

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Is the church Christian?

In his thought-provoking book *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus* (Harper One, 2010), Quaker author and pastor Philip Gulley describes ten ways in which he feels churches would be different if they were really Christian.



Gulley emphasizes that Jesus left no clear directions about the church's structure or purpose. "All we have is extrapolation," Gulley observes, "a few bones upon which have been erected a larger organism." And in recent centuries, even those "bones" have become increasingly hard to identify, he reminds us. "Most of what we assert about the church is based on fragmentary hints from Jesus and two thousand years of tradition."

"But if the church claims Jesus as its founder," Gulley believes, "it should at least share his values."

Can't we at least share Jesus's values?

Knowing precisely what those are can be a problem, of course. There are now roughly 39,000 Christian denominations, Gulley observes, and each has a slightly different take on what the priorities of Jesus were. And each of those 39,000 denominations is sure that it's the one that most faithfully follows him.

Another problem in saying exactly what Jesus's values were is that the past hundred years have brought what Gulley calls an explosion of knowledge about the Bible and its formation. The era of uncritical acceptance of Jesus stories is therefore past. As a result, in Gulley's view, being Christian has now largely come to mean merely being virtuous and good—being "nice"—apart from any specific belief about Jesus.

Even with these difficulties, Gulley feels we can identify ten ways in which the church would have to be different if it were to reflect the values of Jesus.

Introspection is often unwelcome

Philip Gulley finds, as I also do and as many *Connections* readers tell me they do, that the kind of introspection he recommends in *If the Church Were Christian* tends to be unwelcome in the church.



Both lay and clergy members are often made to feel unwanted merely because they interpret Christianity or Bible passages in ways that don't happen to match the official position of their denomination or the views of most members. Some pastors even get threatened with the loss of their denominational credentials, while other lay and ordained Christians experience rejection in other ways. That can happen even when their interpretation seems to be a close match for what Jesus taught and demonstrated.

A widespread understanding



Gulley thinks the Christian faith he is articulating in his book might satisfy only a church of one. However, my reading and the responses I continually get from *Connections* readers tell me that while he may be the only one who endorses every detail of what he's saying, many other Christians have an understanding of Christianity that closely resembles his. And the prevalence of that understanding makes the church's failure to welcome it or at least to give it serious, open consideration seem especially unreasonable.

The church may not be the vehicle?

Philip Gulley sees true Christianity not as a codified doctrine or creed but rather as an approach to life that emphasizes grace, that is always on the side of human dignity, that is always devoted to spiritual growth and moral evolution, and that is always committed to the search for truth. However, he suspects that the institutional church may not be the vehicle for the regeneration that would come from giving increased attention to these traits.



His suspicion may be right, but how unfortunate it would be if in the long run the church turned out to be a vehicle that hadn't made these its goals.

If the church were Christian . . .

√ Jesus would be a model for living rather than an object of worship.

“From an early age,” Philip Gulley tells his readers, “I was taught that Jesus’s divine origins, miracle-working power, and moral perfection confirmed his uniqueness and merited our adoration.” That’s what many other Christians have been taught, too, and it’s what many still see as truth.



Based on this teaching, Gulley goes on to say, “my life in the church consisted of praising and worshipping Jesus as the divine Son of God.” And that’s what much of the church’s life still focuses on.

Researchers have now discovered, however, and many Christians have now realized, that these same traits were routinely attributed to Greek and Roman gods and goddesses and to Roman emperors and other secular leaders. They can’t legitimately be interpreted literally or seen as unique qualities of Jesus. But the church, especially in its worship, still acts as if they can, and it lets this focus obscure what Jesus taught and how he treated people.



That misplaced emphasis tends to let Christians off the hook. It lets us focus on characteristics of Jesus that we can’t hope to emulate and ignore those that we urgently need to emulate. “If we in the church were serious about honoring Jesus,” Philip Gulley believes, “conducting ourselves as he did would be our chief concern.”

√ Affirming our potential would be more important than condemning our brokenness

“A primary concern for Jesus,” Gulley reminds us, “was helping others become mature—spiritually, ethically, emotionally, and relationally.” But instead of emphasizing how Jesus exemplified maturity, love, and wholeness, the church has too often promoted beliefs and customs that degrade us. “I can’t count the times I have sung a beloved hymn of the church,” Philip Gulley writes, “confessing to general wretchedness (*Amazing Grace*), sat mutely while ministers prayed to God to forgive me for sins I hadn’t committed, and left worship services and Bible studies feeling spiritually and emotionally bruised.”



√ Reconciliation would be valued over judgment



“Christians wishing to condemn and exclude can find justification in their Scriptures,” Gulley acknowledges. “When those same Scriptures are elevated as God’s inerrant words, such condemnation appears virtuous and God-ordained.”

But if the church truly followed Jesus, it would take seriously his reconciling example. Early in his public ministry, Gulley points out, he advocated the surrender of pride, ego, the privilege of being right, and everything else that keeps us estranged from others, in order to be reconciled. “True reconciliation is difficult, requiring vulnerability, honesty, and humility. These virtues should be commonplace in the church but are often lacking.”



√ Gracious behavior would be more important than right belief

“Many of the disagreements Jesus experienced with the religiously rigid,” Philip Gulley reminds us, “had to do with their fixation on orthodoxy to the extent that it made them blind to human suffering.” And unfortunately, Gulley finds, this tendency to value orthodoxy over grace is still with us. Yet according to the gospels, “Jesus never, not once, went to the mat for doctrine.”

“We have expended huge amounts of resources and goodwill defending the very aspect of religious life Jesus valued least. This is the great irony of Christ’s church—a significant number of its members care more about believing certain things *about* Jesus than following his example of love and service.” As a result, Gulley observes, “too many times the church has been the caboose on the train of moral progress, at times a drag on grace and compassion.”

“If the church were Christian, mirroring the compassion of Jesus would be more important than echoing the orthodoxy that has built up around him.”

√ Inviting questions would be valued more than supplying answers



Notice that Gulley doesn’t say “allowing questions.” He says “inviting.” Yet too many of our church groups actually try to stifle questions.

Why? In Philip Gulley's view, it's because many in the pews prefer the comfort of what they mistakenly see as certainty, over the growing pains that invariably accompany spiritual transformation. And many clergy feel they must keep members comfortable, so they discourage exploration that might challenge the spiritual status quo. Therefore, "many have found it necessary to leave the church in order to pursue serious spiritual illumination."



√ **Encouraging personal exploration would be more important than requiring uniformity**

"Time and again," Gulley observes, "when faced with the choice between oppressive conformity and personal exploration, the church has opted for uniformity." As a result, "more and more thoughtful people look outside the church for enlightenment."

√ **Meeting needs would be more important than maintaining institutions**

We tend to forget that the institutional church is a means, not an end. Gulley observes that Jesus appeared to give institutional religion little thought. And when he did speak of it, he was scathing.

√ **Peace would be more important than power**

By peace, Gulley doesn't mean silence and passivity. He stresses the importance of actively challenging abusive power, but he is dismayed by his fellow Christians' support of war. He reminds us that for the first several hundred years of the church, Christians believed the ethic of



Jesus called them to love and redeem their enemies, not to kill them. But now, "some of the most strident voices for military force emanate from Christian quarters."

√ **The church would care more about love and less about sex**

"The church's failure to develop, model, and articulate a healthy perception of sex confirms the suspicion of many modern people that the church is not a credible witness to the reality of life," Philip Gulley finds. And the church's dogged insistence on Mary's virginity as a historic fact not only reveals its unease with sex; it also calls into question its commitment to truth.



√ **This life would be more important than the afterlife**

Our fears and infatuations with the next life, says Gulley, have kept us from being gracious in this one. Emphasis on the next world has served as a way to escape from this world. In Gulley's view, "This world is our home and our responsibility. To shirk that duty in order to focus on a world we have no verifiable proof even exists is misguided." Preoccupation with an afterlife makes our own eternal well-being the goal of our faith, and that's the opposite of what Jesus said our goal should be. Isn't it time for the church to change its focus?

What if we accepted the invitation?



Philip Gulley asks us to consider his book an invitation to appraise our churches' current priorities and consider whether they honor the Christian values we claim to cherish. How would the church change if every *Connections* reader accepted that invitation?

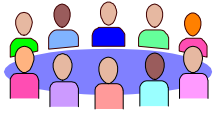
If you're a pastor, how might you accept it by openly nudging your congregation to do the kind of appraisal Gulley asks for? By using each of his

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 18 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist 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 more than 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.

points as sermon topics in a series this summer? Getting your congregation's top decision-making body to read and discuss Gulley's book with you and develop a list of concrete steps through which the congregation could start acting on the ten values?



If you're a lay churchgoer, how could you help to promote the kind of appraisal Gulley advocates? By using his book as discussion material in your Sunday School class or other study group for the twelve summer weeks? By asking your pastor to read the book and meet with you or with a small group weekly to discuss its chapters?

Time to revise content, not just methods

In recent years many churches have updated their communication methods and the style of their worship services, but I don't see many revising or even examining the content they're presenting. Using Tweets and smart phones to communicate an outdated view of the universe is incongruous. So is using hi-tech media to worship a Santa-Claus-like man in the sky and sing about being wretches. Instead of just using the latest methods, isn't it time to focus on how to apply the values of Jesus in today's world? Philip Gulley thinks it is, and so do I.

Barbara

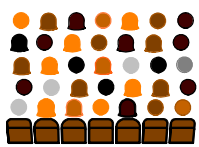


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Is your church Christian?

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If you're a United Methodist

your congregation's pastor(s) and at least one of its lay members will soon be going to this year's meeting of your Annual Conference, the regional UMC governing body for your area. All UM pastors and at least one lay member of every UMC congregation are Annual Conference members. This month or next month, every Annual Conference will meet and elect its lay and clergy delegates to the 2012 General Conference, the worldwide UMC's top governing body, which meets only once every four years.

If you're not an Annual Conference member, do you know which members of your congregation are? Unfortunately, some congregations don't let their members know who currently holds these and other lay offices, but you should be able to find out who does, and you're entitled to know.



By your votes at Annual Conference or by letting your congregation's Annual Conference members know your views, you can help to get General Conference delegates elected who will help the UMC to reflect the values that a truly Christian church would reflect. In this issue of *Connections* I've listed what one Christian, Philip Gulley, thinks those values are. My list would be very similar to his. Yours may be similar or different. But whatever it may be, I hope you'll consider it as you read this issue, and then do what you can to help the UMC make Christian values its focus.