

Connections



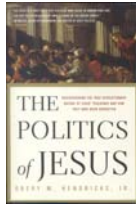
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Jesus's politics and ours

"I was raised on the bland Jesus of Sunday school," Obery Hendricks, Jr. tells us in his book *The Politics of Jesus* (Doubleday, 2006), "the meek, mild Jesus who told us, in a nice, passive, sentimental way, to love our enemies ... He was a gentle, serene, nonthreatening Jesus whose only concern was getting believers into heaven ..."



Reinforcing that description were the pictures Hendricks constantly saw, of "Jesus with his head meekly tilted, soft hands bent limply at the wrist or clasped tightly in prayer, eyes downcast or beatifically turned upward, but never so bold as to look anyone in the eye." In these portraits, plus the famous one that's still on the walls of many church buildings, Jesus looked as if "the last thing he would do was cause trouble or upset anyone's day ..."



Something didn't make sense

Hendricks, now an African Methodist Episcopal Church elder and a seminary professor, noticed that "something in the portrayals of Jesus and his message did not seem quite right; something just didn't make sense." How could such a meek person defiantly call the Pharisees a brood of vipers, Hendricks wondered, and set the temple money changers to flight? "And if he was so meek and mild, how could he get anyone's attention in the first place, much less hold the attention of thousands at a time and effortlessly get tough guys to follow him ...?"

These wonderings eventually led Hendricks to what his book's subtitle calls *Rediscovering the True Revolutionary Nature of Jesus' Teachings and How They Have Been Corrupted*. If many Christians were following this Jesus, we'd be seeing major changes in the world.



Paul and Constantine brought change

How has the church strayed from so much of what Jesus taught and demonstrated? How have we gotten a picture of Jesus so different from what the New Testament presents? In Obery Hendricks's view, two main developments in the early church led it to change its interpretation of Jesus.



First, observes Hendricks, the apostle Paul's different perspective from Jesus gave Christianity more emphasis on personal piety and less on justice. Second, the Roman emperor Constantine's adoption of Christianity changed it from the radical faith of the oppressed to the official religion of the oppressor.

Heaven and personal piety

According to Hendricks, the New Testament clearly shows Jesus as a peasant who rarely ventured into the city, so he used metaphors from rural culture. Most people he encountered were exploited by the religious establishment, brutalized by the Roman colonizers, and impoverished by the Roman tax structure, so the oppressive social system and the resulting plight of the poor were big concerns of his. But Paul was a Roman citizen and a city person. He focused especially on heaven and on what he saw as sinful personal habits, and he often used the language of Greek philosophy.



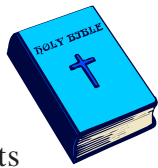
Militarism and political domination

Constantine was a Roman general who became emperor by winning a battle. He interpreted a dream the night before it as saying that Christ would give him victory. Thus as emperor he made Christianity the Empire's official religion and himself its chief priest. He introduced a hierarchical structure into the church, based on rank and status instead of gifts and functions. As a result, observes Hendricks, "many of the dearest and most important doctrines of today's Christian church are the direct result of Constantine's intrigue and machinations." And throughout the subsequent history of the West, militarism and political domination have been confused with the cause of Christ. They're still being confused today.



The tradition of the prophets

To get a true picture of Jesus and his ministry, Hendricks urges us to look at the eighth-century prophets shown in the Old Testament. Their century, he explains, was a time of great prosperity for Israel but also a time in which the gap between rich and poor was greater than ever before. In this setting the prophets were commissioned by God “to oppose the oppression and collective unrighteousness—that is, injustice—of those in positions of power and authority.” The prophets foretold events not as fortune-tellers but rather to warn people what would result if the injustice continued unchecked.



The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me ... to let the oppressed go free.
—Luke 4:18



Hendricks reminds us that Jesus did the same. He “embodied the prophets’ tradition of speaking out against the oppression and

mistreatment of the people of Israel, in his own scathing critiques of the ruling class of his day.”

Never a conservative prophet

“The primary purpose of biblical prophecy,” Obery Hendricks explains, “is to effect social and political change in a society. Prophets never uncritically support the status quo. Rather, their role is to challenge it ... *there has never been a conservative prophet.*” (All italics here are Hendricks’s.)

“Prophets,” he points out, including Jesus, “have never been called to *conserve* social orders that have stratified inequities of power and privilege and wealth; prophets have always been called to *change* them so all can have access to the fullest fruits of life.” Yet in the U.S. today, many Christians portray Christianity as conservative. And even where gross social injustice cries out for immediate change, these Christians want the change to be long-delayed and gradual if it is to come at all.



Hendricks finds it noteworthy that “Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, the biblical prophets who were the boldest advocates of social justice for all, apparently were people of significant financial

means. Although they themselves were not poor, these prophets were so moved by the plight of the poor that they risked conflict and ostracism from members of their own socioeconomic class by standing up for their needier brothers and sisters.”

Recognizing false prophets

Of course, false prophets were also present then and are present today too. Hendricks sees two tell-tale criteria for recognizing them. First, they are silent about issues of social justice. Second, they uncritically support rulers and politicians, instead of acting as those leaders’ “moral conscience and dedicated arbiters of social justice.”



To his first criterion I’d add that some false prophets actually urge us to preserve existing injustices, which is worse than keeping quiet about them. We see that today, even in the church. A current example is church leaders who urge preserving existing church policies that call homosexual people unchristian and bar them from the ordained ministry.

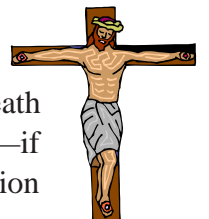


Focusing on abuses of power

Many of today’s mainstream church leaders, writes Hendricks, have reduced Jesus’s gospel of justice and liberation to a narrow doctrine of personal piety that focuses solely on individual sins while ignoring the more harmful sin of social injustice. Hendricks emphasizes that when the biblical prophets spoke out against immoral rulers, they “took their stand against abuses of power, not personal missteps or weaknesses.”

That’s also what Jesus did. The charge for which he was executed, points out Hendricks, along with other scholars who have studied the setting in which Jesus lived, was seeking to replace Caesar’s sovereignty over Israel with the kingdom, or sovereignty, of God. “By any measure,” Hendricks joins other scholars in observing, “this goal constituted sedition, for which the only punishment was crucifixion.

That is to say, Jesus was put to death by the Roman state for advocating—if not actually waging—social disruption and political revolution.”



Not merely a spiritual leader

Hendricks often sees today's mainstream church mistakenly asserting that Jesus was merely "a spiritual leader with absolutely no interest in social and political issues, that his concern was not to challenge the harsh institutional immorality of the social order in which he was born, but only to change the morality of *individuals*."



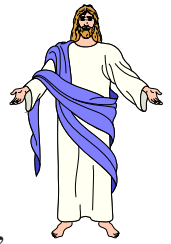
I also see this constantly in the church today. Members complain if a pastor or fellow member advocates opposing war or working to end a blatant social injustice. Also, well-funded, well-organized groups within the UMC aggressively attack the UMC General Board of Church and Society and other injustice-fighting parts of the church, for exposing current injustices and promoting political action to remedy them. Yet political efforts to promote justice seem to be exactly what following Jesus requires. As Obery Hendricks writes, "It is important to *talk* about peace and justice and fairness and equity, but we must also *act* against the systems that stand in their way."

The ultimate activist

Jesus did this by actively opposing what Hendricks sees as the central economic and political institution of Israel, the temple and its aristocratic, hereditary high priesthood and its supporters, whose power and wealth depended on their serving the interests of the Roman Empire. "Jesus' example shows us," Hendricks believes, "that like his anger our own anger should propel us to go to the seat of unjust power, be it the temple, the church, the statehouse, or the White House, and give our collective testimony against the priests of oppression ..."

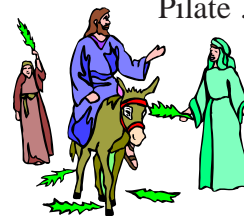


"Jesus not only responded to a particular system of political tyranny," Hendricks points out, "he also asserted the justice of God as the basis for struggling to vanquish degrading social practices and oppressive political structure for all time to come." He did this in numerous ways. "His repeated emphasis on the 'kingdom of God,' that is, the sole rulership of the God of justice; his unrelenting focus on freedom and liberation, on the right of all to have abundance in every sphere of inner life and outer life; and his ever present concern for the poor and unprotected, together constitute a platform for liberation that far exceeds in its scope even the most ambitious secular political agenda." Hendricks sees Jesus as the ultimate activist.



A political demonstration

Many other thinkers are also recognizing this all-important aspect of Jesus's ministry. In their book *The Last Week*—ideal reading for this season, by the way—Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe what they see as an example of Jesus's political action against the Roman Empire, his procession into Jerusalem on what we call Palm Sunday. "Two processions entered Jerusalem. One was a peasant procession, the other an imperial procession. From the east, Jesus rode a donkey down the Mount of Olives, cheered by his followers. ... On the opposite side of the city, from the west, Pontius



Pilate ... entered Jerusalem at the head of a column of imperial cavalry and soldiers. Jesus's procession proclaimed the kingdom of God; Pilate's proclaimed the power of empire."

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 15 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.

Jesus's group apparently was making what now would be called a political demonstration. Yet in many churches this month it will be commemorated with an "Aren't they cute!" procession of children—a misleading contrast to the daring political statement the original procession evidently made.

Justice, righteousness, and steadfast love

Obery Hendricks finds that the principles of Jesus's politics are rooted in the most foundational ethics of the Bible: justice, the establishment or restoration of fair, equitable, and harmonious relationships in society; righteousness, behavior that fulfills

the responsibilities of relationship with God and with humanity; and steadfast love of God and neighbor. And if we do not work for the establishment of God's kingdom of love and justice, Hendricks warns us, then our silence and inactivity serve the forces of injustice.



How can we actively promote the establishment of God's kingdom? Hendricks sees Jesus using several strategies that we need to be using in today's church and world if we want to follow Jesus. I'll describe these in next month's *Connections*.

Barbara



Connections

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Better late than...

I don't know if newspaper columnist Leonard Pitts, Jr. is a Christian, but in his February 18 column he advocated the kind of non-conservative prophetic action that is essential for following Jesus. "Social conservatives are never on time," Pitts laments. "Historically, whenever people have been oppressed, whenever people have cried out for help, social conservatives have been late. This is true whether we're talking American Indians, Jewish Americans, woman Americans, or African Americans. They seem blind to the distress of all Americans except fetal Americans."

Some finally get around to admitting what needs changing, Pitts observes, but not soon enough. He mentions a Christian relief group that lobbied for money to fight AIDS in Africa in 2003. "It was a noble thing," acknowledges Pitts, but "they had come late to a battle other Americans had been fighting for 25 years." Pitts finds that "noble gestures decades after the argument has been settled are of limited value. ... When standing up for the humanity of some despised group would mean something and cost something, our would-be moral leaders are never to be found. They're always late." "Be on time for a change," he urges them now.

I wish UMC General Conference delegates would do that when they vote on UMC homosexuality policy again this spring. We're as late on this now as we were earlier about allowing full UMC participation for laity, women, and racial minorities. Changing would still cost us something but it would still mean something. Can't we become real moral leaders instead of just would-be leaders?

later ... later ...

