

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 14 - DECEMBER 1993

BARBARA WENDLAND

505 CHEROKEE DRIVE

TEMPLE, TX 76504

817-773-2625

Christians and the world



God loved the world enough to send Jesus into it as its savior, and Jesus participated fully in its everyday life. He attended parties, traveled, and went where ordinary people lived and worked.

But Jesus rejected some of the world's customs and rules. He disobeyed religious laws and traditions. He associated with outcasts. He didn't become a husband or father.

When can we go along with the world's ways, and when must we say no, if we want to be Jesus' disciples?

A hard time to say no

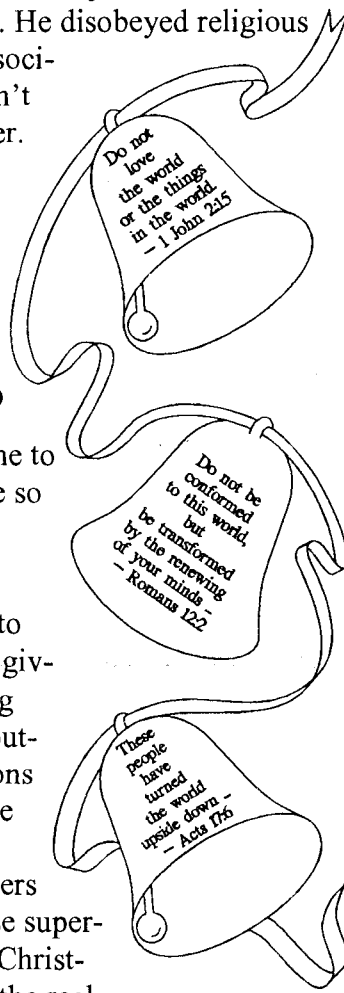
Christmas is a hard time to say no to the world. We're so accustomed to its ways of celebrating Christmas.

At Christmas we tend to assume that receiving and giving luxurious gifts, stuffing ourselves with food, and putting up elaborate decorations are essential. We blame the merchants, TV, business competitors, and party givers who bombard us with these superficial ways of celebrating Christmas, but I'm afraid we're the real culprits. We don't say no when we need to.

One small change

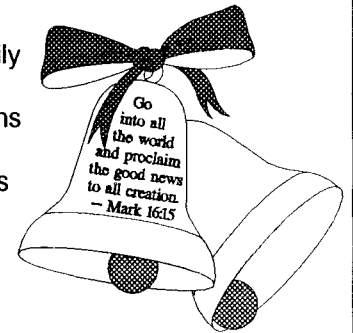
In recent years I've cut back on one of the world's ways of celebrating Christmas, but even that tiny change wasn't easy.

(continued on page 2)



God calls us into the world

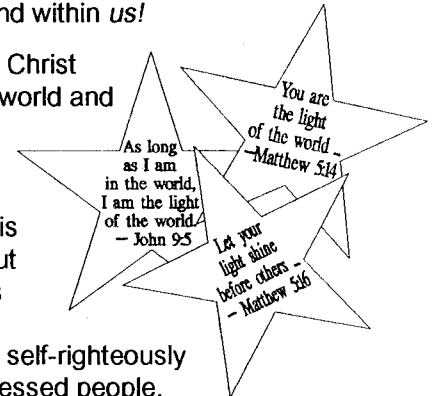
When the Bible refers to the world, it doesn't necessarily mean the physical globe that we live on. It more often means the areas of life in which sin and unbelief prevail and God's authority is not yet acknowledged.



Those are the areas into which Jesus commands us to take the Gospel. They're all over the globe, of course, but we can't necessarily identify them with geographical locations. Sin and unbelief exist in the cities we live in, the places where we work every day, and the social events we attend. The world, in this sense, is even within our churches and within us!

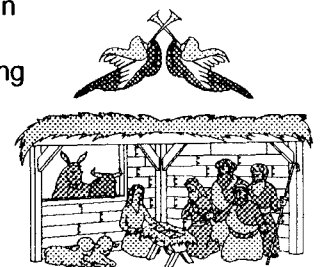
Being the body of Christ means going into the world and doing what Jesus did.

The lepers, centurions, shepherds, and Pharisees that filled his world don't fill ours, but the world still includes social outcasts, the wealthy and the poor, self-righteously religious people, oppressed people, oppressors, and every other kind of person that the world of Jesus' day included.



Going into the world to proclaim God's message, therefore, means proclaiming it to government officials, to friends and relatives, to colleagues at work, to church members, and to whoever else we have access to. The world in which God is at work and wants us to be at work is all around us. Christmas reminds us of that fact, because Christmas isn't just about the baby Jesus.

Christmas is about the Reign of God coming into the world. God calls each of us to be a living example of God's ways, following the example of the adult Jesus who proclaimed and demonstrated them. That's what Christmas is really about.



(Christians and the world, continued from page 1)



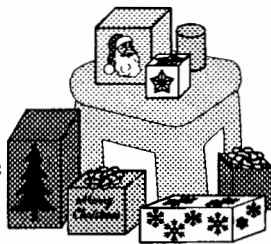
For years I made decorations and filled my house with them at Christmas. One year I made a giant felt tablecloth, with appliquéd trees, hand-sewn sequins, and lights poking through from underneath. I was big on making Christmas cookies, too, and we always had a tall tree loaded with ornaments.

A Christmas *footstool*?



Then a mouse in the attic ate holes in the felt tablecloth. And Christmas decorating began to feel like a huge burden. I realized that like many other jobs that the world expects women to do, Christmas decorating and other such Christmas jobs took more time and effort than their results merited, and they kept me from having time to do other things that I felt God considered more important. I cut back on decorating and began using more time for writing and other jobs that I felt God was calling me to do.

In one recent year I shocked my friends by not even putting up a Christmas tree. My husband and daughter and I put our gifts on a stool in our living room. We probably had the only Christmas footstool in Temple!



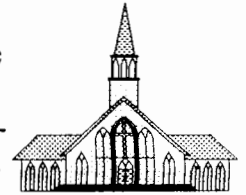
I still get twinges of uneasiness when I visit friends' lavishly decorated homes during the Christmas season, but I can survive that. I think the God-given twinges that caused me to change some ways of using my time were much more important. ❖

The world looks at the church

In *The Once and Future Church* (Alban Institute, 1991) Loren B. Mead tells how the world's attitude toward the church has changed over the centuries, from hostility to support to apathy.

- In the church's earliest years, which Mead calls the apostolic age, the church was threatened from all sides and Christians were severely persecuted.

- Beginning when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, the government protected the church. Many Christian values and religious practices became part of the total culture.



During this age of Christendom, people were born into the church, and being a good citizen was considered the same as being a good Christian. The church's mission was seen as the duty of professionals who took the Gospel to faraway places.

- Although many Christians mistakenly assume that we're still in the age of Christendom, Mead says, the church has now entered a very different period. Neither the government nor the culture as a whole actively supports Christian practices and values. The mission field is therefore in our midst, not just in foreign countries. However, instead of being hostile to the church as it was in the apostolic age, the world tends to ignore the church now.

The church looks at the world

I find Christians' views of the world reflecting the same hostility, mutual support, and apathy with which the world has seen the church over the years.

- Some Christians reject the world and use the church to hide from the world. They consider it too sinful to enter. They won't even accept information from the sciences, the humanities, or business.

- Other Christians see no conflict between the church and the world. They feel that being a good citizen and working in civic organizations is just as important as being active in a church.

- Still other Christians work independently in the world rather than through the institutional church.

How do *you* think God wants Christians to relate to the world? ❖

God's ambassadors to the world

Christians are like colonists who have settled in a foreign country, and like resident aliens or exiles. Our main loyalty is to God, not to the world.

We are ambassadors for Christ ...
—2 Cor. 5:20

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles ...
—1 Peter 2:11

We are a colony of heaven ...
—Philippians 3:20

God sends us into the world like ambassadors sent to a foreign country. We observe some customs peculiar to our home country, but to be effective ambassadors we must follow some customs of the host country and speak its language.

How should we be different?

How does God want the church to be different from the world? Not by using archaic words that are like a foreign language today. Not by refusing to associate with people who disagree with us. Not by ignoring valid and useful information just because it isn't explicitly mentioned in the Bible. We need to *avoid* being different in ways like these that needlessly isolate us from the world, turn its people off, and keep us from seeing how to reach them.

We need to be different instead by demonstrating God's love, justice, healing, and forgiveness—by being recognizable samples of the way God wants people to live.

A time for evaluation and recommitment

In the church year, Advent has traditionally been a time for being reminded of that responsibility. We recall God's coming into the world, not only in the form of a baby's birth but also in that baby's adult ministry in the world and in our continuation of it as his earthly body in today's world.

▪ Advent is a time for reconsidering what God considers most important and how God evaluates our lives. This is why scriptures read during Advent include apocalyptic imagery and Old Testament prophecies that speak of God's promises, God's purpose, and God's judgment.



▪ Advent is a time for seeing how we need to live in order to get to where we want to be when life ends.

▪ Advent is a time for turning in a new direction. Advent scripture readings therefore include accounts of John the Baptist's call for repentance.

A good time for change

The Advent season is an ideal time for making some needed changes. We might decide to start spending more of our money on people who need help, instead of on so many gifts for ourselves and our family. We might decide to spend time with someone who is alone and in need of Christian ministry, instead of just our family and friends.

If the hymns and scriptures in our Advent worship follow the church's historic pattern, they lead

Seeing the world as Jesus did

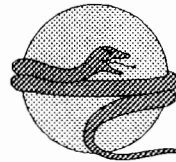


In his book *Freeing the Faith: A Credible Christianity for Today* (SPCK, 1992), Church of England clergyman Hugh Dawes challenges us to see the world as Jesus did.

"Jesus does not dismiss the world," Dawes observes, "so much as approach it from a different angle. In the lifetime of Jesus, a large part of his persuasiveness for so many ordinary people appears to have been the way he managed to throw light upon the real lives they actually led. Yet this sort of being in touch that is evident in many of the gospel stories has today been all but forgotten."

"Instead," Dawes goes on to say, "what we now hear ... is that the church is not meant to speak the language of the world, for the world is fallen and lost."

Dawes finds too many Christians thinking that salvation is *from* the world rather than *in* the world. He feels that today's church too often sees its role as merely keeping its members safe and unharmed, "cocooned against the foes said to be lurking outside, until death comes as the blessed release from all that threatens." Dawes feels that this view ignores the need to set self aside and minister to others, which the gospel portrait of Jesus stresses.



Dawes sees Christians cutting themselves off from the world in ways that defeat the church's real purpose. "All too often," he says, "the Christian response to anything appears to be a knee-jerk reaction of intransigence—the world out there is wrong!" As a result, "whereas once Christians were creatively involved in ethical debates ... , now they are frequently left out because they are considered to have nothing useful to contribute." In Dawes' view, "religion has ceased to be a dimension in the natural, everyday life of most people, and has become instead something private, a club for those who like it."

This is sadly different from what God calls the church to be. How can we help the church stop being just a club for those who happen to like it, and start having a real effect on the world again?



us through this valuable self-examination and recommitment process. If instead we sing only the few most popular carols and hear only about baby Jesus, we miss that God-given opportunity.

At Christmas God again asks us, as individuals and as congregations, a crucial question that we keep trying to avoid: is our own comfort or God's will our top priority? Advent is a good time for a new answer. ❖

Conformists and non-conformists

Christians need to be both conformists and non-conformists. We need to say no to some of the world's ways, and to make clear why we're saying no. But we can't afford to be so unattractive, unavailable, invisible, or incomprehensible that the world overlooks us or dismisses our beliefs without even considering them seriously. And we can't afford to stay comfortably holed-up inside our church buildings and among our Christian friends.

The main non-conforming thing we need to do instead is to communicate the Gospel out in the

world. We need to speak it convincingly in today's language and demonstrate it through behavior that is loving and just. That's being different from the world in the way that really matters.

Merry Christmas!

Barbara



Next month . . .

When Christians disagree



Connections

Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504

Bulk Rate
U. S. Postage
PAID
Temple, TX
Permit # 380

Address correction requested

The church and the world

Updating our language— "Right on target," or "Drastic and terrible"?

Readers' responses to the October issue of *Connections* have ranged all the way from extravagantly enthusiastic ("a masterpiece," and "brilliant") through affirming ("right on target") to outraged ("very upsetting," and "a drastic and terrible idea"). In the January *Connections* I'll discuss the problem of dealing with issues on which Christians have widely differing views.



\$ubscription time

I greatly appreciate the many monetary contributions and encouraging words I've received from *Connections* readers during 1993.

Although I'm still not requiring anyone to pay to stay on the mailing list, I'm asking that all recipients who are willing and able pay for the 1994 issues. I'm not equipped to handle subscription renewals in the way that commercial publications do. However, most *Connections* recipients have now received a full year's issues, so please consider sending me at least \$5 for the 1994 issues if you have not already done so. Thanks!

Autographed copies of *God's Partners*, the book about the ministry of the laity that I have co-authored with Dr. Stanley J. Menking, are available for \$13 including postage and tax. If you are ordering the book, you may send me a single check that includes your book order and your contribution for 1994 *Connections*.

