

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Using the strategies Jesus used

In his compelling book *The Politics of Jesus*, African Methodist Episcopal Church elder and seminary professor Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. reminds us that the Jesus we read about in the New Testament wasn't meek and mild. If Hendricks is right about this, as reading the New Testament seems to say he is, that means that if we want to follow Jesus we can't act meek and mild, either.



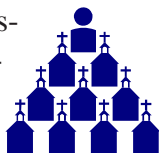
Hendricks sees Jesus as the ultimate activist, constantly challenging the status quo. In his time, that meant challenging the Roman Empire, represented in Israel by its burdensome taxes and provincial governors and abetted by the temple priests who capitulated to the imperial system. Jesus continually promoted love and justice instead of the oppression inflicted by the Empire. He proclaimed that God, not the Roman emperor, was sovereign, an act of sedition for which the Empire's agents executed Jesus.



## Strategically opposing oppression

What we tend to overlook when we think about Jesus, besides his activism in general, is his use of deliberate political strategies to promote the kind of change he knew was needed. If he used such strategies, then following him requires using them. To be his followers, we can't just stay passively in the background and let whatever happens happen.

Obery Hendricks sees seven specific strategies that Jesus used, to oppose the Roman imperial system and the religious establishment that supported it. Reading Hendricks's discussion of these strategies made me reconsider how the imperial system and the supportive religious establishment



## Mercy, justice, piety



In recent years I've come to think more about some words I'd never previously thought much about. One is "mercy." In the past I've mainly thought of it as meaning how a criminal or at least an offender might be treated, in contrast to being severely punished. More recently, though, I've seen "works of mercy" used to mean what I tend to think of as good deeds or charitable gifts—deliberately doing something to help a suffering person, for example, or giving money or food to a needy person.

A different kind of action I've come to think more about is justice. Many people seem to think of it almost entirely as "retributive justice"—punishing someone for a crime or other offense, or getting revenge against someone. But I've come to see that in the Bible justice usually means, instead, remedying mistreatment of groups of people by changing a system that mistreats them. This includes, for example, working to change economic systems that keep people from having enough of life's necessities. It includes working to change laws or customs that keep women or people of nonwhite races or non-heterosexual sexual orientations from having full rights.

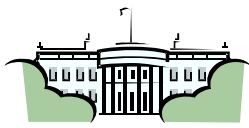
## Emphasizing what Jesus emphasized

Another word I've come to think more about lately is "piety." We most often hear it used, it seems to me, in a negative way, to mean a yucky, holier-than-thou personal attitude—limiting one's thoughts to so-called "spiritual things," never using "bad words," and acting as if the grungier areas of life don't even exist. But "piety" really just means "goodness," which I assume can mean making a habit of doing acts of mercy or justice, or both, which can be an outward and corporate pattern, not just personal sweetness.



Much of today's Christianity seems to emphasize only mercy and piety, especially the surface-sweetness kind of piety that often has hostility or even cruelty not far below its surface. Jesus certainly advocated mercy and true piety, but he also put a huge emphasis on justice, especially by actively exposing and opposing unjust economic and social systems. Shouldn't we make our emphasis more like his?

show up in our world, and how I and other Christians might need to be using equivalent strategies in dealing with them.



I invite you to join me in considering Hendricks's descriptions of Jesus's strategies and in thinking how we might apply them in our circumstances.

### Seeing Jesus's strategies in the gospels

Obery Hendricks derives his list of Jesus's strategies from his interpretation of Jesus's parables and actions in the gospels. You may see these passages differently, but to me, Hendricks's suggestions seem worth considering.

#### √ Jesus treated people and their needs as holy.



"Every day he proved he was with them and one of them," Hendricks observes. He healed their bodies, their souls, and their psyches. He addressed the Empire's economic policies that caused so

many people to be impoverished and to suffer poverty's results. He didn't just deal with people's physical or mental ailments or their spiritual condition and religious practices.

"The goal of Jesus," finds Hendricks, "was realization of the kingdom of God ... a new world order of transformed human relationships. It was social, economic, and political relationships in this world made holy." Hendricks sees this as the core meaning of both versions of what we call the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6 and Luke 11). He sees its message as "treat your neighbors and their needs as holy, that is, by striving to fulfill their needs as if serving God."



#### √ Jesus gave a voice to the voiceless.

An incident that shows several of Jesus's frequently used strategies is his attack on the money changers and dove sellers at the Jerusalem temple, described in Mark 11: 15-19. The attack was not a purely religious act, Hendricks points out, because the temple was not a purely religious institution but rather the center of Israel's economy. Jesus's attack was a very public attack aimed at Israel's center of power. And it was apparently well planned. Hen-

Then [Jesus and his disciples] came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple; and he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves ... He was teaching and saying, "Is it not written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations'? But you have made it a den of robbers." And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching.



—Mark 11:15-19

dricks identifies it as an overtly political act. We'd call it a protest demonstration if it happened now.

In this public political act, Hendricks points out, Jesus was giving voice to the feelings of the poor people of Israel, which they had long held in silence. He articulated their unspoken anger and resentment. Hearing someone like themselves speak their own thoughts and feelings empowered the people. By speaking for them at the seat of power, Jesus was giving voice to the voiceless.



Hendricks reminds us, however, that using this strategy doesn't have to be so dramatic. "It might involve as little as publicly asking a challenging question," he assures us, "or making an outraged remark."

Most of us have plenty of opportunities to do that, in church or in community organization meetings and in conversations. Even if we're not members of official church decision-making bodies, we can speak in classes and in conversations with other members. However, many of us keep quiet because we don't hear anyone else expressing our beliefs, doubts, or concerns. One person's speaking can give the necessary confidence to others who had thought *they* were alone and whose voices also need to be heard. Speaking up can be a way of following Jesus.



#### √ Jesus exposed oppressive systems.

As an example of this strategy, Obery Hendricks cites Jesus's parable of laborers in a vineyard, in

Matthew 20:1-16. He sees Jesus highlighting the injustice of the laborers' situation and treating their needs as holy "by seeking to raise their consciousness of the forces that hold them hostage to poverty and oppression and want." In Hendricks's view, Jesus is explaining that in the kingdom of God such economic injustice will be vanquished, but he is not suggesting that this victory will be accomplished by supernatural means. Rather, he is showing the need for workers to stand together for justice by confronting the cause of their mistreatment.

✓ **Jesus called demons by their names.**



As an example of this strategy, Obery Hendricks mentions the incident in which Jesus drives out the demons from a man in the country of the Gerasenes, told in Mark 5:10. The "unclean spirit" asks Jesus not to send *them* out of the *country*, rather than not to send *him* out of the *man*. Hendricks thus believes that the man represents the people of Israel and that the demon is a collective presence. The demon identifies itself as "legion," referring to the Roman legions, the soldiers of the powerful and brutal Roman army that occupied—possessed—Israel during Jesus's ministry.

✓ **Jesus got angry about seeing others mistreated.**



Hendricks finds that Bible translations sometimes soften or even completely change the meaning of terms and phrases whose original words had political implications. He sees this having happened in Mark 1:40-45, in the story of Jesus healing a leper. According to Hendricks, most translations say Jesus was moved with compassion, but several authentic early manuscripts use a word that means he was moved with anger. Many Christians,



it seems, don't want to think of Jesus as being fully human, which includes getting angry. But apparently anger was a typical response for him, not to mistreatment he received but to the oppression and mistreatment he saw others receiving. This shows us, Hendricks finds, that there are things we should get angry about. We must take sides, he believes, when we see any of God's children excluded from the fullest fruits of life.

✓ **Jesus took blows without returning them.**

When we read Jesus's instruction to turn the other cheek and go the second mile, in Matthew 5:38-41, many of us assume he's telling us to let pushy and cruel people mistreat us. But Hendricks, along with others who have investigated Roman customs of Jesus's time, assure us that he is instead showing us how to exercise power. He is advising us to refuse to let ourselves be defined by those in power. According to Hendricks and others, Jesus is telling us how to turn a humiliating experience into an assertion of our own power and humanity—how to resist without resorting to violence. By seeking and intensifying the conflict, we expose the workings of injustice.



✓ **Jesus demonstrated his way.**

Too often we do the opposite as Christians, it seems. We say we believe in kindness and compassion, yet we treat other people cruelly, sometimes merely because their understanding of the Bible differs from ours. Such actions keep people from being able to believe our pious words. It becomes obvious that we don't really believe those words.



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](http://www.connectionsonline.org). To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at [BCWendland@aol.com](mailto: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 15 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.

## How can we apply these strategies?

If you're a lay church member, how might you need to use these strategies in your local congregation? If you're a pastor, how might you need to advocate them in your sermons and promote them in your other leadership opportunities?



How might we need to use these strategies within our church denominations? If you're a current United Methodist General Conference delegate, how might you need to apply them through your speaking and voting at General Conference this month?



How might all of us need to apply these strategies by taking visible stands on issues currently important in our local communities?

If we're U.S. citizens, how might we need to apply them in deciding how to vote in this year's presidential primaries if they're still to happen in our states? How do we need to apply the strategies when we vote in this fall's national and local elections? Even though empire is harder to recognize now, it surrounds us just as it did Jesus. We need to combat it with some of the same strategies he used.



*Barbara*



### Connections

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## Using the strategies Jesus used

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In a recent church newspaper, a United Methodist bishop quotes Harry Emerson Fosdick, the famous preacher of the early twentieth century, as having said to pastors, "If for some awful reason you only have time to prepare one thing well for Sunday worship, work on the pastoral prayer." The bishop apparently agrees. He explains why: "A deeply considered pastoral prayer expresses to God the heart of the people we serve, and expresses the heart of God to the people we serve."

As someone who's always on the hearing end of pastoral prayers instead of the speaking end, I find this view presumptuous and even a bit arrogant. Unless a pastor happens to be a close friend of mine, I don't think he or she knows much about my heart. And it bothers me for him/her to be so sure he/she is expressing the heart of God. Besides, it seems to me that pastoral prayers are too often sermons in disguise—telling me what the pastor thinks I ought to think or know, in the guise of expressing my concerns to God for me. Still worse, a lot of pastoral prayers I hear seem to be efforts to give information or advice to God.



So if a pastor only has time to prepare one thing well, I'd rather it would be the sermon. I'd much prefer that, in place of a pastoral prayer, even if the pastor has plenty of preparation time, we'd have a time of silence for collecting our thoughts and expressing them to God, each in our own way. Anything the pastor thinks we need to know or do, which he/she may or may not be right about, he/she can tell us in the sermon.