

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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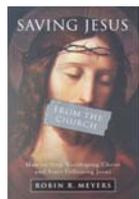
A fork in a long road

We have come to a fork in a long and winding road, observes Oklahoma City University professor and United Church of Christ pastor Robin R. Meyers. “Now is the time to take the road less traveled,” he advises us in his challenging book *Saving Jesus from the Church* (HarperCollins, 2009).



Yet Meyers doesn't think moving forward on that less-traveled road is all we need to do. In his view, the first step must be a step backward. The church long ago took the wrong road at a crucial fork, he believes, and we now must revisit that fork to find the right road on which to go forward.

Confusing certainty with faith



“In the beginning,” Meyers points out, “the call of God was not propositional. It was experiential.” However, instead of staying on the experiential road that the earliest followers of Jesus called “The Way,” Meyers observes, “we have been traveling down the creedal road of Christendom since the fourth century. ... Students who once learned by *following* the teacher became true believers who confuse certainty with faith.” (Italics here are Meyers's.)

“We have a sacred story that has been stolen from us,” Meyers finds, “and in our time the thief is what passes for orthodoxy itself (right belief instead of right worship).” Arguing over beliefs divides us, he sees, but following the essential teaching of Jesus could unite us.



The most urgent questions

In Robin Meyers's opinion, the most urgent question for us is “What kind of God did Jesus

The politics of compassion

“In the struggling and often stagnant mainline church,” Robin Meyers finds, “there is one constant refrain from those who have abandoned the pews to take up fishing, reading the paper, or just sleeping in on Sunday morning: don't mix religion and politics!”



“At one level,” Meyers writes, “I am sympathetic to this argument; on another, adamantly opposed.” Here's why he's opposed. “This complaint is almost always directed at a 'liberal' preacher by a conservative layperson, even though the Christian Right wrote the book on how to mix religion and politics. A more honest version of the complaint might sound like this: don't mix religion and politics in ways I don't agree with. This really means, don't mix religion and politics in ways that threaten my way of life—which really means, in ways that might require me to surrender power, money, or status.”

Following Jesus can require surrendering such things, however, so the church needs to say that. “Not all preaching can be a healing balm,” Meyers assures us. “If we are true to the gospel, some of it will disturb, disorient, and even distress listeners.”

Power and its moral consequences



“It is nothing short of moral sin to suggest that all political decisions are neutral with regard to the life of faith and the ways of compassion. As long as politics is broadly conceived as the exercise of power and its moral consequences, then the church should never separate the body, soul, and body politic.”

“A church entirely devoid of political engagement,” Robin Meyers believes, “is a living contradiction. Churches are political even when they refuse to act politically, because silence is a form of complicity and thus an endorsement of the status quo. The church is political the moment that it determines that one way of treating human beings is more compassionate than another way and then sets out to do the right thing.”

In Robin Meyers's view, as in mine, the often-heard lament about mixing religion and politics reveals a misunderstanding of the gospel message.

reveal?” That question leads to another: “What would it take to make Christianity compelling, even irresistible, again?” And still another: “How can our faith become biblically responsible, intellectually honest, emotionally satisfying, and socially significant?”



“Countless so-called seekers are in exile from the church of their childhood,” Meyers notices, “a mass of refugees from organized religion.” In his view, “these walking wounded cannot return until the church commits itself to both intellectual honesty and an alternative for living in a lost world”

A lack of free and fearless inquiry

Robin Meyers sees that many mainline churches are dying because they have lost their prophetic nerve and gotten used to existing in maintenance mode. They have forsaken their responsibility, he finds, to be places of free and fearless inquiry and radical hospitality as well as spiritual sustenance.



Much of the inquiry, by leading biblical scholars, now takes place in almost complete isolation from the church. Yet many people in the pews are reading the work of Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Karen Armstrong, and other scholars. As a result, these church members recognize the Bible as inspired but also as covered with human fingerprints. But they could use a little help in constructing a meaningful faith in a post-modern and, for many, a postorthodox world, observes Meyers. “They need help to construct a Christian faith worth having in a community worth belonging to.” They often don’t get that help, however, because their churches won’t risk upsetting the members who fear free inquiry and thus oppose it.

Sugary nostalgia with a dash of fear

Meyers’s book, he explains, “is a word on behalf of those who have walked away from the church because they recognize intellectual dishonesty as the original sin of orthodoxy.” His book is “a call to reconsider what it means to follow Jesus, instead of arguing over things the church has insisted we must all believe about Christ.”

“There are countless pilgrims out there,” notices Robin Meyers, “who re-



main fascinated and humbled by his wisdom and by the movement that his life and death unleashed, but who know too much now about the formation of church doctrine, the evolution and redaction of scripture, and the incredible but intransigent cosmology of the church to place much trust in the institution. There is a deep hunger for wisdom in our time, but the church offers up little more than sugary nostalgia with a dash of fear.”



The church has much to offer that the world needs, but we’re not making it well known, Meyers laments. “Strangely, we have come to a moment in human history when the message of the Sermon on the Mount could indeed save us, but it can no longer be heard above the din of dueling doctrines. Consider this: there is not a single word in the Sermon about what to believe, only words about what to do. ... Yet three centuries later, when the Nicene Creed became the official oath of Christendom, there was not a single word in it about what to do, only words about what to believe!”



We’ve got theological laryngitis

If the church doesn’t start openly and actively offering a more candid and intellectually honest assessment of the life and message of Jesus, using the findings of modern scholarship, Meyers fears, the church will quite literally lose its voice. “Biblical illiteracy,” Meyers assures us, “is contributing to theological laryngitis.”



“Anti-intellectualism,” sees Meyers, “remains strongly entrenched in many parts of the church, but it is grounded in fear, not in faith.” What causes this fear? Undoubtedly, the realization that we may find that some of our current beliefs aren’t true. That realization brings the fear that we won’t be able to find any equally comforting beliefs to replace them. We may also fear having our ignorance revealed, making us feel inferior to people we now feel superior to. We thus try to hide our lack of knowledge instead of remedying it.

Meyers doesn’t believe knowledge is redemptive, but he’s sure of its value. “It is not the case,”

he emphasizes, “that faith is more pure when it is uninformed or when it turns away from critical thinking and sound reasoning as threats to the life of the spirit.” He sees science as faith’s handmaiden, not its enemy. What he finds threatening to the future of faith is the fear of what can be known, as well as fear of the search to know more.

We need a new Reformation

Meyers feels that Christianity is now so fundamentally associated with the formula of fall and redemption and so focused on beliefs about Jesus instead of invitations to follow Jesus, that a new Reformation is needed. “It will deal,” Meyers hopes, “not with matters of doctrine and church order but with a recovery of the concept of transformation through the imitative wisdom of discipleship.” It will also seek to restore the ancient truth that creation is blessed, not fallen.



“The new Reformation will be about the very life and death of Christianity itself,” says Meyers. “We must first recover the original message and then be willing to interpret it for a new age.” That interpretation will recover the essential quality of Christianity that we have lost—the quality of Christianity as a way of life, not a collection of literally interpreted scriptures and doctrines.

Emphasis on compassion and justice

Above all, the new Reformation that Robin Meyers hopes for will emphasize the compassion and justice that were apparently so prominent in the message of Jesus. Meyers reminds us that “Be compassionate as God is compassionate” is probably one of the earliest and most authentic statements attributed to Jesus.



Unfortunately, Meyers observes, we often fail to get the true meaning of this statement because instead of “compassionate” Matthew uses the word “perfect,” making faith seem an impossible ideal.

Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

—Luke 6:36

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

—Matthew 5:48

Also, many English translations of the statement in Luke use

“merciful,” which has connotations of pity, especially between people of unequal status or in response to wrongdoing. “Mercy” implies condescension. In contrast, in both Hebrew and Aramaic, scholars tell us, the word usually translated “compassion” is the plural of a noun whose singular form means “womb.” So compassion is what Meyers describes as “a quality of vicarious, even visceral, empathy,” like what a woman feels for a child in her womb.



We run into similar problems recognizing the importance of justice. I was reminded recently that the Greek word often translated as “righteousness” also

Strive first for the kingdom of God and its justice [righteousness], and all these things will be given to you as well.

—Matthew 6:33

means “justice.” Yet these two English words have different connotations today, and neither conveys well what the Greek word apparently meant. We often think of righteousness as perfec-

tion in following rules that relate mainly to personal behavior, and “justice” in today’s world often merely means punishment of criminals. But in the Bible, “justice” involves combatting oppression and helping all people get access to life’s necessities.

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I’ve written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year’s issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 16 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



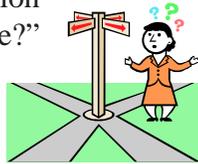
I’m a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman’s wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people 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.

A collection of radical misfits

Before the disciples of Jesus were called Christians, Robin Meyers reminds us, “they were a collection of misfits who practiced radical hospitality by eating a sacred meal without a guest list or a bouncer.” Now, however, by contrast, “one can be called a Christian just by mouthing a creed.”

“How can we reverse this perversion and recognize a disciple in our time?”

Robin Meyers asks. In his view, we’ll have to choose a different road from the one we’re now on.



“The old way of being Christian in the world cannot stand, and a new way cannot be avoided,” Meyers advises us, “if the faith is to endure and the human race is to survive. ... The belief that the Bible is the unique revelation of God containing the literal words of God and defining faith as a set of beliefs that are required now for the sake of heaven later, is not only indefensible but socially, politically, and now environmentally fatal.”



We’re long overdue in saying that openly in our churches.

Barbara



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July 2009

Texans, mark your calendar!

Internationally known Christian scholars John Dominic Crossan and Joerg Rieger will speak at First United Methodist Church in Richardson on Friday night and Saturday, October 23-24, and in Temple Sunday afternoon and early evening, October 25. The Richardson seminar and the

Temple seminar will both include talks by Crossan and Rieger, dialogue between them, discussions with attenders, and opportunity for attenders to get acquainted with each other.



**SAVE
THE
DATE**

Details later . . .