

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 70 - AUGUST 1998



BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 254-773-2625 BCWendland@aol.com

Accentuating the positive

“You’ve got to ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive,
eliminate the negative,
latch on to the affirmative,
don’t mess with Mister In-between.”

“You’ve got to spread joy up to the maximum,
bring gloom down to the minimum,
have faith, or pandemonium
li’ble to walk upon the scene.” *

These words of an old song that has resurfaced in a recent movie aren’t what church members knowingly use as a guide for life. However, the song describes a policy we often use in the church. Trying to protect members’ feelings and comfort, and to keep things under control, we try to prevent mention of the church’s shortcomings. We try to eliminate the voices and views that seem negative.

At first glance this seems like a nice upbeat policy to follow, but it can be dangerous. Eliminating the negative can lead to disaster.

Bible heroes didn’t leave out the negative

It’s unbiblical, too. Eliminating everything negative was advocated by Pollyanna, the fictional character who never admitted that anything was less than the best, but I don’t recall God telling people anywhere in the Bible to use that method. God doesn’t advocate the ostrich method, either—burying our heads so we won’t see what’s happening around us.

Instead, in the Bible we continually see God telling people to notice and speak up about what is against God’s will, and to work toward getting it changed. Neither the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, nor Paul pulled any punches in saying what was wrong in the society or the religious institutions of their day. Neither did later giants of the church.



What’s positive? What’s negative?



What’s positive and what’s negative depends a lot on who’s doing the evaluating. Some people tend to see most pleas for change as negative and destructive. Even if the status quo isn’t good, they see criticism of it as an unkind and unbearably painful attack on the people who are responsible for it. Other people, however, tend to see forthright, open acknowledgment of problems as positive and constructive. They see it as a needed attack on problems that need solving, not as an attack on the people who happen to be involved in them.

Both of these groups may be trying to show Christian concern for people, but they’re doing it in different ways.

One emphasizes not hurting the people whose comfort depends on the status quo, while the other focuses on the people who are being harmed by the status quo. The church needs both viewpoints.



Publicizing the problems can be positive

In *Connections* I often suggest changes that I feel might help to solve problems that our churches urgently need to solve. Sometimes, however, I merely describe problems without offering any solution, because I can’t see a solution but I hope that other church members will see one when they become aware of the problem. Clarifying the problems and making more church members aware of them can be a positive contribution.

Besides, although the current problems of different church congregations and denominations have a lot in common, the solutions won’t be exactly the same everywhere. Making the problems more apparent may therefore be all that’s appropriate. Individual Christians will have to look for how the problems are showing up in their own settings, and for what the solution might be.

Solutions to widespread, long-standing problems like those our churches currently face don’t happen until a lot of people see the need for solutions. They come only when many people join the search for them or at least exert the pressure that’s necessary for making the search happen. Identifying and publicizing our churches’ problems is therefore an essential and thus positive step toward finding the solutions we need.



The song I've quoted claims to give biblical evidence for the need to eliminate the negative, but it contradicts what the Bible actually says.


 "To illustrate my last remark,
 Jonah in the whale,
 Noah in the ark. 
 What did they do,
 just when everything looked so dark?


 Man they said we'd better
 ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive,
 eliminate the negative, 
 latch on to the affirmative, 
 don't mess with Mister In-between." *

Disciples of negativism?



According to the Bible (Jonah 1-3), God told Jonah in no uncertain terms to deliver a negative message about the wickedness of the city of

Nineveh. Jonah tried to avoid doing it, but God told him again and Jonah finally told Nineveh it would be overthrown. He didn't eliminate the negative.

Noah didn't, either. God didn't mince any words in saying that the earth was corrupt and full of violence and thus God was going to bring a huge flood. Noah evidently delivered this negative message, because he convinced his family to get into the ark to escape the flood. (Genesis 6:9-7:24)



However, a church leader whose views I read recently would evidently call such Bible heroes "disciples of negativism." That's his label for people whose words don't all reflect "societal insights that build, encourage, and celebrate." I disagree with his view, but I believe it deserves consideration because many church members apparently share it.

Plucking may come before planting



The Bible tells us that building up is vitally important but some tearing down is necessary too. It's like getting the weeds out of a spot where you want a flower bed. Planting new plants is futile if you don't first pull up what's already growing there.

Of course, in the Bible we also find Jesus saying to leave the weeds alone for fear of pulling up the wrong thing (Matthew 13:24-30). However, this instruction seems to refer to trying to fill God's role of saying who will be saved and who won't, in the final judgment.

The Lord said to [Jeremiah], "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

—Jeremiah 1:9-10

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

—Philippians 4:8

Some Christians cite a passage from Philippians as evidence that we should never say anything negative. That interpretation seems wrong to me, but I keep wondering because a lot of Christians claim it is right.

Optimism is important

Warnings against expressing negative views remind me of a statement I heard General Eisenhower make in a recent PBS documentary. He said that the Allies' prospects looked nearly hopeless at a certain point in World War II. However, he felt that the D-Day invasion offered the only chance for stopping Hitler, so to his troops Eisenhower didn't admit his feeling of hopelessness. He felt that in order to be effective as a leader, he had to present an optimistic view even if he didn't see much basis for it.



Warnings against negativism also remind me of a comment I heard years ago in a Sunday School Class I was in. "Whenever anything new is proposed in this congregation," a member said, "everybody tears it apart." By contrast, he said, in the other congregations he had been in, everyone simply accepted whatever was proposed, and then they got busy doing it. He felt this made the difference in whether or not a church was effective and growing.



I still remember this man's comments because they made me very uneasy when I heard them and they still make me uneasy. They make me wonder whether he was



correct and whether I'm part of the problem he was describing.

I know that no organization can get anywhere if every time something new is proposed, it is immediately hit by objections—"We tried that back in 19—, and it didn't work," or simply "That's not the way we do it here." However, I also feel sure that automatic, unquestioning acceptance of everything that leaders propose is unwise, dangerous, and irresponsible in any organization. In the church I believe it is unfaithful, too.



Facing the negatives is important, too

Maybe the answer to the question of whether to focus only on what's positive or to mention the negatives depends a lot on the circumstances and timing. When it's time to put a decision into action a leader may need to mention only the positives. However, letting himself or herself be surrounded only by yes-men and cheerleaders while policy decisions are being made is dangerous. When the



U.S. troops were on the brink of the D-Day invasion, telling them that the situation looked hopeless would have been unwise. But General Eisenhower undoubtedly had advisors that kept him informed about what might keep the plan from working.

In the church, refusing to admit that any negatives exist is likely to drive away some of the people who could be the most helpful in solving our problems. When leaders don't openly acknowledge problems that are obvious to perceptive members, the leaders give the impression that they don't even see the problems. This makes some of the most capable members and potential members feel that the church is out of touch with reality and thus there's no point in being part of it.

Different gifts, different callings

I suspect that differences in Christians' gifts and callings also have a lot to do with whether we should express only the positives and avoid the negatives in the church. God often instructs and enables prophetic voices to see and to say what is wrong in societies and in religious institutions. God

also calls and enables people to encourage others and to keep them aware of the reasons for hope. Both gifts are important, and so are both callings, but one person rarely has both.

Dr. Richard Mouw, president of Fuller Theological Seminary, points out something that relates to this question, in his book *Uncommon Decency* (InterVarsity Press, 1992). "In Hebrew society the prophet mediated God's will to the people . . . The priest . . . mediated the people's concerns to God." Mouw observes that the priestly role is usually a necessary preparation for exercising the prophetic role. "Until



people have been sure that we have heard and understood their concerns," Mouw observes, "they probably will not listen to our prophetic messages."

We're afraid to risk pandemonium

Our determination to eliminate all mention of negatives in the church can keep the church from accomplishing its purpose. Failure to pay attention to the negative can even lead to premature death. As theologian John Cobb puts it in his book *Becoming a Thinking Christian* (Abingdon Press, 1993), "Sometimes it seems that church leaders prefer that the church die in superficial harmony rather than live in vigorous debate." Why?

I suspect it's largely because we're afraid that if we let disagreement surface, we'd lose control and never be able to regain it. The church might fall apart, we fear, or at best we would lose our positions in it, and we're not willing to risk that. However, Jesus allowed his earthly body to be broken, and a new kind of body emerged that was infinitely greater but that hadn't even been imagined before his death. Maybe that also has to happen to the church, which is now the earthly body of Christ.



Besides, when everything seems under control we're not likely to make any changes, even if

In one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function . . .
—Romans 12:4

Now there are varieties of gifts . . . but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.
—1 Corinthians 12:4-7

they're urgently needed. Only when we can't deny that our present ways of functioning have stopped working are we likely to make needed changes. Only then do we become convinced of the need to look for better ways.



Trying to eliminate all the negatives and prevent all pandemonium may therefore hinder God's purposes. Accentuating the positive and eliminating the negative may feel good to us, but it evidently isn't always what God wants.

Barbara

* **Ac-cent-tchu-ate The Positive**, Lyric by Johnny Mercer, Music by Harold Arlen, © 1944 (Renewed) HARWIN MUSIC CO., All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Reforming the nation and the church

One *Connections* reader felt that I left out something that needed to be included in the July issue about early Methodist conferences, and I think his point is well taken. Wesley said God's design in raising up the Methodists was "to reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land." A crucial question for us now is whether we've become the kind of church Wesley saw the need to reform, instead of God's agent for doing the reforming.



Connections 8-98
Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

Bulk Rate
U. S. Postage
PAID
Temple, TX
Permit # 380

Return service requested

Accentuating the positive

Tough questions

I commented to a bishop that his being made chairman of a general-church agency seemed to put unnecessary and unreasonable demands on his already-full time. His reply saddened me. "Well, before I became a bishop," he said, "I felt that bishops shouldn't chair these boards. But after I became a bishop," he continued, shrugging his shoulders, "... well, you know, you just go along with what seems to be expected of you."



When is "just going along" unfaithful? Should we refuse even if it means we're seen as negative? Should we refuse even if it means being ousted from the church position that has furnished our income or at least has given us a platform from which to speak?

If you've just discovered *Connections*

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 5½ years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write me at the address above, phone 254-773-2625, e-mail BCWendland@aol.com, or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland>.



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 and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.