

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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A courageous book

I've just read a book that almost made me want to stop writing *Connections* and say, "Read this book instead!" The book is *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe*, by Gretta Vosper (Harper Perennial, 2008). She is pastor of a United Church in Toronto and is founder and chair of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity.



Saying what often stays unsaid

Vosper's book will upset churchgoers who believe that all of the Bible's contents and all Christian doctrines came from God, are God's unique revelation, and can be taken literally. Vosper doesn't believe these things and neither do I. Many other Christians don't, either, but many haven't yet dared to admit that they don't.



We need to let these thinking Christians know that they're not alone and that their views merit consideration. So even if your first impulse is to dismiss Vosper's views as worthless or even sinful, I hope you'll resist the urge to do that. I hope you'll at least suspend judgment temporarily and ask yourself, "What if she's right in what she's saying?"

Chaos has erupted

"The Christian Church as we have built it and known it," Gretta Vosper believes, "has outlived its viability. Less and less vulnerable to religion's absolutes and supernatural claims, people are no longer content with its ethereal promises."



The result? "Chaos has erupted in the mainline church," Vosper finds. However, she sees a bright side of this situation. "In moments of utter chaos, great things *can* happen. The dissolution of order allows for new patterns to emerge, new relationships to form."

A worldview we can't present as fact

If we want today's world to find Christianity convincing and see its value, says Canadian pastor Gretta Vosper, we can't keep presenting as fact the worldview that the church now presents.



What makes up that worldview? First, observes Vosper, is the claim that God created the universe and everything in it. Second is that the Bible is what she refers to as TAWOGFAT—the authoritative word of God for all time. In addition, the church claims that God intervenes in nature and in human lives at some times but not at others.



The church's worldview also says we are unworthy of God's love. It portrays Jesus as the one and only Son of God who came to earth to live and die for us. It claims that we can be forgiven our sinful natures only by believing that Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

However, people who have even a rudimentary understanding of the sciences, history, archaeology, or any number of other disciplines, Vosper observes, understandably challenge almost every item of this worldview, especially if they have also read the Bible and examined it with the help of contemporary scholars and have applied critical thinking to the basic tenets of Christianity



Time to release the brakes

Vosper believes, as I also do, that refusing to apply critical reasoning to the worldview the church presents is simply dishonest. Also, it keeps the church from moving forward. "Progressively minded Christians," explains Vosper, "argue that leaders in the Christian Church have the responsibility to release the brakes." Yet many church leaders and other members are still keeping the brakes on.

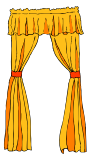
Progressive Christians "are not about tearing down a faith system that is a comfort and strength to anyone," Vosper assures us. "They are not about tearing down the timeless values of compassion and justice." Instead, they're about tearing down unsupported claims that the church's humanly constructed worldview has divine authority.

But dreadful things can also emerge from chaos, and none of us are very comfortable in the midst of chaos. The challenge for church leaders and other Christians in this chaotic time, therefore, is whether we'll lead the church to something great or something dreadful. The big question for us, in Gretta Vosper's view, is "Can the church slough off the encrustations of two millennia of ecclesial doctrine and theology in order to address the world's most urgent needs?" In her opinion, "This is an enormous challenge." It's enormous especially because so many churchgoers don't yet see that change is needed.



Welcome for some but not for others

The challenge is enormous also because real change is painful. "Broad-vision change," Vosper points out, "is not 'new curtains' window-dressing change but real, deep down, 'this is going to hurt' change. It can be liberating and refreshing, but it comes with costs."



"Change is not a welcome program," Vosper observes. But as I read this statement, I thought, "That's true for many changes, but not for all. And it's true for some people but not others." I wondered why. In the church, I think the difference depends partly on whether we find the worldview that the church presents convincing.

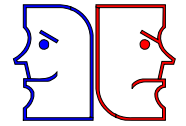
For many years, even before I could even admit or articulate my real beliefs to myself, I found much of it unconvincing. It didn't seem to match what I saw happening or what seemed well known about the universe and human beings. So I'm eager for change in this regard. To me, it is a welcome pro-

I hope you'll read *With or Without God*. Its easy, conversational style doesn't take a Bible scholar or professional theologian to read. Vosper uses some overly long sentences and pronouns that don't match their antecedents, which bothered me and will bother some other readers, but her message is important enough to outweigh that.

New paperback copies don't seem to be available from U.S. booksellers, but you can order them from Canada at www.chapters.indigo.ca/books (1-800-832-7569) or at www.amazon.ca, and www.amazon.com may have used copies.

gram. I wish the church would examine its worldview more actively and move faster toward giving up the parts that contradict today's best thinking.

I know many other Christians also want change for reasons similar to mine. Yet I'm well aware that many others are horrified by the mere thought of changing the church's worldview. To me, this huge and strongly felt difference seems to be the biggest challenge today's church faces.



Values at the core of many faiths

What broad change, then, is Vosper advocating? "What the world needs in order to survive and thrive," she believes, "is the radical simplicity that lies at the core of Christianity and so many other faiths and systems of thought—an abiding trust in the way of love as expressed in just and compassionate living."

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
—Micah 6:8

Vosper finds that when people are asked what values they consider most important, they consistently name many of the same ones. These include hope, peace, joy, forgiveness, caring, love, respect, wisdom, courage, justice, and trustworthiness. "All are common not only to most religions," Vosper finds, "but also to all who embrace humanitarian ideals. While a belief in a supernatural deity would not diminish the list, neither is such a belief necessary in order to embrace any or all of them." In Vosper's view, "A church that promotes the way of life portrayed in values such as those, rather than approved doctrines, holy books, or teachers, is what the future desperately needs."



A message with its own authority

"This core message," Vosper contends, "carries its own authority. It needs no doctrine to validate it, no external expert or supernatural authority to tell us it is right." A church focused on this message "need not fear the disciplines of science, history, archaeology, psychology, or literature; it will only be enhanced by such disciplines. Such a church need not avoid the implications of critical thinking for



its message.” The application of critical thinking, in fact, will only help the message carry more weight.

To make such a change, Vosper explains, the church “must shift from its time-bound biblical and doctrinal base to a broader base of timeless, life-enhancing values—a base that would include all people of the world who embrace humanitarian and ecologically sound ideals.”

Eight essential elements



Gretta Vosper sees eight elements as essential for spawning the progressive thought that the church so urgently needs.

■ **An open mind.** “Having an open mind within Christianity has, for much of its past, put one at a decided disadvantage,” Vosper sees. Church people have generally assumed that they would get all they needed to know through the “proper channels.” But it’s now time for us to take back the responsibility to examine and question what comes through those channels, and to open our minds to other views.

■ **Passion.** When people are able to hear and engage with challenging theological and spiritual concepts, Vosper observes, they quickly become passionate about the subject. Many “are astounded to



learn that others have been thinking, for just as long, the same things they have.” And yet, “they have not been able to completely share an integral part of who they are with another living being. It is absolutely heart-wrenching.” This is what I hear continually from *Connections* readers. Yet the church pays little attention to such voices, and they often have kept quiet because they mistakenly thought they were alone. In Vosper’s opinion, “We must turn up the



volume so that those many important voices can be heard.”

■ **Creativity.** Gretta Vosper urges us to welcome this gift that exists in the church. Some among us, she finds, “see things differently. They have a way of turning stuff upside down, figuring out how it works, taking it apart, and putting it back together in a better way, often with parts left over. They seem to have little homing devices that present them with a constant supply of things that could use ‘a little improvement.’”

■ **Intellectual rigor.** “Get to know your subject,” Vosper advises us. “Read, listen, ask questions, demand clarity, and ask some more. ... Know everything you need to know, and then start asking more questions.”



■ **Honesty.** Gretta Vosper finds that in the church, just as in much commercial marketing, what is being sold is often not the product itself but rather a good feeling associated with it. The church gives the impression that its product is “a virtual freedom from trauma, tragedy, and turmoil in this life and an absolute freedom from eternal death and torment in the next.” This presentation gives many members a feeling of security, yet neither the church nor anything else can actually provide such security. Vosper wants us to start honestly admitting that.

■ **Courage.** Vosper points out that honesty can come from naiveté, brutality, or courage. Honesty based on brutality seeks to maim, hurt, or destroy, but honesty that comes from courage aims to chal-



lenge, change, and heal. Though she rejects brutality, Vosper assures us that courage requires more than being nice. Niceness can actually hamper progress, she warns, while the courage to be honest propels it.

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.

■ **Respect.** Perspectives that have come before ours have brought meaning to generations of believers and continue to do so, Gretta Vosper reminds us. “Such knowledge must be honoured even as it is set aside.” But doing that can be hard. If we find that church leaders haven’t told us what they knew or what they really believed, “we feel we have been duped, and, to make things right, we too often feel compelled to humiliate and denigrate those we believe have duped us.”



■ **Balance.** This includes patience, perseverance, and the proper pace. “Ideas that dispute what people have believed, even when proffered with respect and

all the back-up documentation necessary, are rarely met with a ticker-tape parade.”

Crucial questions for the church

Would the church still be the church if it stopped portraying God as an all-controlling, interventionist being? If it stopped portraying the Bible as God’s unique and eternal word? If it stopped portraying Jesus as uniquely able to guarantee a happy after-life? Would we still be Christian if we promoted justice and compassion but not the worldview that the church now presents? Views like Vosper’s raise these questions that we urgently need to ask.

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A courageous book

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Sunday mornings wouldn’t be the same

A worship service reflecting the changes Gretta Vosper advocates would shock many churchgoers, but I’d welcome it and I know many other Christians who also would. “The overall layout doesn’t have to be all that foreign,” Vosper observes, “but the content needs to change substantially.” She explains that she’s not just referring to avoiding exclusively masculine words, which should now be a given. Besides that, she believes, “we need to release words, statements, and concepts that reiterate dogma we no longer (and maybe never did) truly believe ourselves.”

Doing that would include “a sweeping away of language that suggests salvation from hell in return for a belief in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins.” It would include not singing hymns “that reiterate that bargain and celebrate Christianity’s march across the globe, triumphantly bringing its patronizing ‘light of the world’ to all the nations.” Vosper also urges us “to stop referring to God, casually or reverently, as someone who sends or doesn’t send favourable weather; grants or does not grant our prayers; saves or does not save a loved one from harm, for reasons ‘God only knows’ but that we most certainly will not understand yet must accept as evidence of God’s wisdom, power, and love.” And instead of “This is the Word of God” that we so often hear after scripture readings, she suggests “We read this passage that in it we might find wisdom for our journey.” She finds that such a change “makes an incredible difference to the experience that one can have in a Sunday morning service. Honesty and integrity come through first and foremost, and they are both necessary for the church of the future.”

