

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## God's priorities and ours

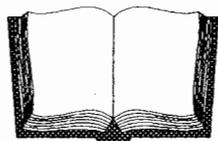
In our churches we spend a lot of time, money, and effort on things that God evidently doesn't consider very important. We usually give top priority to our own comfort, but God apparently gives top priority to ministering to others.



**"Whoever sees me sees the one who sent me."  
—John 12:45**

## Jesus shows us God's priorities

To find out what God considers important we must look at Jesus. This mainly means looking at the Gospels, even though they don't tell us everything Jesus said and did. They weren't written during his earthly lifetime, and they reflect human limitations of their



authors, editors, translators, and copiers. But they still give us the best picture we have of Jesus and therefore of God.

## What does God require?

Because we're human we can't come up with a perfect list of what God wants, nor can we agree on exactly what belongs on the list. But despite this problem, in the church we need to consider actively and discuss openly what we think God's

**What does God require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?  
—Micah 6:8**

top priorities are. Then we need to act on what we find. Jesus gives high priority to acting and bearing fruit.



What do you think God's top priorities are? What are ours and our churches'? I invite you to consider your answer as you read mine. ❖

## Money reveals our priorities

How we spend our money says what our real priorities are.



Lately I've seen churches saying disturbing things with their money. One large, prestigious UM congregation whose long-time pastor is about to retire has raised the pastor's salary by \$30,000 for his last year, evidently in the hope of attracting a big name as the next pastor. That raise is larger than the whole salary of many clergy, some of whom are in places where ministry is harder, more dangerous, and more urgently needed.

Some clergy feel that the remedy for this unjust system is to pay all our pastors the same salary. Advocates of that method say that clergy's motivation is their God-given call, not their salary, so they will do their best no matter what their salary is. But I don't think we can count on that, because clergy are human. Some are ineffective and lethargic, and removing salary differences would reward those clergy and help them stay that way.



Maybe a better method would be to pay our highest salaries to the clergy who took the toughest appointments and were effective in them. What if we paid all clergy salaries from a central fund in each geographical area, and paid the highest salaries to clergy who effectively pastored congregations in the neediest parts of our inner cities, rather than to our administrators and to pastors of affluent congregations in comfortable neighborhoods as we now do? Affluent, prominent people need pastors, of course, and pastoring a megachurch is a demanding job and reaches many people, but it isn't the main kind of ministry Jesus spent his time on or told his followers to emphasize.

Of course, laity might refuse to pay if they couldn't set their own pastor's salary. And clergy and their families might not be willing to accept more danger and less comfort in order to get the income they want. That's how the world works, isn't it?

**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed ...  
—Romans 12:2**

It may be, but God asks us not to copy the world's way. God calls us to use a different and better way.

## Jesus' #1 priority: demonstrating love in action

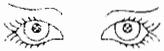
Jesus came to show us what God is like, and what the world would be like if everyone lived the way God wanted. Because God is love, Jesus spent his time demonstrating love. He embodied love in all that he did. At the end of his earthly life he left the church here to keep doing that. What he did is evidently what God wants us to do.

**"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ... I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father."**  
—John 15:12,15

### ▪ Feeding people

Jesus gave both physical food and spiritual nourishment to the people who hungered for it.

### ▪ Helping people see and hear

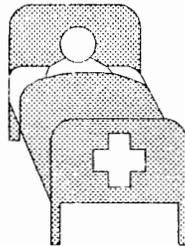


Jesus often cured people of blindness and deafness, but he didn't just give them the physi-

cal ability to see and hear. He helped them recognize what was really happening. He encouraged them to look honestly at themselves, and to see the world and other people as God saw them.

### ▪ Restoring people to health

It's hard to compare the diseases described in the Bible with those we know today, but we can see that Jesus often healed what we classify as physical, mental, spiritual, emotional, and psychological ailments.



And the Bible's many references to the relationship between faith, prayer, and healing let us know that the body, mind, emotions, and spirit aren't as separate as we usually assume they are.

### ▪ Rescuing people who are being mistreated

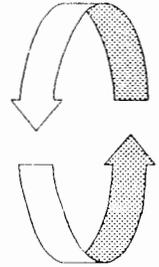
To many Christians, promoting justice means seeing that rule-breakers are punished, but to God it apparently means keeping people from being demeaned, cheated, or needlessly overpowered. Jesus constantly touched, rescued, and made friends with people that others considered inferior, sinful, or dirty and thus not

**[God] has anointed me to bring good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free ...**  
—Luke 4:18

entitled to a voice or even to basic kindness. He rescued women, children, lepers, Samaritans, prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors, people who broke traditional religious rules, and many others whom the religious, political, and social leaders of his day had relegated to the bottom of the heap.

### ▪ Reversing the popular view of what matters

Jesus said the heap wasn't arranged in the way most people thought it was. Many of the people they had pushed to the bottom, he said, actually belonged on top, and vice versa. In fact, according to Jesus what God wants is not a heap at all, but something more like a circle or a network of circles instead.



### ▪ Inviting everyone



Jesus urged his followers to go out and invite everyone into God's realm. He compared it to a feast. He told his followers not just to invite

their friends and social equals. He told them to go everywhere to make disciples—all over the earth and also into every aspect of people's lives and every segment of the population. He portrayed God's invitation as inclusive, not exclusive.

### ▪ Measuring by God's standards

Jesus said ministering to suffering people was important. He said it was more important than saying religious words or following religious, cultural, and family traditions. And he said that our treatment of others was what counted with God.

**"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."**  
—Matthew 7:21

### ▪ Looking at what is ultimate

According to the Gospels, Jesus spoke often about "the last days." This was a way of describing what was ultimate, which can mean either what is most important or what will

**"Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?" ... "Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." And these will go away into eternal punishment ...**  
—Matthew 25:44-46

happen at the end of our lives or at the end of the world. Christians don't all agree on the exact meaning of biblical statements about the last days, but they evidently remind us to act in ways that will lead us where God ultimately wants us to be.

### Thinking about God's priorities hurts

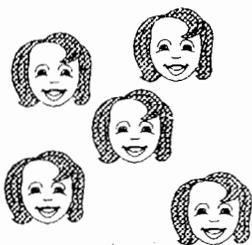
I hate to think about what God's priorities are, because I'm not willing to adopt many of them. They are too uncomfortable and inconvenient. Some are dangerous. Adopting them would seriously disrupt my life. But I'm afraid a big reason for our churches' failure to be more effective is that too many of us feel that way. And unfortunately we encourage each other to keep using our own priorities instead of God's. ❖

**"Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor ... then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.**  
—Mark 10:21-22

### Our #1 priority: our comfort

Here's what our top priorities appear to be. They're aimed at keeping ourselves comfortable.

#### ▪ Being with people like ourselves



Being with people who look, talk, and act like ourselves is comfortable and enjoyable, and we don't like to participate in church activities that aren't enjoyable. As a result, many of

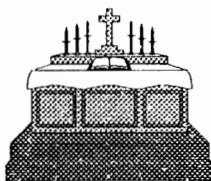
today's churches have become more like snobbish social clubs than like the diverse, loving, world-changing communities that God wants them to be.

#### ▪ Seeking power and approval

We want to be liked. We want status and power, too. We jealously guard what we have and we keep trying to get more. But sometimes what our friends, colleagues, and family members value, and therefore what we must do in order to hold on to power and to please the people around us, is the opposite of what God wants us to be doing.

#### ▪ Feeling sure that we're right

We like having lists of rules to cover everything we're supposed to be doing. We especially like lists that include only what we're *already* doing.



We like to think that if we're doing things like attending worship services reasonably often and not murdering anyone we're meeting all of God's requirements. We like having creeds

and doctrines and prayers that we can recite like robots and never have to reconsider. But this isn't what Jesus advocated or demonstrated. His rule asks us to do whatever love requires in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in. What that is will vary with the circumstances. It can't be covered by any list of rules or any religious words.

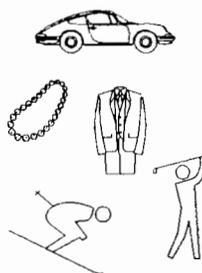
#### ▪ Controlling what others do

Even though he knew God's will perfectly, which we don't, Jesus didn't force people to do what he thought they should do. He specifically told his followers not to try to weed out the world's evil, because he knew they would destroy some good by mistake. He told his disciples not to attack people who weren't part of their group. And he said we must believe in him, but he didn't say exactly how we must express that belief. But we keep trying to oust and punish the people who we think aren't saying all the right words and following all the right rules. We want the comfort of feeling that we're doing what God wants when other people aren't.



#### ▪ Living in luxury

We conveniently ignore Jesus' statements "take no thought for what you will wear," and "don't lay up treasures on earth." Many of us consider expensive entertainments and luxurious houses, cars, and clothes indispensable, yet Jesus called such things unimportant.



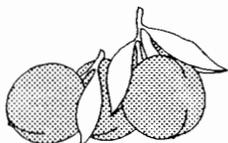
#### ▪ Doing what we've always done

It's easy and comfortable to assume that whatever our culture, our nation, and our friends, family, and church members do is automatically what God wants. Yet over the centuries many cherished traditions have turned out to be contrary to God's will. What we've always done may be the very opposite of what God wants us to do. ❖

**"You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition."**  
—Mark 7:8

### Jesus said our fruit was important

Apparently God's top priority for the church is ministering to the world in love and justice, in order to let the world know what God is like and to draw all people to God through the saving love of Christ. If we do that, our ministries will bear fruit.



Jesus often said fruit was important. He said that verbal statements of belief or commitment were worthless if they weren't confirmed by actions that were loving and just. In the church we need to be a

lot clearer about this. We need to help each other summon the nerve to use God's list of priorities. Our actions clearly show whether we're really using God's list, no matter what our words may say. ❖

*Barbara*

Next month . . .

**We can't stop with what we learned in kindergarten**



**Connections** 6-94

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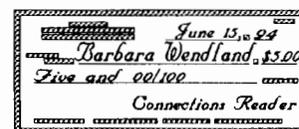
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