

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Wrappings, old and new

As I write this it's not yet Christmas and I'm wrapping gifts. The church is on my mind more than usual, and I'm thinking about it while I wrap. I see a lot of resemblance between gift wraps and church traditions. I wrote about this in a very early issue of *Connections* (March 1993), and this year's gift-wrapping has brought it back to my mind. Like Christmas gifts, many of our beliefs are packaged in containers that hide what's inside. Also, like some of the wrappings I've saved for years, some of our religious wrappings get saved long after they need to be discarded.



A favorite part of Christmas

Gift-wrapping is one of my favorite parts of Christmas. I inherited that from my mother. She loved to make packages look beautiful, and she was good at it. When I was growing up, she and I had lots of fun wrapping packages together. My daughter and I did that as she grew up, too, and we still like doing it.



We always save lots of gift-wrappings from one Christmas to the next. In my attic, therefore, are boxes and boxes of smushed bows, wrinkled paper, and droopy artificial poinsettias and holly leaves. Whenever I start to wrap a gift I dig through them to see what's reusable. Often I reuse a favorite piece of paper for several years by repeatedly cutting off its torn edges and sticky spots. But after each trimming I can use it only for a smaller package, and hiding its tears and wrinkles keeps getting harder. Finally I must throw it away, when it's too small to cover even the tiniest box.



Whose pastor?

Talking with a friend recently, I mentioned a former pastor of my church. My friend asked, "Do you still think of him as your pastor?" I was taken aback by the question. When I thought about it, however, my answer was "No, but I've never really thought of anyone as 'my pastor.'" I realized that when I think of whoever is the current pastor of my church, or of one of its former pastors, I think of him (my church's senior pastors have always been men) simply as "the pastor of my church," not as "my pastor." I wondered why.



Institutional or personal?

I see pastors, I realized, mainly in terms of their institutional roles. They're required to do certain ones, and only they are permitted to do most of those: preaching, presiding over worship services and administering the sacraments, supervising the church program and staff and volunteers, and leading the congregation where the pastor believes God wants it to go. I think that's what makes me see pastors mainly as "the church's pastor."



Teaching is a big role for pastors, too, and of course so is ministering to members in times of grief, serious illness, and other personal difficulties. However, if I feel the need for these ministries I usually seek them from other sources. For religion-related information, I go to books. For advice, help in difficult times, or conversation for sorting out something that's on my mind, I go to my closest family members and friends. A few pastors happen to be among those friends, but I see them mainly as friends, not as pastors. Does this deny that they've been called by God in a way that lay friends and family haven't?

What's your view?

If you're lay, do you see your congregation's pastor mainly as the church's pastor or as your pastor? What do you think makes you see pastors in this way? Does it matter? How might seeing them in the other way make a difference to you or to the church? If you're a pastor, which way do you prefer to be seen?



My mother and I passed wrappings back and forth for years. I'd put a favorite decoration on one of her presents or my father's, and she'd save it and use it the next year on a package for me or my husband or daughter. We exchanged one pink foil angel every Christmas for years, so that angel always reminded me of my mother and of the fun we had wrapping gifts together. The pink angel seemed like an essential part of our Christmas, but I finally had to throw it away. I wanted it to last forever, but it couldn't.



What about church wrappings?

We have a similar problem in the church but it's harder to recognize there. The church's wrappings include favorite hymns that we've sung for years. They include the words in which we've most often said prayers and creeds and heard favorite Bible verses. Our wrappings include worship customs, methods of church organization, and beliefs about God, Jesus, human beings, and the cosmos.

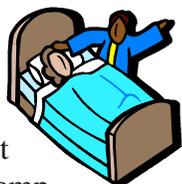
These customs and doctrines aren't truth. They're just wrappings in which some earlier Christians have presented what they believed to be truth. Like most beliefs, these include both truth and error.



Saving these packages in which our beliefs and memories have been wrapped helps us feel safe and comfortable, however, so we cling to them. They evoke fond memories of important experiences and beloved people, just as the pink foil angel reminded me fondly of my mother. Thus we'd like to keep using them forever, even if they've gotten too tattered or too small to cover new knowledge or the new circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Old wrappings stop being useful

We may encounter serious illness that prayers don't cure, leaving us seeing no reason for a loved one's death. We may suddenly see that for our nation to make so-called preemptive strikes against our enemies doesn't seem to fit with the kind of peacemaking that Jesus advocated. We may notice how much of our church language leaves out everyone who's female, and start realiz-



ing that this mistreats women. We may see church members wanting to accept groups of people who seem sinful to us, making us wonder if God really wants us to keep shunning them as we've been doing. Disconnections like these, between what we've always thought and what we're now starting to see, can cause unrepairable rips and frayed edges in our favorite religious wrappings. Or change happens in the church. New hymns appear, and words are changed in old favorites. A new pastor starts using a new method of taking communion, or a new order of worship. When such things happen, we may start suspecting that our old beliefs, like my repeatedly trimmed wrapping paper, won't cover what we now need to understand.



New materials keep appearing



As my old gift-wrappings have worn out, new materials have become available. Many old bows were made of papery ribbon that can't be fluffed any more, or of fabric that ravel and can't be reused without ironing. In the last few years, however, wire-edged ribbon has appeared, and it works and lasts much better. For Christmas 2006, much new ribbon had a gauzy texture that gave a previously unavailable look and will be longer-lasting.

Similarly, useful new religion-related materials keep becoming available. Recently discovered ancient documents, plus ideas from the people who study them, can give us new understanding of non-Christian religions, the Bible, Christian history, the role of Jesus, and maybe even the nature of God.



Change is scary

The mere thought of changing familiar beliefs and customs, however, can be terrifying. We're afraid that if we discard old wrappings we won't find any usable new ones to replace them. Even peering inside of the old ones is scary. What if we found them empty? If we've staked our life on a certain belief about heaven or about women's roles, seeing that it may not be entirely true is unnerving. So instead of looking for new wrappings that will fit new situations and new insights, we tend to cling fiercely



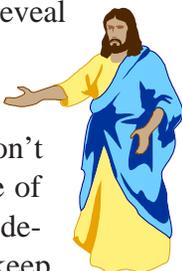
to our old wrappings and try to keep them from being torn open.

When we blindly keep using all our saved church wrappings without examining them, we're likely to think that whoever disagrees with us or advocates change is unchristian. We may even try to track down and root out those nonconformists. Our panicky, cruel treatment of them, then, not only hurts them needlessly but also makes us miss the gift of new God-given insight they may be offering. We miss God's "new thing" by trying to save all the old things.

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
—Isaiah 43:18-19

We worship wrappings instead of God

When we cling mindlessly to every church tradition, we're worshipping mere containers that we've tried to put God into. We're no longer worshipping God. We're worshipping pictures of God instead of God. The Bible calls this idolatry. It's worshipping something that is meant to reveal God and point us toward God, instead of worshipping God.



Because God is infinite, God won't fit into any of our packaging. None of our mental pictures will completely describe God. Whenever we try to keep God in our wrappings, God will keep breaking out. Thus we can't expect any religious custom or doctrine, any pattern of church organization, or any description of God to last forever, no matter how beautiful we may think it is or how well it may have served in earlier years. Our traditions are

merely packages in which God's presence is visible for a limited time. But like my pink foil angel and wrinkled paper, these church wrappings can't last forever.

Tradition-breakers began our traditions

Ironically, many of our present church traditions were begun by Christians who dared to discard older traditions that they realized didn't express God's will, yet we now cling to these nontraditionalists' traditions. The United Methodist Church came into existence because John Wesley, a clergyman in eighteenth-century England, made drastic changes from the religious practices that were customary in the Church of England that he was part of. To revitalize worship and reach contemporary people, he preached in factories and town squares instead of church buildings. He and his brother wrote new hymns. He made new use of small groups to promote spiritual growth and Christian commitment. But many Methodists now consider Wesley's hymns and methods sacred. They act as if following Wesley were as important as following Jesus. We cling to Wesley's creations instead of looking for equally creative solutions to today's needs, expressed in today's terms and consistent with today's knowledge and ways of living.



The King James Version of the Bible also came into existence because innovative, presumably God-inspired people dared to make changes in order to meet a need. King James I of England saw that people needed a translation of the Bible that they could read for themselves. He assembled a group of scholars who translated the Bible into the English language of their time.



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 14 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

The words that were familiar in 1611 are almost like a foreign language now to Americans who aren't regular churchgoers, and these are the people we need to reach with the Gospel. Yet many Christians still use those outdated words. They refuse to take the kind of bold step that King James did. They worship King James's wrappings instead.

When needed change finally takes place and we get used to the new way, we usually wonder why anyone ever opposed it. Most of us feel this way now about opposing slavery and racial segregation, for example, and about letting women vote. Can't we learn from ex-



perience, and make the changes that God through prophetic voices asks us to make today?

We never see all of God

God often has to wrench us loose from strongly held beliefs and cherished traditions in order to show us more of God. We can never fully see or describe God, so the need to learn more about God, describe God in new ways, and express our faith in new ways never ends. In order to grow, therefore, we have to keep looking for new wrappings even as we continue to be grateful for what beloved old ones have meant to us in the past.

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What "new wine" might God be trying to give you in this new year of 2007?

What "new wineskins" might you need to start using in order to contain it?

Have some of your religious wrappings become too small or too tattered to cover the new insights you've started to get glimpses of? Might this year be the time to clean out some old wrappings and look for better ones that are now available?



Where could you look? Who might help you with your search?

Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

—Romans 6:4