

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

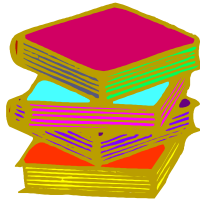
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Recent reading

This month I'm writing about some books I've recently read and liked, which I think you might like too. They're not all brand-new, and they're a mixed bag with regard to styles and subjects, but I've found them all interesting and thought-provoking. The first one probably will make you either cheer or hurl it at the wastebasket.



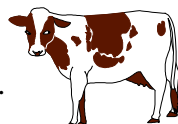
■ ***Dying Church, Living God: A Call to Begin Again***, by Chuck Meyer (Northstone Publishing, 2000)

Meyer, a clergyman in Austin, Texas, suspects as I do that, "If you like the status quo, get all gushy over the Atonement and the Blessed Virgin Mary, and you think the Church is the one thing that will never change," this book will make you angry. But even if it does, it might make you think about some things we all need to consider. It's short, easy to read, and definitely not boring.

Meyer starts with a warning. "You have two options now that you won't have later: 1. Stop reading and give this book to someone you really want to disturb. ... 2. Continue at your own peril." He warns readers, too, that "if you read this book you may never be able to go back to your previous religious assumptions."

Chuck Meyer believes the church is hindering the Holy Spirit's efforts. Too often, he says, it wastes the precious time of people who are desperately seeking nurture, affirmation, and God.

"Its trappings," he claims, "have become traps to confine and limit God." Here's just one of his hilarious examples: In the midst of a world filled with enormous change, churches still schedule their worship services to fit nineteenth-century milking schedules.



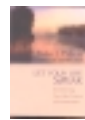
Some recommended books for groups



Connections readers often tell me they'd like suggestions for books to use in Sunday School classes or other church groups they're in, so I'm suggesting some here. Some are longtime favorites of mine and others are recent.

Jesus: A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and The Life of Discipleship, by Marcus J. Borg (HarperSanFrancisco, 1987); and/or *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, by Marcus J. Borg (HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). Each of these short books would be interesting for a class to read and discuss. They take the findings of recent scholarship into account, and they're easy to read. A leader's guide is available for *Jesus: A New Vision*.

Why Christianity Must Change or Die, by John Shelby Spong (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998). Like all of Spong's books, this one is controversial. However, I believe every Christian needs to consider the views he presents. Spong's writing, he says, "arises out of the sense that God must be worshiped with the heart. It also reveals that any god who is threatened by new truth from any source is clearly dead already."



Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 2000). This slim, easy-to-read book can help Christians see what God is calling them to do, whether it's a career or a volunteer job.

Religious Right, Religious Wrong, by Lloyd J. Averill (Pilgrim Press, 1989—out of print). A *Connections* reader told me about this one after he read last month's issue. It's worth trying to find copies of.

A Testament of Devotion, by Thomas R. Kelly (Harper & Row, 1941/1996). This tiny but potent classic continues to inspire new readers.

The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium, by Walter Wink (Doubleday, 1998). This is Wink's short version of the subject he has addressed in three thick books. He helps us recognize and resist the unjust "principalities and powers" that dominate and oppress people in today's world.



Feedback on fundamentalism: Readers respond to last month's topic

"You have put into words my feeling about two F's: Fundamentalism and Family," writes an Episcopal laywoman in response to last month's *Connections*. Because of today's loaded use of "family," she says, "I now have a hard time using the term even when it describes a legitimate personal experience in my life." As for "the other 'F,' Fundamentalism," she exclaims, "It is beyond me!" Still, she suggests one reason for its attraction. "Its self-righteousness," she finds, "feeds the ego and makes its proponents feel superior—feel that 'they're on God's side.'"

A few readers wrote objecting to the February issue. They see liberalism as the reason for mainline churches' membership loss. However, many more responders expressed thanks and agreement. Several of them said they were participating less because of the near-fundamentalism they find. For example, a United Methodist laywoman wrote, "My husband and I teach a Sunday School class but we no longer attend many of our church's worship services because they are so conservative."

"It crumbled when I learned to think"

A church dropout writes that what saved him from the fundamentalist approach of the church-related college he attended was transferring to a major university where, he says, "I was exposed to all manner of thought," and "fundamentalism simply crumbled as I learned to think for myself." He found that it didn't even reflect much of the real Judeo-Christian tradition. "Even its hymns were relatively modern," he noticed, "and as far as I could tell, it lacked a substantial theology."

[Jesus] said to him,
 " 'You shall love the
 Lord your God with all
 your heart, and with all
 your soul, and with all
 your mind.' This is the
 greatest and first
 commandment."
 —Matthew 22:37-38

"We've been left completely in the dark"

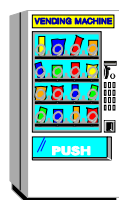


A still active but discouraged layman writes, "Is fundamentalism thriving because churches haven't informed people adequately about it? I answer with an emphatic yes. The subject was touched on during one Bible study class, but our congregation at large has been left completely in the dark."

That sounds as if we need to inform our members better about the Bible and Christian history. Yet here's what church expert Lyle Schaller reports in his recent book *Discontinuity and Hope* (Abingdon, 1999). "In today's world people come to church in search of certainty, not in a quest for more knowledge." That may tell us something important about fundamentalism's appeal. More of Schaller's findings next month in *Connections*.

In Meyer's view, "This is a time in the history of God with us, when 'keeping the faith' involves questioning our structures, emptying ourselves, and seeing what God fills us up with ..." Instead, however, Meyer feels we've cemented ourselves into a God-box and filled it with a structured hierarchy of belief and personnel that tends to keep God out. Like other hierarchies, he claims, the church-personnel hierarchy—a top-down, condescending, one-way street—seldom asks for feedback because the feedback might show the need to dissolve the hierarchy.

"God is not a vending machine," Meyer reminds us, "dispensing mysterious random answers to 'weejeus' prayer requests" such as "Weejeus wanna ask ya, Lord, for enough money to build this new building." He sees these habits as especially characteristic of the fundamentalism into which many church members have fled looking for assurance. "But absolute guarantees of assurance," he wisely



observes, "are purchased at the extremely high price of intellectual and intuitive dishonesty."



A big part of the church's problem, Meyer finds, is that the busy-ness of our church activities can make us think the church is alive. He believes we need to examine our current church activities carefully to see whether they actually reveal life or death.

Discussion questions at the end of Meyer's book could be the basis for lively and helpful sessions in a Sunday School class or other church group. They're questions that we all need to be asking constantly and openly of ourselves, our fellow church members, and our church leaders.

Meyer offers few concrete suggestions for remedying the problems he describes, but his book can motivate readers to look for remedies. The church could benefit greatly if a lot of members read it and took it to heart.

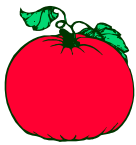


■ *Life on the Vine: Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit in Christian Community*, by Philip D. Kenneson (InterVarsity Press, 1999)

“Nurturing individual fruit in individual lives,” theology professor

Kenneson reminds us, “is not our ultimate goal.” Setting an example for the world is. In Kenneson’s view, “the church is called to embody before the world in all its relationships the kind of reconciled and transformed life that God desires for all of creation.”

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ...
—Galatians 5:22



Kenneson gives helpful and very readable suggestions for cultivating the fruits in the midst of life in the world—love in the midst of market-style exchanges, joy in the midst of manufactured desire, faithfulness in the midst of impermanence, self-control in the midst of addiction, and so on. Unlike some others who write about the fruits of the spirit, Kenneson uses neither an overly pious tone nor an academic style. Church groups could find his book useful for study and discussion.

■ *The Church As Counterculture*, Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow, editors (State University of New York Press, 2000)

Through articles by Walter Brueggemann, Stanley Hauerwas, Roberto Goizueta, and others, this book questions the church’s conformity to the culture in which it lives. The authors’ style and vocabulary may be too academic for some readers, but they’re saying things the church needs to hear. Marianne Sawicki reminds us, for example, of our ten-

dency to reduce church tradition “to whatever was believed and handed on by the generation immediately before our own. The opinions of our parents then simply stand for ‘the tradition.’”



Says Michael Warren, “Sometimes religious groups or organizations produce results that disaffirm or deny the very realities they claim to affirm. Such communities can become radical living disconfirmations of their own sacred texts, official position, and the very religious rituals in which they themselves engage.” He asks a question we all need to be asking of ourselves and our churches. “How can religious assemblies become more aware of what they actually live?”

He has some valuable observations about money, too. The church excludes, he points out, “reflection on how we think about and use money and leisure, the closely guarded commodities of privacy.” As a result, he reminds us, “what religious discourse dares not discuss, commercial orchestrators of human desire use every conceivable stratagem to manipulate.”



■ *A Long Way from Tipperary: A Memoir*, by John Dominic Crossan (HarperSanFrancisco, 2000)

I got a little tired of Crossan’s blowing his own horn and saying the same things several times in this book, but I enjoyed it anyway. I like to discover what leads people to hear the callings they hear and to pursue the careers they pursue, especially if their path has been quite different from mine, as Crossan’s certainly has.

Crossan makes pertinent observations that apply to more than just the Catholic Church, in which he became a priest and scholar. “We humans abuse

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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. Some readers make voluntary financial contributions, but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

whatever power we have unless we struggle against it consciously, concretely, and corporately,” he reminds us. “Even more seriously,” he finds, “we usually project our own abuses onto God and thereby declare them justified.”



With regard to your religion, Crossan suggests, “you must experience it as if no alternative were possible. But at the back of your mind, you must also recognize that alternatives are always present.”

Ideal advice, I’d say. But in practice, keeping faith and reason so well balanced is a constant challenge. For most people and most churches, simply living

our faith from day to day “as if no alternative were possible” is the easy part. Keeping our minds open to new alternatives takes a good deal more effort.

That’s why I believe reading is so essential. God calls us to read not just the Bible, but books that will help us learn to read the Bible with new insight; not just books of comfort and assurance, but books written to challenge and deepen our faith.

In today’s busy world, that’s a tall order — but reading with other Christians makes it easier. I hope your class or group will consider one of the books I have suggested.

Barbara

“The generations born after 1940 have radically altered the context for doing ministry. Before these generations grew into adolescence the churches could say, ‘This is our agenda, take it or leave it.’ These folks brought their own agenda and proclaimed, ‘This is our agenda. Listen or we’ll leave and go elsewhere.’”

“Discontinuity with the past often is a powerful source of hope for new generations, even when that discontinuity is a cause for alarm among the leaders in old institutions.”

These are two of the many observations Lyle Schaller makes in his book *Discontinuity and Hope: Radical Change and the Path to the Future*. Have you noticed the discontinuity in your church? It’s there. It can be unnerving. How can we find hope in it? In next month’s *Connections*, more about what discontinuities Schaller thinks we need to pay attention to, and more of the hope he sees in them.

