

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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## Two systems in tension

In his book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree: Understanding Globalization* (Far-rar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), Pulitzer Prize winner Thomas L. Friedman describes the new system that he believes is shaping world affairs. As the Foreign Affairs columnist for the *New York Times* and its former bureau chief in Beirut and Jerusalem, Friedman has traveled the world and interviewed people in many walks of life for years. He is looking, he says, at the interaction of politics, culture, geopolitics and national security, financial markets, technology, and environmental concerns.



## Ancient forces and the global market

In Friedman's view, a very significant tension has developed between the ancient forces of culture, geography, tradition, and community, and the new system that has integrated capital, technology, and information across national borders and created a single global market. He symbolizes the old forces with the olive tree, and the new system with the Lexus. He's amazed that in the same world where factories are using the latest technologies and global marketing strategies, like a Lexus factory he visited in Japan, people are still fighting over who owns which olive tree. To a great extent the fate of the olive trees depends on global forces related to the wider world's technology and politics, yet the olive-tree defenders are acting as if those global forces didn't exist.



Institutions and individuals that keep acting that way, Friedman believes, have little hope of continuing to play significant roles in the world. If he's right about that, what does it mean for the church? Many churches seem a lot more like the olive tree squabblers than like the Lexus factories.

## Candles preventing stones

Something remarkable happened in 1989 at the St. Nicholas church in Leipzig, in what was then East Germany. According to Pastor C. Führer's account that I received on a recent visit there, peace prayer services had been held regularly at the church for several years, attended sometimes by only a few and at other times by crowds protesting a new government outrage. The services stressed prophetic Old Testament texts and the Sermon on the Mount, applying them to current oppressive government actions and praying for God's guidance.



By the fall of 1989, access roads to the church had been blocked for months and were being checked constantly by the brutal State Security Police. Arrests and so-called temporary detentions in connection with the prayers for peace happened continually. But the flow of people to the St. Nicholas church had continued to grow.

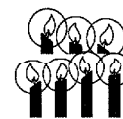
## Calmness and solidarity in the face of force

Suddenly police and soldiers made a new, hideous show of force. A thousand communist party members were ordered to go to the church, joining the State Security Police who had always been on hand in great numbers during the peace-prayer services. The result? Even more enemies of the church were exposed to the gospel. The calm and concentration was unbelievable, worshipers noted. Near the end of the prayer service the bishop gave his blessing. He also read messages from civic leaders, including the conductor of Leipzig's famous orchestra, supporting the church's call for non-violence and showing solidarity between the church and art, music and the gospel.



## They weren't ready for candles and prayers

As the two thousand attenders left the church, tens of thousands were waiting outside, holding candles. To carry a candle and keep it from going out, Rev. Führer points out, you need two hands. You can't hold a stone or club while holding a lighted candle. Soldiers and police were drawn in and became engaged in conversations. Then they left.



The movement lasted only a few weeks, but it hastened the collapse of the party and dictatorship. After the collapse a former party leader said, "We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers."

## A system based on integration and speed

The globalization system of which the Lexus factory is a part, Friedman observes, now shapes the domestic politics and foreign relations of virtually every country. The defining perspective of this system is integration. Its symbol, he sees, is the World Wide Web, which connects everyone without having anyone in charge. The technologies that characterize globalization are computerization, miniaturization, digitization, satellite communications, fiber optics, and the Internet. And the defining measurement of the globalization system is speed.



Globalization has its demographic pattern, too. Friedman calls it “a rapid acceleration of the movement of people from rural areas and agricultural lifestyles to urban areas and urban lifestyles more intimately linked with global fashion, food, markets and entertainment trends.”



## Super-empowered individuals

Globalization’s most important feature, as Friedman sees it, is its power structure. It is built around a balance between nation-states, a balance between nation-states and global markets, and a balance between individuals and nation-states. Globalization has given individuals more power to act directly on the world stage and to influence markets and nation-states, than at any previous time in history. Friedman points out. Individuals no longer need the traditional mediation of governments, corporations, or other public or private institutions.

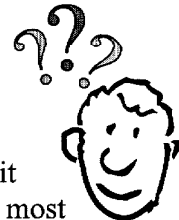


We see this in the church. Individuals depend less on church institutions than they did in earlier years. Denominations and their leaders are much less important to many members than in earlier years. And instead of waiting for official permission or programs to bring them together, members with similar concerns now find each other, communicate, and work together through e-mail and unofficial web sites, publications, and caucus groups.

## The future replaces the past

An important result of globalization, Friedman observes, is that innovation is often replacing

tradition. “The present—or perhaps the future—replaces the past,” he explains, quoting business writer James Surowiecki. “Nothing matters so much as what will come next, and what will come next can only arrive if what is here and now gets overturned.”



The result? “While this makes the system a terrific place for innovation, it makes it a difficult place to live, since most people prefer some measure of security about the future to a life lived in almost constant uncertainty.”

## Only the paranoid survive

“The defining anxiety in globalization,” in Friedman’s view, “is fear of rapid change from an enemy you can’t see, touch or feel—a sense that your job, community or workplace can be changed at any moment by anonymous economic and technological forces that are anything but stable.”



This constant and unpredictable change is what’s scary about the globalization system. It seems to be based on a process that Friedman calls “creative destruction.” He describes it as “the perpetual cycle of destroying the old and less efficient product or service and replacing it with new, more efficient ones.” In such a system, Friedman finds, it seems that only the paranoid survive—only those who manage to stay ahead by constantly looking over their shoulders to see who is creating something new that will destroy them.

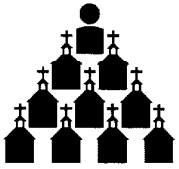


## The Fast World and the Slow World

Because of changes in how we communicate, how we invest, and how we learn about the world, Friedman sees, there is no more First World, Second World, or Third World. “There’s now just the Fast World—the world of the wide-open plain—and the Slow World—the world of those who either fall by the wayside or choose to live ... in some artificially walled-off valley of their own, because they find the Fast World to be too fast, too scary, too homogenizing or too demanding.”



In Slow World institutions, Friedman notices, one or a few people at the top tend to hold all the



information, make all the decisions, and have the whole picture of what is going on. The people in the middle and the bottom merely carry out the decisions, and they

are given only the information that relates directly to their jobs. A low-level person may notice something important about customers or competitors, and pass the information up the hierarchical ladder. It gets to the top, however, only if the people at each step recognize its significance, aren't threatened by it, and therefore don't try to kill it. And even if it gets to the top, it often is no longer timely by then, and the person who decides about it may decide on the basis of his experiences years earlier when he was at the bottom of the ladder.



Like overweight people with hardened arteries, Friedman observes, such institutions can't respond quickly and effectively to challenges. Unfortunately the Slow World characteristics he describes are plentiful in our denominational church systems.

### The turtles and the used-to-bes



Friedman recognizes that many people—"the turtles," he calls them—feel threatened by globalization because they don't have the skill sets or

the energy to make it into the Fast World. They're desperately trying to avoid becoming roadkill.

Friedman finds, however, that the strongest backlash against globalization doesn't come from the turtles or the poorest members of the population. It comes instead from the "used-to-bes" who were protected by what he calls "the rigged games" of Slow World systems. The used-to-bes often have the political clout to organize against change. They prevent it by appealing to the people who prefer the past to the future—who talk about what color to repaint the room instead of seeing the need for a new building. Churches, it seems, include many turtles and used-to-bes.



### Two age-old human quests

If the globalization system has become the huge factor that Friedman believes it has, how should we respond? We mustn't destroy our olive

trees, Friedman assures us. "They represent everything that roots us, anchors us, identifies us and locates us in this world," he reminds us, "whether it be belonging to a family, a community, a tribe, a nation, a religion or, most of all, a place called home." We fight over them, Friedman finds, "because at their best they provide the feelings of self-esteem and belonging that are as essential for human survival as food in the belly."



And to Friedman the Lexus factory represents "an equally fundamental human drive—the drive for sustenance, improvement, prosperity and modernization ... "

The Lexus and the olive tree therefore symbolize two age-old human quests. One is for individual and communal identity, and the other is for material betterment. All that's new about them now is that they're happening on a global scale.



Problems come, Friedman observes, when an obsession with our own olive trees makes us exclude other people and groups or, even worse, try to exterminate them. That raises a question that Christians need to ask. Which of the olive trees that we defend are essential, and which ones aren't? We also need to ask questions that Friedman doesn't mention, about material betterment. How far can it legitimately go without becoming sinful greed? How far can it go without becoming unjust?

### Finding a healthy balance

There's nothing wrong with trying to anchor a society on religious and traditional values, Friedman acknowledges. But he finds that when our efforts are driven not by spirituality but by a backlash against globalization they become a fundamentalism that turns into sectarianism, violence and exclusivity and results in falling even further behind.

The challenge for countries, institutions, and individuals, Friedman believes, "is to find a healthy balance between preserving a sense of identity, home and community and doing what it takes to survive within the globalization system." We need the balance, Friedman explains, because "a tree without roots will never be stable, but a tree that's only roots will never grow into the world, bear fruit, and provide shade."



## We need more than candles and prayers


Friedman's views may not relate to churches, if our purpose isn't marketing products. But in a sense that is our purpose. God calls us to deliver the gospel in ways that let the world see its value. Today that means reaching the Fast World, so I believe we need to pay attention to what Friedman is saying.

To carry out our God-given mission we need to focus very clearly and deliberately, as the Leipzig Christians evidently did in 1989, on God's prophetic word and Jesus' teachings, and on specific ways in which they apply to the world we live in.


But we seem to be relying instead on the vague hope that candles and prayers are all we need. We too rarely back them up with action, or even with the continual, explicit reminders we need, about how God's word applies to specific, concrete situations in today's world.

We can't keep relying only on being innocent as doves. We need to become wise as serpents, too.

*Barbara*



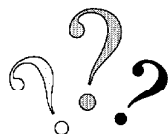
“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”



—Matthew 10:16

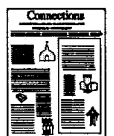
**Able to thrive in the Fast World? To find out, Tom Friedman asks these questions about a country. We may need to ask them about our churches.**

- How wired are you, for electronic communication?
- How fast are you at processing information, deregulating, and making room for what's new?
- Are you tapping into the wires and getting knowledge to the right place at the right time?
- Are you working well with friends, allies, and partners?
- Are your exports lightweight enough to deliver easily?
- Do you dare to be open?
- Does your management get it?
- Will your brand name attract people?



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