

Connections

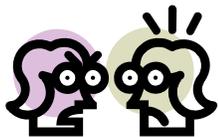
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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An unbridgeable gulf?



Every now and then I get the feeling that there's simply an unbridgeable gulf between theologically conservative and fundamentalist Christians and those who are more liberal or progressive. Two recent experiences reinforced that feeling for me. First, on Interstate 35 I saw a giant billboard that proclaimed in bright colors and huge letters, "Jesus is the only way to God."



"How can anyone believe that?" I wondered. And more important, "Why does someone—and obviously someone with a lot of money to spare, or a very large and determined group of someones—see that claim as believable enough and important enough to need announcing to everyone who drives on I-35?"

A few days later, the newsletter of the unofficial "Confessing Movement within The United Methodist Church" came in the mail, and it also claimed that Jesus was the only way to God. It made other related claims, too, and quoted Bible verses to justify each one. It said that "being saved," by which it apparently meant going to heaven at death, would happen only to Christians, and that Christians therefore must try to make Christians of everyone in the world. Like the billboard, the newsletter obviously reflected a big expenditure of money and a very strong desire to get its message delivered.



Why such different opinions?

I find claims like these impossible to believe, and I know that many other Christians also do, yet many others seem sure that these claims are true. What leads people who all see themselves as Christians to arrive at such widely different beliefs? Is the gulf between us unbridgeable?

What difference does knowledge make?

A recent survey conducted by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (<http://pewforum.org>) asked Americans 32 questions about religion. Most were about the core teachings, history, and leading figures of major world religions. A few dealt with what the U. S. Constitution says about religion and what is permissible with regard to prayer and scripture reading in public schools. The groups that got the most correct answers were atheists and agnostics, Jews, and Mormons.



Does this show that the more a person knows about religion, the less likely that person is to choose to be a Christian? Does it say that knowing more about Christian doctrines and Bible stories makes them seem less believable? It's tempting to say yes.



Becoming informed about such things won't necessarily convince anyone that God doesn't exist, of course, but it convinces some that God isn't likely to be the kind of person-like being that many Christians picture. And having that view often leads to being labeled as an atheist—as "not believing in God"—merely because of having an understanding of God that differs from the labeler's or the majority's understanding.

Does knowledge promote Christian commitment or discourage it?

Responders to the Pew survey weren't asked if they knew how the religions or their sacred documents originated and developed. Neither were they asked if they had considered how religious beliefs compared to the findings of science or history. These seem to be the aspects of religions that lead many people to recognizing all religions as mere human efforts to explain what no one really knows how to explain. Having this kind of information also leads some people to believe that there's no such thing as God (to be an atheist) or at least that there's no way to know about God (to be an agnostic).



So would giving church members more information about the Bible and Christianity help them to become more committed Christians, as we tend to assume it would? Or would it lead more of them to become atheists or agnostics instead?

Bible verses aren't proof

It's easy, of course, to come up with Bible verses that seem to support the claim that Jesus is the only way to God and that only Christians will go to heaven. But doing that has serious drawbacks.

**I am the way,
the truth, and
the life. No
one comes to
the Father
but by me.**
—John 14:6

First, it ignores a lot of what now seems to be well-known about how and when the quoted sections of the Bible were written and how they reached the form in which we have them today. Today's best scholars tell us, for example, that the gospel of John was not written until about 100 years after the death of Jesus, and that, like the other gospels, its author is unknown. This seems to mean that what this gospel presents as being said by Jesus is very unlikely to be an actual quote from him. Instead, it's only what one community of later followers came to see as the meaning of his life, long after his death.

**There is salvation
in no one else, for
there is no other
name ... by which
we must be saved.**
—Acts 4:12

The other gospels are now known to have been written earlier than John but still many years after the death of Jesus, and

their authors are also unknown. The book of Acts was written even later than John, also by an unknown author or authors, and many of its contents conflict with what Paul wrote much earlier, which therefore seems more reliable. So claiming that isolated verses from any of these books in the Bible are verbatim quotes from Jesus, much less from God, is unconvincing to many Christians today.

How could only one religion be true?

Besides knowing all of this now about books of the New Testament, however, merely thinking about the claim that Jesus is the only route to God keeps many of today's Christians from finding that claim believable. How could only one religion and the document it considers sacred contain the only truth, and the beliefs of all others be false? Why would God have given the truth to only one group of people and depended on everyone else's getting it from that privileged group



in order to avoid going to a fiery place for eternity? For many Christians and others today, believing that such a thing would have happened is impossible.

What does believing in Jesus really mean?

Many Christians say “believing in Jesus” is the requirement for having access to God during life and going to heaven after death. But what does “believing in Jesus” really mean to these Christians? It seems to mean believing certain facts about Jesus and declaring that they are true. It especially seems to mean believing that his mother was physically a virgin, that his body somehow came back to life after he died, and that he was divine in a way that no one else is or ever has been.



Above all, these Christians seem to see having these beliefs as essential for avoiding hell when they die. They therefore feel they should try to keep people from suffering that fate, by converting them to these beliefs as soon as possible. That's evidently what the sign on I-35 is meant to accomplish.



Comforting things to believe

Believing all these things is undoubtedly comforting for the Christians who believe them. They evidently would find it unbearable—terrifying—to know or even to suspect that they couldn't count on going to an ideal place when they die and on seeing their family members there. It would evidently be unbearable for them, too, to feel that no all-powerful being cared about them personally, looked after them, and was available to answer their prayers.

These Christians evidently are also comforted by believing that their group will go to heaven and no one else will. They're apparently encouraged by thinking that at least in this way they're better than a lot of other people, especially if in other ways they get the message that they're not as highly regarded as others. Those all seem to be *very* strong motivations for believing what many Christians believe.



Other Christians see things differently

For many years I assumed that finding these Christians' claims impossible to believe meant there

was merely something wrong with me—that there was some crucial point I was overlooking, or something I hadn't yet caught onto. And plenty of conservative Christians tell me that something like that is in fact true. Or they say that I just don't have enough faith, don't really know God, don't know Jesus, or haven't ever been converted. As a result, for many years I kept trying to convince myself—and succeeding reasonably well—that everything these other Christians believed was true actually *was* true, even though I really couldn't see how it could be true.



I now know, however, that large numbers of other people, including a lot of Christians, find fundamentalist and conservative Christians' claims as unbelievable as I do, and for very similar reasons. I know that I'm far from alone in seeing God, Jesus, and the Bible very differently from more conservative Christians.



Information has brought change

There's undoubtedly a lot of room for improvement in my efforts to follow Jesus, but I don't think that's what keeps me and other like-minded Christians from believing what more conservative Christians believe. What has mainly made us feel the need to reject those beliefs instead, it seems to me, has been getting new information and reflecting on what it seems to reveal about those beliefs.

We're aware of enough people who've been prayed for and yet not been healed, to keep us from believing all the claims about prayer that we hear from conservative Christians. We've learned enough about the universe, the parts of atoms, and the roles of DNA and genes, even if as non-scientists we still

know relatively little about such subjects, to know that the Old Testament's stories of creation and other aspects of nature aren't literally accurate.

Accounts of ancient people's efforts

Also, learning more about how the Bible's contents originated and developed into its present forms has caused us to see the Bible merely as an account of people's efforts to explain what they saw happening, not as an explanation given by God. And learning more about the setting in which Jesus lived has kept us from accepting all statements about him as literal. We've learned that Roman emperors and other leaders, as well as numerous religious figures, were regularly called sons of God, were said to have been born of virgins impregnated by gods, and were said to have risen to another realm after death. This information has convinced us that those aren't facts about Jesus.



As a result, we want the church to give its members and the wider world such information. We feel that making it known would be likely to motivate more people to imitate the behaviors that evidently had top priority for Jesus, such as compassion, mercy, justice, and nonviolence, instead of focusing on claims that so many of today's people understandably find baseless.



Is spreading information futile?

Other progressive Christians, however, don't think delivering information will promote needed change. They say that trying to change conservative churchgoers' beliefs in that way will only make those churchgoers more adamant in defending their beliefs, widening the gulf. They say we should therefore simply concentrate on promoting compassion

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at 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 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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 U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in 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.

and justice in all arenas of life, instead of trying to convince traditionalist Christians that some of their beliefs don't hold water.



Yet getting information about the Bible, Jesus, and Christian history has helped me see the real value in Christianity, when I otherwise felt like abandoning it because of doctrines and Bible verses that I felt sure couldn't be true. I know that many other Christians' experience has been similar, so I feel that disseminating such information is vitally important. I feel sad and fearful when I see what I consider regressive interpretations of Christianity getting increasingly aggressive.

Is there any way, then, to bridge the gulf that now so often seems unbridgeable, between the Christians who say Jesus is the only way to God, and those who say Christianity happens to be our way but isn't the only way? I'm not sure. I'm afraid that the gulf will remain or even grow unless the church starts communicating up-to-date information more widely that it is now doing. Yet for many Christians, comfort, tradition, and fitting in with friends and family may keep carrying so much weight that new information won't help. Still, whenever I see the sign on I-35, I'll keep wondering, "How can anyone believe that?"

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Four main ways of picturing God in the U.S. today

In *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God—& What That Says About Us* (Oxford University Press, 2010), Paul Froese and Christopher Bader report the findings of a recent survey that found four main understandings of God prevalent in the United States. "The word 'God' is often heard in conversation both private and public," these authors observe, "yet we tend to avoid deep conversations about God." They find a lot of confusion about religion here, fueled by our ignorance of each other but made worse by the agendas of political and public figures. These figures, Froese and Bader point out, would have us believe that we are in the midst of a struggle between "true believers" and the "godless" or, put another way, "fundamentalists" and "secular humanists."

That overstates the problem somewhat, say Froese and Baker, yet some clear divisions are evident in how Americans now picture God, and these influence our behaviors and attitudes about life. The most crucial theological disagreement in America, Froese and Bader find, is about whether God interacts with the world and whether God judges the world. They find that the combinations of these two characteristics result in four different ways of seeing God: as authoritative (engaged and judgmental), as benevolent (engaged but not judgmental), as critical (judgmental but disengaged), and as distant (neither engaged nor judgmental). Which of these is your way of seeing God? What effect do you see these differences having, on the U.S. and the wider world?

