

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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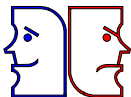
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Opinions that need examining

Christians have been discussing Christianity in news media a lot lately, it seems. One of them has been syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts. In his August 5 column, he speculated about the future of organized religion. A recent statement by best-selling author Anne Rice had triggered his comments.



Several years ago, Rice returned to the Catholicism of her youth after calling herself an atheist for years. But now, she writes, "I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being 'Christian' or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to 'belong' to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For ten years, I've tried. I've failed. I'm an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else."



"In the name of Christ," Rice continues, "I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial-birth-control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular-humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life."

Christians ignoring biblical exhortations

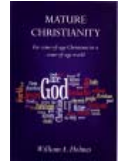
Leonard Pitts observes that Rice is far from alone in her refusals. He cites studies showing that the percentage of Americans who call themselves Christian has fallen by ten since 1990 and the percentage of those who claim no religious affiliation has almost doubled during the same time. "Organized religion, Christianity in particular," Pitts concludes, "is on the decline, and it has no one to blame but itself: it traded moral authority for political power."

Although the Bible contains numerous exhortations to serve those who are wretched and poor, Pitts observes, to anger slowly and forgive promptly, and to



Promoting mature Christianity

There's a sense in which what we say about God today needs to be a radical departure from what Christians have previously been in the habit of saying. That's the view expressed by United Methodist pastor William A. Holmes in his new book *Mature Christianity* (Resurgence Publishing Corporation, 2010).



Holmes says his book is "for come-of-age Christians in a come-of-age world." He compares our present church situation to one that nineteenth-century Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard described in a parable. A fire breaks out backstage just before a circus is to perform. A clown, already in costume, rushes out to warn the audience. But the spectators take his desperate pleas as part of an act. The more he gesticulates, the more they laugh, until fire engulfs the theater.



Since all accounts of God are subjective accounts of someone's experience, Holmes reminds us, interpretations will vary and different "orthodoxies" will appear and eventually disappear. We therefore need to communicate our faith today in ways that will make sense to today's people. "The more we gesticulate with our funny creeds and doctrines," Holmes fears, "the more laughable we seem to a skeptical world."

Time to sound the alarm

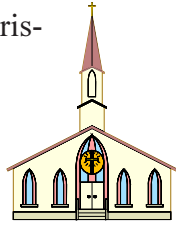
"The fires of social, political, and economic crises threaten to leave only the charred remains of a once relevant institution," Bill Holmes observes, "and there must be those of us 'on the inside' willing to sound the alarm and point to alternative, life-saving exits. Our priority is not the survival of the institution per se (the theater or the church), but acting out a drama which reclaims the world for the humanizing, civilizing process."



Holmes believes "it is still possible to proclaim the Christian faith in a compelling way without insulting the modern mind." He's urging Christians to get busy doing that. Doing it needs to come partly, he finds, from lay persons raising the great questions of life, aided by the insights of Christian scholars and theologians.

walk through this life in humility and faith, too many Christians ignore those exhortations. Thus they lack the moral authority that Christians should have.

“Somehow,” Pitts finds, “low taxes for the wealthy and deregulation of industry became the very message of Christ. Somehow, hostility to science, gays, Muslims, and immigrants became the very meaning of faith. And somehow Christianity became—or at least came to seem—a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party.”



He wonders, however, what will happen to the people who aren't willing to accept these misrepresentations of Christianity. “What of those,” he asks, “who seek a magnificent faith that commits and compels, and find churches offering only a shriveled faith that marginalizes and demeans?” He believes that such seekers will determine the future of organized religion, and he fears that their negative impressions of Christians, like Rice's impressions, will keep driving them away from Christianity.

We need to show the world another way

In an August 5 column in *The Washington Post*, however, United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton takes issue with Anne Rice's view. He appreciates her frustration, he says, and he believes it is shared by tens of millions of Americans.



However, he reminds us that what she's renouncing is not true Christianity. She is merely rejecting a particular expression of the Christian faith, writes Hamilton, and Christians need to make known how different it is from real Christianity .

Hamilton compares Rice's statement to his feeling about the packaged fish sticks that for years were the only form in which he ever encountered seafood. He was sure he disliked seafood, but then at age thirty-eight he tasted swordfish and salmon at good restaurants for the first time, and he has loved seafood ever since.



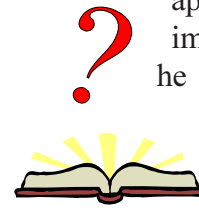
He also compares Rice's statement to one he once heard from a church member who told Hamilton he was no longer willing to call himself a Christian. The member ex-

plained that he didn't want to be associated with Christians like a particularly obnoxious one he had just encountered. “Please don't let this man define what it means to be a Christian,” Hamilton urged the church member. “We desperately need to show the world that there is another way to be Christian!”



What Bible does this man read?

Another recent newspaper column presented an impression of Christianity that Christians urgently need to recognize as false and publicly declare to be false. In the August 18 issue of *USA Today*, Richard Land, President of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission for the Southern Baptist Convention, claimed to show how biblical principles apply to the current discussion about immigration reform. But some of what he listed as biblical principles are unrecognizable to me as part of the Bible's message. In fact, some of them seem to contradict it.



Calling a nonbiblical principle biblical

The first “biblical principle” in Land's list was readily recognizable as valid: “Respect the God-given dignity of every person.” That seems like a good enough interpretation of a lot of the teaching of Jesus, as the gospels present it.

Land's next “biblical principle,” however, made me say “Wha-a-a-t????” It was “Protect the unity of the immediate family.” I don't find that in the Bible. In fact, some parts of the Bible seem to show Jesus saying something quite different from that. At least, they show him giving the immediate family much lower priority than Land claims it gives.

It's easy to think of a few scriptures that give the immediate family high priority, of course. One of the Ten Commandments comes to my mind first: “Honor your father and mother.” And Matthew 15:1-6 seems to show Jesus endorsing this commandment. But another gospel shows him giving higher priority to

“Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”
—Luke 14:26

Then his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd ... said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

—Mark 3:31-35

To another [Jesus] said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." But Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

—Luke 9:59

his followers than to members of his biological "immediate family." And elsewhere he tells potential followers they must put following him above concern for their family members. He apparently even gave higher priority to following him than to burying a parent, a duty that most of us consider essential.

Jesus evidently didn't give top priority to marriage, either. He apparently wasn't married, and apparently Paul wasn't. And many leaders in the Old Testament apparently had several wives. Their "immediate family" wasn't the kind of family whose unity Richard Land says a biblical principle tells us to protect.

how their original documents were altered before reaching their present form, and about what the gospel authors' reasons for writing evidently were, we can't legitimately assume that these gospels contain direct quotes from Jesus. The best we can do is evidently to look at the gospels' overall description of his teaching and practice, to find the principles that his teaching and actions reflected. We especially can't legitimately claim that an isolated Bible verse expresses such a principle if we're ignoring other verses that say something different.



A questionable list

Richard Land's list of "biblical principles" goes on to list "Respect the rule of law." That one made me think, "Well, yes and no." It seems to me that the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and Paul all advocate opposing religious and secular laws that promote injustice.



Here's Land's next principle: "Guarantee secure national borders." My knowledge of world history is far from complete, but I'm pretty sure that the kind of official "national borders" that the U. S. has today didn't exist in the times and places the Bible tells about. And my knowledge of the Bible's contents lacks a lot, but I'm not aware of the Bible saying anything about the need to "guarantee national borders." Instead, it says a lot about the need to protect the aliens and strangers who are in our midst.

Richard Land's next principle is "Ensure fairness to taxpayers." My limited knowledge of the Roman Empire tells me that its taxation of the residents of its outlying provinces, including the one in which Jesus lived, was extremely oppressive. So maybe ensuring fairness to taxpayers could be called a bibli-

Direct quotes from Jesus are unlikely

Because of what is now known about how long after Jesus's death the gospels of the New Testament were written, about how they were chosen over other writings from the same period, about



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 17 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



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.

cal principle. Still, applying this usage directly to today's United States tax systems seems a stretch.

The last so-called "biblical principle" in Land's list is definitely a stretch: "Establish a path toward legal status and/or citizenship for those who qualify and wish to become permanent residents." Doing that may be desirable, but I seriously doubt that it can legitimately be seen as a biblical principle.

Real Christianity or a distortion?

In evaluating views like Land's or like those that Hamilton's church member and Anne Rice want to avoid being associated with, we need to ask ourselves

what evidence is actually in the Bible for what is being called a biblical principle or Christian behavior. We need to notice when the Bible contains statements opposing the so-called biblical principle. We need to notice when scriptures that seem to support the principle merely describe customs and beliefs of an ancient society, instead of reflecting the Bible's overall advocacy of compassion and justice. We need to ask ourselves, when we're tempted to reject Christianity because of how we see Christians behaving, whether what is turning us off is real Christianity or rather a distortion of it.



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Connections

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Opinions that need examining

September 2010



Like author Anne Rice, whose present opinion about Christianity I quote on page 1 of this *Connections*, many of us occasionally feel so turned off by what we see Christians doing and saying, that we don't even want to be called Christian. When we see Christians promoting injustice and unkindness, we don't want people to think we support it too. When we hear Christians claiming that unbelievable things are true, we don't want people to think we believe those things too. It's tempting, therefore, to shrink into the background and keep quiet in order to avoid being associated with the beliefs and behavior we feel are wrong, but that's not a faithful or useful response. Seeing such behavior needs to lead us instead to become better informed and speak more openly about what we believe and why. It needs to lead us to become more active in exposing and opposing injustice and promoting justice in our churches and local communities and the wider world.

What about dropping out of the church? That can be a hard question. If staying in includes supporting policies and appearing to support beliefs that we feel are contrary to true Christianity, getting out may be what integrity and faithfulness require. But if staying in provides opportunities that we wouldn't otherwise have, to speak against injustice and promote justice and to help disseminate information and insights that are otherwise being ignored in the church, staying in may be the most faithful choice. Either way, speaking up is essential. I continue to think Joan Chittister's advice is wise: There may come a time when you have to leave the church to save your soul. But if you leave, don't leave quietly, and if you stay, don't stay quietly.

