

Connections

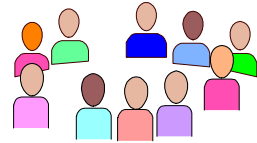
A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 195- FEBRUARY 2009



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Warned against life-changing books

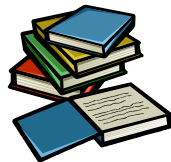


On a recent evening I was in an interesting conversation. All of the participants were smart, well-informed people. They're lively, talented, well-read, widely traveled, active in the life of the local community and beyond. They're also religious people. They all give quite a bit of thought to what they believe about the divine and to how those beliefs require them to live.

They all grew up in churches, in five different mainline denominations. Several in the group are still active in churches, but just barely. They participate only in a service project or a Sunday School class. Others have totally given up on church participation in recent years. Unfortunately, doing serious thinking and reading seems to have made many in this group feel that they don't fit in the church.

Valuable books or dangerous books?

We got to talking about our spiritual journeys. That led to mentioning the books that had been the most valuable for our journeys. Interestingly, different people mentioned several of the same books.



For some older members of the group, these included *The Taste of New Wine* and *The Edge of Adventure*, by Episcopal layman Keith Miller. In these books of the 1960s and 70s, he had daringly admitted that despite being super-active in his church he had been inwardly sick of its programs for years. He had finally realized, he wrote, that being active in a church didn't automatically mean being a Christian, and that members' presence at vestry or deacons' meetings didn't necessarily



Forbidden fruit?



Throughout history, various groups have tried to stifle views they disagreed with. Sometimes they've banned books in an effort to keep people from getting new information that could reveal the falsity of the beliefs of the group currently in power. Sometimes people have gone so far as to kill others who were expressing minority views or opposition to the current regime.

A reason to be wary

"You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat ...

—Genesis 2:16-17

Ironically, some of those who were killed, including Jesus, we now see as heroes or saints. That should make us wary of anyone who tries to keep us from getting new information or new ideas.

In this *Connections* I report a conversation in which several participants told about pastors' having told them they shouldn't read certain books. Yet the books turned out to be among their most memorable and helpful.

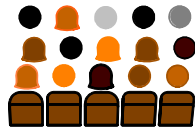
I wonder if experiences like these are replays of what ancient people recognized when they told the story of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which has led to our expression "forbidden fruit."



Using our ability to think

Does this story tell us to avoid everything that attracts us? Everything that would increase our knowledge of what the world is really like? I don't think so, but we constantly run into people who want to ban or censor whatever reveals more than they think others ought to find out. We come across those, too, whose way of dealing with whatever would make them think in new ways is to act as if it doesn't exist. But to me a better way is to use our God-given ability to learn and think.

reflect personal commitment to God or God's purposes. Miller expressed his concern that no one in the organizational life of the church seemed to recognize that these characteristics showed anything wrong. He urged his readers to recognize what true Christianity really was, and to put more of it into practice in their personal lives and their churches.



More recent books mentioned by the group as having been eye-opening and life-changing for them included some by Marcus Borg. They also included Richard Elliott's *Falling in Love with Mystery* (which, by the way, is available complete and free at www.fallinginlovewithmystery.com).

None of us who had read these books were surprised by others' saying how valuable they had been. What was *very* surprising, however, and dismaying, was that several in our group said they had been told by pastors that they shouldn't read them. The books that had turned out to be the most valuable for these Christians were books that pastors had tried to keep them from reading. That's shocking.



A welcome contrast

In addition to mentioning life-changing books, in this conversation some of us also mentioned individuals who had powerfully influenced our spiritual journeys by talking with us in person. Interestingly, four of us mentioned the same uniquely influential pastor. He didn't warn us against any books. Instead, he read many of the same ones we read, and he discussed them with us. He sometimes quoted from them and others in his sermons, to the dismay of other church members who criticized him for quoting from anything other than the Bible.



A big part of what made this pastor so important for each of us was that he was open in revealing his real self. He didn't hide behind a pastor mask. He let us know that he had changed some of his beliefs over the years. He admitted that he disagreed with some of our denomination's official positions. He admitted that he had doubts about some familiar Christian

doctrines. He revealed his views about controversial issues currently in the news, even though some of those views were unpopular in our area, and he explained why he felt that following Jesus led to those views.

But he didn't just reveal himself. He also asked us about our interests and concerns. He got to know us as individuals. He took our questions and observations seriously rather than acting as if questioning popular beliefs or disagreeing with the majority was unacceptable. He supported us in taking innovative steps.



What a welcome contrast he and others like him have been, to the other pastors who have warned us against reading books that didn't parrot the church party line or support "the way we've always done it." What a fortunate contrast the supportive pastors are now, for individual members and for the whole church. Yet how rare they seem to be. Why?

Why try to prevent growth?

Why would a pastor try to keep members from reading books whose contents could lead them to new insights and spiritual growth? Is he or she afraid that those members will then drop out because of reading something different from what they've heard in church, and that if enough dropped out, that pastor might be moved down the salary ladder? Are these pastors afraid they might find that some of their own beliefs are no longer believable, if they came across new information and seriously considered its implications?



It seems to me that if a belief won't hold up to comparison with other possibilities, that's a good sign that it's not worth believing. It's evidence that belief may need to be abandoned or at least revised.

What's the danger?

What's the perceived danger in letting scholars' findings of recent centuries make us question some of our long-held beliefs?

Might recent findings about the life of Jesus and later Christian history lead us to abandoning so much



of what we've always seen as Christianity, that we'd have nothing left? That's the really scary question that arises if we let it, when we read books that give us new information or challenge our present beliefs.

Would Christianity collapse?

Maybe that's why pastors sometimes warn people not to read books that offer new insights and information about the Bible or the church. If enough people read them and became convinced that what they were saying was valid, and that some of what we now believe isn't valid, might the whole church—even all of Christianity—come tumbling down? I can't imagine that happening, but apparently it's a real fear for church members who have a big investment in keeping their present beliefs unchanged. It's a fear also for people who stand to gain from having the church status quo remain unchanged.



That would include pastors and other people who depend on the institutional church for their and their families' income and status. However, the people who fear change also include countless lay members who see God as a person-like being in the sky to whom they can direct their prayers and from whom they can hope for answers. Any suggestion that God might be different from that feels threatening.

The people who can't bear to discover new possibilities also include the many who believe that declaring belief in Jesus gives them a guaranteed ticket to heaven at death, and that unbelievers and followers of other religions won't go there. Suggesting that such views might not be



reliable would be like pulling the rug out from under these churchgoers.



These Christians' fear isn't just that their own eternal fate would be in jeopardy if they turned loose of any of their present beliefs. They also seem strongly motivated by what they see as an obligation to save others. Their belief that Christianity is the only route to God makes them want to help everyone else in the world to get onto that route.

The destination or the route?

Their concern, however, seems not for the better earthly life that results from what early Christians called "the way"—the loving and just way of life that Jesus taught. These Christians seem more concerned instead for what they see as the destinations we're all headed to after death.



For Christians with this viewpoint, therefore, a book that focuses on the human aspects of how the Bible was written, the earthly life of Jesus, or Christians' involvement in current issues here on earth, apparently seems likely to weaken the church. It might lead churchgoers away from the correct Christian path, they fear, therefore it's potentially harmful.

Knowledge is power

"Knowledge is power," said philosopher Francis Bacon wisely. And in any institution, controlling sources of knowledge can be to the advantage of the people in power who don't want to lose or even share their power. Unfortunately that's true in the church as well as elsewhere. So if a pastor tells us, "Don't read this book," we probably need to pay

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.



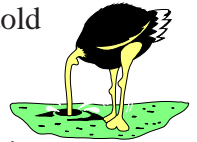
I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people 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.

attention. It may be a book that will open our eyes and help us see God more clearly. It's likely to be one that advocates change. It's likely to be a book that for our own spiritual growth and the faithfulness of the church we actually need to read.

Members and ex-members of many congregations are reading eye-opening books that are making them think seriously about the Bible and Christian beliefs. Yet instead of encouraging such thinking and helping these members be catalysts for

The kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.
—1 Corinthians 4:20

needed change, some pastors have told them instead not to read the books.



Reading and thinking can make members unwilling to participate in some church activities. So if merely getting people to attend is the church's goal, it's understandable for leaders not to want members to read books that will cause them to question their beliefs or their patterns of participation. But for the good of the church, members need to be questioning what it does. So if any pastor tells you "Don't read that book," I hope you won't obey.

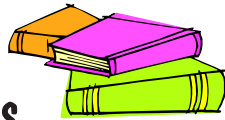
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Connections

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Warned against life-changing books



February 2009



In earlier centuries, when a church official told lay members "Don't read this book" the forbidden book was sometimes the Bible.

John Wycliffe was an English theologian and lay preacher who believed English-speaking people needed a Bible to read in English, so in 1382 he translated part of the New Testament from a Latin version into English. Still trying to punish him for his lifelong dissidence, a Pope had Wycliffe's remains dug up and burned along with his books.

It's amazing what lengths powerful church leaders have sometimes gone to, trying to keep members from finding out what those leaders didn't want them to know.

