

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

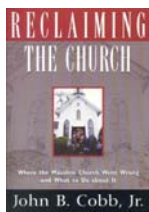


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## Mainline or margins?

“Our churches are sick,” claims United Methodist theologian John B. Cobb, Jr., who calls himself “a troubled member of an oldline denomination.” What especially worries him, he tells readers of *Reclaiming the Church: Where the Mainline Church Went Wrong and What to Do about It* (Westminster John Knox, 1997), is that statistical projections show that our sickness will lead to death.



Cobb doesn't mean a literal death. Instead, he means a move from the mainline to the margins—from being taken seriously to being ignored. For the church, that's a deadly place to be. It can lead to using whatever tactics will hold or attract people, whether the tactics match our God-given purposes or not. “To survive at the margins,” Cobb finds,

“there is a danger that we will so change our character that what has been valuable in our churches will disappear. That is the ‘death’ that is to be feared.”



## A spiritual problem

Cobb sees our problem as spiritual. “Movements flourish when their members are passionately committed,” he observes. “Christianity has flourished when Christians have been convinced that their faith is of supreme importance to them individually and collectively and also to the world. These convictions call forth deep personal commitment and willingness to sacrifice.”



Cobb finds that although the oldline churches still have some members that understand Christian faith as supremely important, no such understanding is widespread in their congregations. “There,” he sees, “the topic is rarely discussed. If it is raised, it is quickly silenced because of the danger of controversy.”

## Time to start thinking again

The vast majority of lay people and even most pastors, in John B. Cobb's view, don't feel responsible for thinking as Christians, yet such thinking is essential for the church. “In the long run,” Cobb observes, “thoughtful and sensitive people will not stay in the church unless they believe that the church's message can make sense.”



Cobb sees that to recover from its present lukewarmness and the resulting decay, the church needs to start thinking and to transform its thinking. It needs to think what it believes about salvation, for one thing, but “the most basic question on which it needs to think is the reality and nature of God.”

## Thinking can lead to controversy

We avoid this theological thinking, Cobb finds, partly because it can lead to controversy. We also avoid such thinking, however, because we've turned it over to universities to do for us. They've turned it into academic disciplines whose discussions and findings reach few church members.



It seems to me that in the United Methodist Church we've also turned over some of our thinking to remote study committees. Recent ones appointed by UMC General Conferences have studied communion, baptism, and UMC structure. A new one will study how our bishops function. Members of these committees are chosen from all over the world. They meet for several years and then publish their results. But few church members see those results or even know the study happened.

## Is our brain missing?

John Cobb says today's church lacks “organs of thought.” Is he right? If the church is like a human body, as the apostle Paul says it is, is its brain currently missing? Are seminaries and study committees the only brain the church needs? How can we encourage more thinking in local congregations? How can we show skeptical but thoughtful people that our message makes sense?



## Shared convictions are essential

Cobb acknowledges that passionate Christian conviction can have harmful results as well as helpful ones. It has often led to destructive treatment of those who do not share it, he reminds us, such as the Jews. “Some who have suffered at Christian hands now rejoice that so many of us are now halfhearted.”



Cobb’s point, however, is not that having strong convictions is good or bad. “It is that without strong, shared Christian convictions among their members, churches decline.” He sees that happening now.

The requirement that the strong convictions be shared has become hard for oldline churches to achieve, Cobb finds. Some members have strong convictions, but they are about concerns that seem unimportant or misguided to other members. This can’t provide a basis for shared worship or action.

## Debate can be invigorating



Cobb finds that the existence of two different views on an issue doesn’t have to bring disaster even if it makes a few members leave. “If both groups

have a clear common understanding of the mission of the church,” he says, “and if they can articulate it in such a way that they can understand and appreciate the opponents’ views as sincere efforts to implement that mission, then the church can be invigorated by the ensuing debate, and it may remain united around still more fundamental commitments. But today in the oldline churches, this is rare.”

## The lukewarm members remain

More often, Cobb notices, leaders hold the group together out of institutional loyalty but the members with the strongest convictions feel they have to go somewhere else to act on those convictions. As a result, the members who remain are mostly the lukewarm ones.



Cobb feels that although today’s oldline churches do good things and serve real needs of real people, as a group and on the whole their members are lukewarm. “We inspire

no passion. We don’t even call for primary commitment to the gospel that we purport to serve. We are quite content if, among the priorities of our members, Christian faith comes in third or fourth, after family and employer and nation, perhaps. We accept still lower rankings from many of our members with little complaint, glad for the small favor of occasional attendance and financial contributions.”

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. ... Because you are lukewarm ... I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”  
—Revelation 3:15-16

## Survival becomes our purpose



In this condition, Cobb observes, the church can’t define the world’s needs from a Christian perspective. Neither can it order its activities to meet those needs. Its main clear purpose becomes survival, and its most pressing concern the attraction of new members, for which it adopts a marketing strategy.

John Cobb hopes we’ll start looking at ourselves realistically and diagnosing our shortcomings honestly. Then, he feels, we’ll need to decide whether we still have a role that merits growth or even survival. If we decide that we do have such a role, then we’ll have to consider what changes would have to happen in order to reverse our decay.

## Two proposals

Because Cobb sees that the church has recovered from earlier periods of lukewarmness, he is relatively optimistic about what would happen if we looked at ourselves realistically and decided to make necessary changes. He proposes two possible responses to our decline—renewal and transformation.

Renewal tries to recover an earlier form of church life. It focuses on the inner life of the church, especially of the local congregation. It has been a creative response in earlier times, Cobb finds, but because of challenges the church faces now but didn’t recognize earlier, renewal isn’t likely to help now.



Transformation, in contrast, aims at responding as effectively and appropriately to our current situ-

ation as the early church responded in its time. Transformation, says Cobb, “concentrates on reaching out to those who have been alienated from the church by the incredibility and oppressiveness of many of its teachings.” It aims at renewing minds, not at returning to what the church did earlier.

... be transformed  
by the renewing  
of your minds...  
—Romans 12:2

### Three challenges

Cobb sees us faced today with three main challenges, to which renewal is an inadequate response.

■ **Anti-Judaism.** We’ve now realized that much Christian teaching, beginning with the New Testament, has been anti-Jewish and has generated a climate that has sometimes even led to genocide.



■ **Feminism.** Many Christians now realize that when God is named only in masculine language, men are mistakenly seen as more God-like than women and thus are given inappropriate power. Yet changing our God-language is peculiarly hard because male terms are so pervasive in the Bible and Christian tradition. Also, because Christianity arose and still lives in patriarchal societies, hierarchical organizational patterns pervade it. Yet such patterns contradict what Jesus modeled and taught.



■ **The ecological crisis.** The Bible has been interpreted as giving humans unlimited authority over the rest of creation, supporting destructive practices whose harm the church mostly ignores.

### We’ve lost some cultural props

John Cobb also finds that we’ve recently lost some cultural props that many Christians mistakenly con-

sider part of Christianity, and the loss has shaken many Christians’ confidence. We’re seeing that Christianity can’t be identified only with European culture, so we wonder if Christianity is only one tradition among others. We’re being nudged to ask whether nationalism and the quest for economic prosperity fit with Christian beliefs. We’re finding that rationalism can’t explain everything, and that perspective and circumstance affect what a person sees. We’re hearing that the Bible doesn’t actually authorize all the sexual institutions and rules we’ve attributed to it.



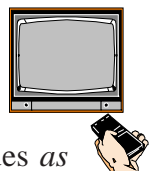
These threats to what we’ve taken for granted leave many Christians hurting, confused, fearful, and angry. They want reassurance that their assumptions are true. But we can’t legitimately expect the church to affirm beliefs that actually are inconsistent with the gospel and are harmful both to those who hold them and to those who are victimized by them, Cobb warns. “The mission of the church in the



years ahead,” he feels sure, “must be more than agreeing with those who want to create an island of unchanging certainties in a context of flux.”

### A big obstacle

Cobb sees a big obstacle to dealing effectively with these challenges and changes. It’s the church’s inability to think theologically. “Most of the beliefs and attitudes of most of the members,” in Cobb’s view, “are shaped more by their location in society, their secular education, the newspapers they read, and the television they watch than by their Christian identity. Most members can hardly imagine what it would mean to reflect on issues as



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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. Many readers voluntarily 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 believe our churches need to address.



Christians.” It’s that kind of reflection, however, that Cobb thinks we urgently need to do.

To overcome the lukewarmness that comes from being confused and uncertain about God, says Cobb, we must find a new consensus about our basic beliefs. We must find a credible way of speaking about God. And we must find “a way of enthusiastically and wholeheartedly affirming our faith that does not continue to vilify Jews, oppress women, and discount the natural world.”



## Where are we now?

It seems to me that in the seven years since Cobb’s book was published, mainline churches have moved in the inadequate direction he calls renewal. Many of their members, at least, are now more adamantly than ever insisting on interpretations of Christianity that were prominent in earlier centuries but don’t make sense now. Thus we now need transformation more than ever, to respond convincingly to today’s challenges and changes and to show the world that we really have something valuable to offer.

*Barbara*

## Mainline or margins?

July 2004

Like the book by John B. Cobb from which I quote in this issue of *Connections*, a more recent book also expresses concern about the church being on the margins of our society. It’s *Methodist and Radical: Rejuvenating a Tradition* (Abingdon, 2003), a collection of essays by Methodists from several different countries.

Its editors, Joerg Rieger and John Vincent, see the margins as where the church needs to be.



These two books are referring to two different margins, however. Cobb writes about how our influence has become marginal, while the authors of the essays in *Methodist and Radical* emphasize the need for the church to be at work on the margins of society. “The church as a whole is best shaped and transformed not from the top down but from the bottom up, by perspectives from the margins.” In a later issue of *Connections* I’ll say more about what some of the authors in *Methodist and Radical* are urging Christians to do, and why.

