

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 252 – OCTOBER 2013



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Secrets that need to be known

A friend who's relatively new to Temple recently mentioned to me that she didn't participate in any church. When I said I didn't either, despite having been an extremely active United Methodist for most of my life, she commented on how prevalent Christian fundamentalism was here.



She has always lived in the South, she told me, and grew up active in a church. By the time she reached college age, however, much of what she had always been told in church came to seem unbelievable to her, so she stopped participating. She went on to become a physician and to have a scientific view of the world, and many of the claims made by churches simply didn't match what she learned from other sources.



Temple is a medical hub with many doctors and researchers, and is near Fort Hood, a large military base with officers who have traveled widely. Yet she hadn't yet found anyone else here, she said, who openly disagreed with conservative Christian claims. Even among the people in the area who seemed to be the best-educated and likely to be the most open to new ideas, few actually seem to use the modern, analytical thinking in their religion that they use in their professions.

Keeping quiet about progressive views

Since moving here, this friend has therefore kept quiet about her religious views, she said, because so many people see them as unacceptable. She was surprised and pleased to find that I shared them.

I felt sad, if not surprised, that she hadn't previously found anyone here to whom she felt she could safely admit her real beliefs. But there are still too many places where progressive views are kept secret. If churches are to survive, that has to change.

Bringing reason into the open

When the church's biggest secrets today are information and opinions based on reason and modern scholarship, bringing those secrets to light is essential for the church's long-term survival. Merely streamlining organizational structures and updating styles of worship and methods of communication will not be enough to reach people in the 21st century, even though those changes are also needed.



Putting more emphasis on "making disciples," as the United Methodist Church now seems to be doing, is also sadly inadequate. Unfortunately, that approach often still fails to reveal openly what being a modern disciple may actually require: for example, analyzing and questioning what our nation does, or promoting economic justice, or welcoming all kinds of people even if that means disobeying laws or church rules.

Openly giving up outdated beliefs

In addition to doing those things, the church needs to start publicly admitting that some traditional beliefs cannot and should not be maintained. Christianity is not the only religion with the truth. The Bible is not the only sacred scripture. Many of Christianity's most familiar doctrines and creeds, like many Bible verses, can't legitimately be interpreted literally—they are neither historical reports nor physical exceptions to the laws of nature. Why should all this be a secret?

I believe that unless the church actively, openly, and quickly starts admitting these long-held secrets, while at the same time vigorously promoting the kind of compassion and social justice that Jesus taught, it will keep losing younger generations and even many perceptive members of older generations. Recent surveys have even shown that happening already.



If the church took these daring steps, it would undoubtedly lose many current members, but it would also gain a great deal of credibility it now lacks. More important, the world would gain a more open, honest commitment to a truth in which everyone can believe. And a modern understanding of Christianity would no longer have to be the church's best-kept secret.

Reminders that we're not alone

I got a similar message recently from a longtime *Connections* reader who also lives in Texas. Hearing from him always reassures me, because he and I share many of the same understandings of Christianity, even though we're in the minority among the churchgoers who surround us.



"I have often thought of you," he wrote in his most recent e-mail, "when I realized that I was not alone in these kinds of thoughts. You have been an inspiration to me over the years." That meant a lot to me, just as messages from many of you also do. When you're surrounded by people who think you're a dreadful heretic, it's reassuring to be reminded that you're at least not alone!

A god beyond the earth?



"It seems clear to me," this reader wrote me, "that the vast majority of Christians today still believe in a God beyond the earth. My guess is that if you asked most people where heaven is, they would still say that it is somewhere in the sky, far above us. God is there with his angels. Jesus sits somewhere to his right, and around him are all the faithful who made it to heaven through their faith in him."

This friend goes on to mention several theologians and philosophers who have urged abandoning this concept of a transcendent deity, which he called a "Sky Father"—the kind of person-like being that I think of as a cosmic Santa Claus. But, this *Connections* reader asks himself, "Why is it that so many millions, indeed perhaps over a billion Christians, believe with all their being in a transcendent entity, a creator God, who loves and cares for them and has prepared a heavenly realm for their eternal existence?"



Why hold on to this belief?

He wonders, as do I and my new Temple friend and many *Connections* readers, why, after so many discoveries about the universe, so many Christians still believe literally in such an anthropomorphic image of God, which seems so inconsistent with modern scientific knowledge. Indeed, scholars have

known since the 19th century that such sky gods are actually typical of early human cultures, like the period when the creation myths recorded in Genesis were first told. That shouldn't still be a secret.

"Maybe in a world like ours, with so much turmoil and uncertainty," my friend speculates, "... millions of people need a faith in something that gives them not only security but also hope and a sense of meaning and purpose. ... Maybe they cannot conceive of a world where they must depend solely on their own resources to build a saner, safer world."

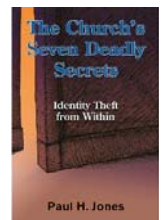


As I prepare to become eighty two months from now, I feel more fragile and isolated in some ways than ever. I fully understand that it would be deeply comforting if there were a supernatural power who knew and loved us as individuals, communicated with us through prayer, and could magically strengthen us and help solve our problems.

Yet I also still believe that a modern understanding of God can be comforting in a different way. If, as the Bible puts it, the church is indeed the body of Christ, and the Spirit is what connects people, then surely our modern image of God includes community. God, whatever that term means to us, does not leave us to our own resources. As humans who are fully alive, fully connected, we are meant to be there to know each other, to comfort each other and strengthen each other, and to confront problems together, not alone. It is deeply sad to me that my local congregation no longer fills that role. But in a way that I could never have foreseen, you, my friends and readers, now communicate God to me.

An encouraging acknowledgment

The title of a recent book, *The Church's Seven Deadly Secrets* (Polebridge Press, 2013), also felt encouraging to me when I saw it. I was glad to find another acknowledgment that many Christians' portrayals of God and Jesus seem inconsistent with what has been learned from science and other scholarly sources, but that churches are mostly keeping this secret.



The book’s author is Paul H. Jones, a professor of religion at Transylvania University, a Kentucky liberal-arts college affiliated with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In his view, continuing to hide what he calls the seven deadly secrets (playing on the concept of the seven deadly sins) jeopardizes the nature and purpose of the church.



He finds that “because there are few places in our society, including the church, where religious issues are discussed seriously, a huge knowledge gap exists between the lectern and the desk, the pulpit and the pew.” He observes, too, that “there is also a strange silence about the church’s ongoing conversation with culture, as well as about the principles and practices of biblical and theological scholarship.” As a result, “many Christians cannot reconcile their belief system with modernity.”

How the church keeps knowledge secret

Jones’s observations of how the church keeps its knowledge secret seemed generally accurate to me. He feels that too many clergy keep quiet about what they learned in seminary, rather than revealing it to church members and outsiders. Many clergy assume that hearing accurate information and potentially subversive (even though authentically Christian) ideas will cause a crisis of faith for members and make them leave, which pastors want to avoid. Also, too few pastors take the initiative to deepen their own education and teach others, spending more time instead on maintaining the status quo.



In addition, Jones points out, too many pastors and lay members expect the church to be a sanctuary that protects them from worldly threats and

temptations. They make the church into a community of conformity, and they see real learning as appropriate only for experts in ivory towers.

American culture doesn’t help

Jones believes that what he calls “unfortunate cultural realities” also help to keep the church’s secrets secret, and I suspect he’s right about that. The public face of U.S. religion, he points out, is Christian fundamentalism—biblical literalism, rigid dogmatism, and conservative moralism, which wrongly portray Christianity. Even the most religious Americans are often profoundly ignorant about the Bible, and our textbooks and conversations about religion are “oversimplified and shamelessly uninformed.”



What are the deadly secrets?

When I saw what Paul Jones considered as the church’s seven deadly secrets, however, I was disappointed. Three of the secrets he names seem reasonable enough to me: that the meaning of scriptures and doctrines depends on the context from which they emerged; that Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian; and that the Bible needs to be read critically, not literally.



Another is that, according to scholars, the Bible’s word that we translate “faith” actually means trust, not belief. I accept that from my own reading, but since beliefs still play such a huge role for so many Christians, I believe the church still needs to deal openly with whether certain common beliefs such as virgin birth, bodily resurrection, and a Sky Father seem more likely to be true or to be false, and why.

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 20 years’ back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I’m a lay United Methodist 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 more than 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.

Jones's other three secrets, however, left me cold or worse. Jesus, not the Bible, he says, is the word of God. Both Jesus and the Bible may well be "words of God," but I believe that there have been and still will be many other words of God, and that that secret is one the church urgently needs to make known.



Another secret, says Jones, is that Jesus's miracles are prologue, not proof. I couldn't ever tell what he meant by that, so I don't see it as a key secret. And his last secret—that many parts of the Bible portray God as violent and over the centuries Christians have often acted violently—doesn't seem to be a secret.

Time to examine and question tradition

Jones's weak conclusion is that Christian tradition includes all we need for making secrets known and bringing Christianity to bear on today's world, but we're just not making enough use of it. There I simply disagree. Archaeology, history, science, and reason sometimes directly contradict tradition. *That's* a key secret that we must speak out openly.

That may not happen in my lifetime, but if the church is to survive in the 21st century, it must reveal new truths, not just maintain old traditions. If it does, surely it will also be following Jesus.

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Connections

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October 2013

Growing older, more stress, a *Connections* anniversary . . .

This issue completes 21 years of *Connections*. When I mailed the first issue in November 1992, I had no idea how long I might keep writing it. I wonder that now more than ever.

This year has brought a noticeable increase in physical evidence of getting older—old, in fact!—for both me and my husband, which has added considerable stress to my daily life. Also, no longer participating in the church keeps me from being as aware as I once was about what's happening in it and what changes are needed but aren't happening, so I have less "fodder" than I once did for writing. Yet I still care about the church and think about it often, and read and hear what others have to say about it, so for now I'm still carrying on. Often when I hear from new people now, asking to get on my mailing list, I have a strong urge to reply, "Just go to my website and read the back issues. I've already said all I have to say!" But so far, I'm not telling anyone that.



I've been more explicit in this issue than I've been before about how I see Christianity, which may bring more "Take me off your mailing list!" replies. But I'm pretty sure it will also bring some thanks from people who appreciate the reminder that they're not alone, and who, like me, long for the church to state progressive views more openly. If you're one of those, I thank you in advance!