.

If you want to distribute it to a large group and want an original that's cleaner than the copy you get in the mail, let me know and I can send you a fresh camera-ready copy on 4 white 8 1/2" x 11" pages.



Also, if you want to let people know more about *Connections* I can send you a flyer that includes a subscription blank, a list of back issues, and information about who I am and why I write *Connections*.

the central areas where the scriptures were read and other parts of the liturgy were carried out. Also, women had to worship in a part of the building separate from men. We don't need to preserve this.

Also we probably shouldn't copy the early church's portrayal of God and the spiritual world as completely separate from the physical world and from everyday life. That's misleading. We don't need to ban non-Christians from our sanctuaries, either, or to threaten them with pictures of a fiery hell. In earlier times such tactics may have persuaded people to become Christians, but now they seem more likely to have the opposite effect.

Earlier Christians made mistakes, just as we do, and their methods don't all work now, so we can't keep doing everything they did. However, we still need to include the drama, beauty, and substance that they knew were essential to the gospel message.



Barbara

**Next . . . Silent Generation,
Baby Boomers, Generation X—
we find God in different ways**



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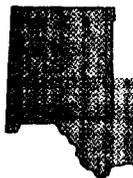
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Welcome, new *Connections* recipients!



With this issue, *Connections* starts going regularly to the recipients of the quarterly mailings of two more United Methodist Annual

Conferences—900 people in the New York conference and 600 in the New Mexico conference. To these clergy and laity who are getting *Connections* this month for the first time, welcome!



If your conference would like to join the seven who are now including *Connections* regularly in their mailings, let me know. I will charge you nothing for sending you a camera-ready copy each month, from which you can make the copies you need for inclusion in your mailings.

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and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want any of the 4 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write to the address above, phone 817-773-2625, e-mail bcwendland@aol.com, or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland/connhome.htm>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.