

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 19 - MAY 1994



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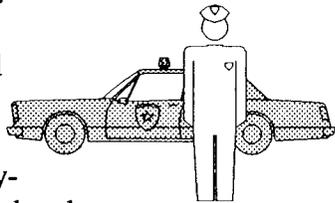
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We aren't God's police force

The Gospels show Jesus directing his strongest criticism against the scribes and Pharisees who appointed themselves God's thought police. They stayed busy trying to catch and punish people who advocated change or broke religious rules.



"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven."

—Matthew 23:13

Unlike the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus spent his time demonstrating love, mercy, and justice by accepting people and ministering to them. He

welcomed the tax-collectors and prostitutes that others called the worst sinners. He welcomed the Samaritans and lepers that most people shunned.

Jesus told his followers not to try to weed out the world's evil. He assured them that God would do it at the appropriate time. (Matthew 13:28-39) And Jesus didn't attack people who misquoted him. He concentrated on ministry instead. We need to, too.

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him ... Whoever is not against us is for us."

—Mark 9:38-40

Love says what police tactics can't

Many people who found Jesus' words baffling got his message from his loving treatment of them. His actions demonstrated the love that his words advocated. Our actions need to do that, too.

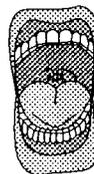
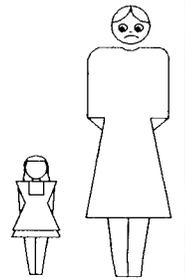
In today's church, however, many people who claim to be Christians are acting as a self-appointed police force like the Pharisees that the Gospels describe. They are doing a lot of finger-pointing.

(continued on page 2)

Miss Steele's way isn't Jesus' way

When I hear Christians harshly attacking other Christians, I feel as if I'm six years old again and hearing my elementary-school principal, Miss Steele.

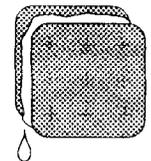
Miss Steele was a large woman who rarely smiled. She wore her straight iron-gray hair pulled tightly into a bun at the back of her head. Her usual costume was a dark crepe dress and black oxfords. She never wore a smidgen of makeup.



Even more intimidating than Miss Steele's grim appearance, however, was her deep, fierce voice. Whenever an unsuspecting child incurred her wrath (which was quite often), she roared out with a booming sound that seemed to make the school building's locker-lined walls vibrate.

In Miss Steele's eyes the worst sin was running in the halls, so she policed them diligently. Whenever students were in the halls she stood where she could see in all directions, and if she saw a child daring to run or even skip she thundered "Walk!", terrifying not only the offender but also anyone else who happened to be creeping meekly through the hall at a permissible speed.

Miss Steele also policed the school lunchroom. The big sin there was licking an ice-cream sandwich around its sides instead of taking bites from it. Licking was by far the best way to eat this favorite dessert, to avoid drips and uncomfortably cold teeth, so we all did it. But when Miss Steele saw anyone doing it, her dreaded voice pierced the lunchtime chatter, ordering the offender to stop at once or be sent to the office.



When I hear Christians denouncing heresy and attacking people they think are breaking God-given rules, I feel as if I'm hearing Miss Steele again. What they rant about often seems as trivial and arbitrary as her ice-cream rule. And like her, they're trying to exert control by speaking harshly, threatening punishment, and brandishing power. How different from Jesus, whose kind treatment of people led them to take him seriously and follow his example.



(We aren't God's police force, from page 1)

▪ Members of many churches are busy trying to expose and eliminate heresy. They want to overpower, punish, and oust whoever doesn't obey their favorite rules and customs. They don't want anyone to translate Christian beliefs into today's words. They don't want anyone to worship in ways that differ from what the majority prefers.



▪ A group of Southern Baptists have ousted the president of the world's largest theological school because his interpretation of the Bible isn't exactly like theirs.

▪ People claiming to be Christians brutally attack women who seek abortions and medical personnel who provide them. Although the attackers' opposition to abortion reflects legitimate Christian concern for rescuing babies, their treatment of the pregnant women and clinic employees contradicts Jesus' teachings.

▪ Members of several denominations are attacking others for merely attending an event that used a traditional feminine word for God's wisdom and said that natural functions of women's bodies were God-given rather than dirty or sinful. Attenders have received abusive phone calls, and some have even received death threats. Incredible!

Jesus cared about love more than rules

Unlike these modern-day Pharisees, Jesus practiced love. He stressed justice, too, but to him it meant keeping people from being demeaned or oppressed. For him, alleviating suffering was evidently much more important than punishing rule-breakers.

Above all, Jesus told people to worry more about their own behavior than about other people's. ❖

"You tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith... You blind guides!"
—Matt. 23:23-24

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?"
—Luke 6:41



"You load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them." —Luke 11:46

Yesterday's heresy is often today's truth

More than three centuries ago Galileo made important new discoveries about the laws of motion and their application to the solar system. (He supposedly demonstrated them by dropping a cannonball from the tower of Pisa.) But Galileo was criticized because his findings contradicted what "everyone" believed. The Roman Catholic Church excommunicated him for heresy, and only within the past year has the Catholic Church finally admitted that Galileo was right. He wasn't a heretic after all.



A dismaying look at the past

Recently a friend and I were talking about our childhood years. Hers were spent in rural Oklahoma and mine were in Texas. We recalled how "everyone" considered associating with black people unthinkable. It never entered our minds that there might be anything wrong with treating black people as inferior and making them use schools, restaurants, and other facilities that were separate from those we used. We assumed this system was God-given. We were horrified by the few white people who associated with black people and treated them as equals. Looking back on those days now, it seems unbelievable that we could have failed to see how unjust this system was, and how contrary to what the Bible teaches.

Religious and secular history are full of instances like this, when what "everyone" assumed was God's will turned out not to be. The priests and worshippers in the days of Isaiah, Amos, and Jeremiah couldn't believe what these prophets said God wanted. Religious people at the time of Jesus' birth couldn't believe that God would send a baby into a poor, insignificant family to be the world's savior.

History also includes appalling examples of people claiming that following Jesus required treating people cruelly. Crusaders in the Middle Ages mistakenly claimed to be defending God's truth by killing infidels. Witch-burners in early America claimed to be rooting out evil for God.

God can surprise us

No matter how unthinkable a new idea may seem to us, it may turn out to be true. No matter how distasteful someone else's religious practice may seem to us, it may be a faithful response to God. People aren't necessarily heretics or sinners just because their beliefs contradict ours. We could be wrong.

Gamaliel, a teacher of the law ... said to them, "Fellow Israelites, consider carefully what you propose to do to [Peter and the apostles] ... If this plan ... is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them—in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"
—Acts 5:34-35, 38-39



The issue isn't just who is right

As Christians we must stand up for what we strongly believe. And holding each other accountable and offering guidance are important aspects of being the church. Also, the church must have some general guidelines that define it.

But offering is very different from forcing, and guidelines are very different from detailed rules that are declared compulsory for everyone. Besides, people sincerely trying to obey God can easily come to different conclusions about what God wants with regard to a specific issue. And right is rarely all on one side.

How we defend our beliefs is important

In standing up for what we believe is right, therefore, we must look first at whether we're focusing on something essential or merely defending a personal preference. Then we have to look at *how* we promote our views. If we mistreat people and try to force them to believe exactly what we believe, we're breaking Jesus' commandment to love.

Jesus' new commandment—to love one another—is not a new set of rules. It is a new way to treat people, even when we are declaring our opposition to their behavior or beliefs.

The most cruel and shameful parts of Christian history are those in which people claiming to be Christians have conducted witch hunts, inquisitions, and wars in the guise of eliminating heresy and defending truth. We can't afford to persist in this kind of pointless and cruel behavior. ❖

Does God care about technicalities?

The February *Connections*, about Communion, brought an unusual number of responses. Almost all were enthusiastic. Several readers liked the whole issue so well that they made copies and distributed them to church groups they were in.

One reader, however, objected to my calling some personal experiences Communion. He wrote, "Of the three significant spiritual experiences you listed, only one would qualify as Communion." The others, he said, in which no clergy person officiated and the standard words were not spoken, "were not in the technical sense Communion."



Jesus wasn't prescribing a method

I doubt that "the technical sense" matters to God. When Jesus said "Do this in remembrance of me," I don't think he was defining a precise method for us to follow. We don't know the exact words he said, and they were in a language we don't speak, so their basic intent is all we can hope to duplicate. He evidently used the ordinary food and drink that happened to be available, and an ordinary room. And he often berated groups like the scribes and Pharisees for emphasizing procedural technicalities instead of intentions.

Christian tradition includes variety

Christian tradition includes a wide variety of religious practices, and there's no reason to see tradition as a universal or perpetual rule. So although we need some consistency in how we present Communion in our worship services, I don't think God cares whether our individual experiences qualify as Communion in what anyone else defines as "the technical sense."



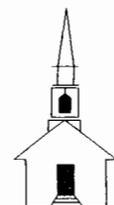
Growth is not heresy



"My congregation doesn't use the *United Methodist Hymnal* or offer *Disciple* Bible study, and it uses very little UM Sunday School material," a *Connections* reader writes, "however, last year I participated in *Disciple I* at another UM church in my area, and I've just begun *Disciple II*." She also has undertaken some church jobs that have put her in contact with United Methodists far beyond her own congregation. She has found these new experiences immensely rewarding and helpful, but she can't help feeling a little uneasy because her congregation tells her she should restrict herself to its rigid, narrow views. She says, "I wonder if what I'm experiencing is growth or if I am indeed becoming a 'heretic.'" How unfortunate it is when church members treat other members like this, trying to make them feel guilty for taking new steps and growing spiritually!

Our church began with a need for change

Fortunately this lay woman has not given up. "I am greatly encouraged," she says, "by the fact that our church began through a need for change." Despite her own congregation's unwillingness to grow, she knows God wants her to. "Our heritage can give us a grounding on who we were and where we have come from," she reminds herself, "but in order to go on, we must have the courage to change when necessary." Amen.



Jesus showed compassion

Jesus showed compassion even to the people whose sin he denounced. He even brought some of them into his inner circle. Instead of making and enforcing rules, he ministered to people. He showed them what God was like by demonstrating love in action.



That's how we need to spend our time, too, rather than pointing fingers and acting like God's police force. ❖

Barbara

If you remove ...
the pointing of
the finger ... and
satisfy the needs
of the afflicted, then your light
shall rise in the darkness ... Your
ancient ruins shall be rebuilt ...
—Isaiah 58:9-12



Next month . . .

God's priorities and our priorities



Connections 5-94

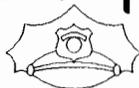
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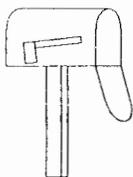
Christians aren't God's police force



When *Connections* is slow, don't despair

Some *Connections* readers discuss its contents with friends, relatives, or colleagues who live in a different city or state, and they wonder why they don't all get *Connections* at the same time.

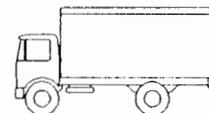
Please don't think your copy of *Connections* is lost when you don't get it as soon as someone who lives elsewhere. Because the contents of *Connections* aren't usually time-sensitive, I send it by 3rd-class mail to minimize the cost. This means it travels by slow methods and the receiving post office has the right to hold it for several days before delivering it. As a result, *Connections* is usually delivered in Temple the day after I mail it, but it doesn't get to other Texas cities until a week or 10 days later, and it takes 2 to 3 weeks to get to other states.



If you fail to get an issue of *Connections*, let me know and I'll be glad to send you a replacement. But please measure by the time of the month you usually get *Connections*, not by when someone in a different city or state receives it.

Moving?

If you're one of the many United Methodist clergy



who will be moving to new appointments in June (or if you're about to move for any other reason), please send me your new address right away so that I can mail your June *Connections* to the right place. When I mail an issue to an outdated address, the post office returns it and I must pay not only the return postage but also the postage for re-sending the issue to the new address. I can avoid this unnecessary expense for the June issue if you'll send me your new address by the end of May. Thanks!