

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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The shock of the truth

It took me a long time to catch onto some facts that many other people discovered much earlier in life, and some of those came as a big shock when I finally caught on. One was that there was no Santa Claus.



I knew parts of the Santa story seemed impossible—the chimney part, and the claim that Santa could get to every home in the world in one night. But somehow I kept ignoring those impossibilities.

A shock and a change

I learned to read early, however, and one day I read a newspaper article advising parents how to tell their children that Santa didn't exist. I was shocked. At some level I had known the truth or at least strongly suspected it, but I had kept myself mostly convinced that there was a logical explanation for what seemed unbelievable in the Santa story. Then

finally I had to face the truth. It was disturbing at first, and it changed how my family celebrated Christmas from then on, but of course it was necessary for growing up, and much more comfortable in the long run.



Time to face truth in the church

It's time to grow up and face truth in the church, especially with regard to our underlying beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, and human beings. Doing this may also make us reexamine our views about issues such as religious pluralism, abortion, and homosexuality, which our basic beliefs strongly influence.

Facing the truth about such issues can be more uncomfortable than giving up belief in Santa, of course. It could even make some members uncomfortable enough to leave. Also, facing the truth would require big changes in our worship services, much bigger than my family's change in observing Christ-

Learning the truth, moving on

Some uncomfortable but essential discoveries have made me change my beliefs about sex, among other things. Some came in childhood but others not until much later.



When I asked my mother why only married people had babies, she said it was because babies needed fathers to earn money for them and mothers to be at home with them. It didn't occur to me that there might be any more to it than that. I was shocked when I learned there was more. The truth seemed repulsive and unbelievable. Later I learned that it didn't just happen with married couples. (This was before the so-called sexual revolution and TV and the Internet.) It



took me even longer to realize that sexual contact happened between men and women in other ways too, and still longer to become aware of homosexual practices. Only much later did I realize those practices weren't sinful or even unnatural.

Time for love and kindness

Many Christians still haven't faced that truth. Fear or distaste makes them see their own sexual behavior as the only kind approved by God. Some even think God commands them to get rid of the people who behave differently. Many see this view supported by the few scriptures about sexual behavior, claiming those as God-given rules that apply to all people in all times and circumstances, even though they apparently reflect only ancient cultural views. These Christians ignore the many other scriptures about treating all people with love and kindness, including the people who are different from us and those who are being rejected by religious and social customs. These scriptures are much more numerous and more strongly emphasized in the Bible, especially by Jesus.

Ignoring truth can lead to cruelty

It's time to face the truth about the variety that exists in sexual orientation. We need to oppose sexual abuse, by heterosexuals and homosexuals, but if instead we reject people for merely not being heterosexual, we're doing the opposite of what Jesus taught and modeled. His example, plus what is now known about sexuality, needs to be our guide.

mas. However, many members and ex-members are more than ready for such change. Our refusal to change is needlessly keeping many of them away. It's destroying our credibility in the world, too.

Avoiding the truth only in religion

I'm constantly amazed by people who want the latest information in all other areas of their lives but avoid up-to-date information about the Bible, Jesus, and church traditions. The doctors I know, for example, use the very latest information available about the human body and treatment of disease. They wouldn't think of using the beliefs and methods of Galen, the third-century physician, or even eighteenth-century medical methods.



Yet in their religious life many Christian doctors treat even older beliefs and documents as authoritative. They follow the same mindless pattern many other people also follow in church. We recite creeds written in the third or fourth centuries, based on the



culture, knowledge, and politics of that time. We use the English of the 1600s. We sing theology of the 1800s. It's as if we were still claiming that Santa Claus exists.

Guidelines for revealing the truth?

Couldn't our worship reflect current information and views instead, and use today's language, or must we avoid those to protect the Christians who depend on the familiarity of the old ways and beliefs for comfort? A *Connections* reader recently reminded me of the two principles that Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman once suggested for answering this question. First, he said, don't tell people what they aren't ready to hear, and second, don't tell them anything they will need to unlearn later.

I'm not sure this is good advice, however. Some people may *never* feel ready to hear anything that will make them uncomfortable, but that doesn't mean we need to keep them from ever hearing such things. A certain amount of discomfort is an unavoidable part of learning and growing, and we need to learn and grow. The church needs to promote growth instead of perpetuating immaturity, and



we lose many thinking people when we avoid telling the truth.



Not telling people anything they will later need to unlearn is wise in some circumstances. It's not smart to tell children the stork brings babies. However, anyone who wants the truth will eventually have to unlearn some things, because more of the truth keeps being discovered. The best available information at the time we learn it often turns out later to be wrong.

Beliefs about the Bible are basic

Our beliefs about God, Jesus, and human beings depend heavily on our awareness or lack of awareness about what kind of document the Bible is and how it reached the form in which we know it. Increasing our awareness is therefore very important.



Like several other contemporary Christian authors, Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong throws some helpful light on this subject. In his latest book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (Harper-SanFrancisco, 2005), Spong laments the harm done to the earth and to countless individuals by Christians' claim that the Bible is literally the "word of God," a claim he calls "problematic at best and absurd at worst." He reminds us that it has led to mistreatment of women, Jews, homosexual people, members of non-Anglo races, and the environment.

A belief we're afraid to question

Because we're human and finite and God isn't, our understanding of God can never be more than partial and tentative. And even to get a tentative understanding that's believable, we must consider not only what the Bible and other religious writings say, but also what is currently known about the earth

Correction

On page 1 of the January 2006 *Connections* I mistakenly said a contributor to the book *In Times Like These* was Phyllis Trible. The contributor actually was Phyllis Tickle. I regret this error and I've corrected it in the file that is on my web site.

and the universe from other fields of knowledge and from people's experience that differs from our own.



Spong warns about mindlessly accepting the picture of God we're most often given in church, of a being who rules this world from a position outside of it and occasionally invades it in miraculous ways—the understanding called theism. We'd all like to be able to count on such a being who wants the best for us and will come to our rescue when threats appear in our lives, however, so we resist hearing this view denied or even questioned, even though it's largely an unrealistic picture.

We're not denying God's existence

Along with many other Christian thinkers, Spong assures us that rejecting the theistic picture of God doesn't mean denying God's existence. It merely means recognizing that God is not separate from us, and that earth, not heaven, is our home. This



recognition implies that neither Christianity nor any other religion has a monopoly on the truth or on access to God. Thus a frightening result of abandoning theism, Spong points out, is that religious authority crumbles. That kind of authority depends, he explains, on claiming unique ability either to speak for God or to explain divine behavior.

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Jack Good, author of *The Dishonest Church*, from which I quoted in last month's *Connections*, prefers to think of God as Ultimate Mystery, beyond human understanding. For Good, this name "implies that we are confident a spiritual realm exists, while recognizing that our ignorance of this realm exceeds our knowledge."

A visitor from heaven?

Spong feels that our misleading picture of God has kept us from seeing Jesus appropriately, as a God-infused human being. We see him instead as a divine visitor from heaven, sent by a God who lives in the sky. We say Jesus was human as well as divine, but we essentially deny his humanity. We therefore expect the most important part of our lives to happen in heaven after we die, so we downplay what happens on the earth. This helps us avoid feeling responsible for its care and transformation and for the relief of human suffering. It also lets us see salvation as escaping earth.



Just as I saw the Santa Claus story as unbelievable for a long time before I could admit that it wasn't true, for a long time I've found the doctrine of "substitutionary atonement" virtually impossible to believe. It claims that God saved us from going to hell as punishment for our sin, by killing the innocent Jesus as a substitute for us, the guilty ones.

Until recently I didn't dare to admit my views about this. I now know, however, that I'm far from alone among Christians in seeing that doctrine as unbelievable. I've learned, too, that it is only one of several different views of atonement in the Bible. Many Christians call it a picture of "divine child abuse," and thus totally inconsistent with the love we attribute to God.

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Temporary pain or a constant ache?

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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 13 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 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus 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.

over the long run. As Jack Good observes, facing an uncomfortable truth is like undergoing the temporary pain of surgery rather than having to live with the constant ache caused by non-sustainable beliefs.

Childlike, not childish

I'm afraid we too often fall back on the scripture "All things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27) to avoid applying our God-given reason to unbelievable religious doctrines. We'd be wiser to keep looking for what is actual, instead of trying to justify unconvincing claims by saying everything is possible.



Jack Good urges us to abandon the *childish* attitudes that linger in most of our congregations and to adopt instead the *childlike* attitudes recommended in the gospels. Instead of clinging to limited concepts from earlier centuries and our earlier years, he urges us to be "full of wonder, ready to relish the search for what is unknown." I wish we'd follow that advice.

... whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.
—Mark 10:15

... do not be children in your thinking ...
—1 Corinthians 14:20

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Crucial questions that rarely get asked in church

In his book *The Hidden Face of God* (Free Press, 2001), scientist Gerald Schroeder describes a universal wisdom that pervades the universe, a "unifying wisdom embedded within the cells of life."



That's essentially what I understand "God" to mean, and it's quite different from the description I hear in church. Almost the only picture of God we get there is of a person-like being who lives somewhere in space and acts in unpredictable ways to punish some people and reward others, during their earthly lives and also after death. We claim that this all-powerful being loves each of us and wants the best for us, yet we have to do all sorts of rationalizing if we want to keep seeing that picture as true when incurable cancer or a devastating hurricane strikes.

Could the church abandon this unconvincing portrayal of God, or could we at least start making clear that it can't be taken literally, without destroying many members' motivation for continuing to be part of the church or even to be Christians? Or in order to keep members in the church and comfortable, do we need to keep them believing in this picture that seems to contradict a lot of what we know?



Those are very important questions, yet in the church we almost never even acknowledge them, much less offer convincing answers to them. We're losing credibility as a result.