

Connections

A laywoman's monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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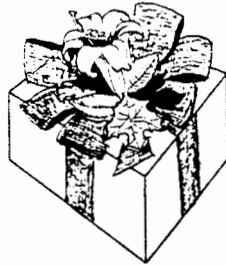
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Gift wraps don't last forever

Wrapping gifts is one of my favorite parts of Christmas and family members' birthdays. I like to receive beautifully wrapped gifts, too. I almost hate for them to be opened, because it messes up the wrappings I've enjoyed looking at!

I often save gift-wrappings. They're so pretty, and they represent so much love and work. In my attic I have boxes and boxes of smushed bows, wrinkled gift-wrap paper, and droopy artificial flowers and leaves. Whenever I start to wrap a gift I dig through them, hoping to find something re-usable.



Sometimes I can re-use an especially gorgeous piece of wrapping paper for several years by cutting off its torn places and sticky spots. But after each trimming I must use it for a smaller package, and hiding its tears and wrinkles keeps getting harder.

I re-use package decorations, too. My mother and my daughter and I exchanged one pink foil angel every Christmas for years. I'd put it on one of my gifts to my mother one year, and she'd save it and use it on a gift for me or my daughter the next year. So the pink angel has always reminded me of my mother, and of the fun she and my daughter and I have had wrapping gifts together over the years.

The pink angel seemed like an essential part of our family Christmas. But it is in pieces in an attic box now, too dilapidated to use. I wanted it to last forever, but it couldn't.

What about church wrappings?

We have a similar problem in the church, but it's harder to recognize there.

The church's wrappings include favorite hymns that we've sung for years. They include the words in which we've most often said prayers and creeds and

(continued on page 2)



Tradition is like a parent

Tradition can be a valuable guide for shaping our understanding of God and helping us respond to God's call, but it can also keep us from recognizing God's call and responding faithfully to it.

Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?

Matthew 15:2

Our religious traditions are like beloved parents. They have made large and valuable contributions to who we are, but if we don't go beyond them we fail to become the church that God calls us to be today.

We get many of our beliefs, habits, and personality traits from our parents, and they teach us how to live in the world of human society. But we aren't meant to be carbon copies of our parents. Their contributions are essential, but we eventually need to make our own decisions about which of our parents' beliefs and behavior to copy and which to reject. If we follow all of our parents' patterns all our lives, we stay immature, no matter how old we may be chronologically.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:11

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Romans 12:6

If we act and think exactly like our parents forever, we never become the unique individuals that God intends us to be. We fail to develop and use the unique combination of abilities God has given us.

When we never turn loose of any part of our religious tradition, we fail to make full use of our God-given spiritual gifts. We fail to follow our God-given calling as a church. We don't minister effectively to today's world. We miss seeing God's "new thing" and being part of it.

Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

Isaiah 43:18-19

(Church wrappings, continued from page 1)

heard favorite Bible verses. Our wrappings include methods of organizing the church, and ideas about who should do which jobs.

We love many of these features of the church. They evoke fond memories of important experiences and beloved people. Saving the beautiful packages in which our beliefs and memories have been wrapped helps us feel safe and comfortable.

Neither is new wine put into old wineskins; otherwise, the skins burst, and the wine is spilled, and the skins are destroyed; but new wine is put into fresh wineskins, and so both are preserved.

Romans 6:4

But change comes. New circumstances arise, which our old church wrappings won't cover. People get new insights from God and propose new wrappings to fit them. New hymns appear, and words are changed in old favorites. A new pastor comes and starts using a new method

of taking communion, or a new order of worship.

Our personal lives change, too. We enter new stages of life, or disasters strike. Our old beliefs no longer cover what we're experiencing, but the thought of changing them is terrifying. We're afraid that if we replace our old wrappings we won't like the new ones as well. Even looking into the old ones is scary, because we fear that we might find them empty. So instead of looking for new wrappings that will fit the new situations and the new God-given insights, we cling fiercely to our old ones and try to keep them from being torn open.

When we accept all the church's traditional beliefs and practices without ever re-evaluating them, we're likely to think that anyone who advocates change is un-Christian. And if the church changes we may think it has become faithless or pointless. We may even decide that belief in God is pointless.

When this happens it means that we're worshipping mere wrappings and containers, not God. We're worshipping pictures of God instead of God. The Bible calls this idolatry. It's worshipping a human product that was meant to point us toward God, instead of worshipping God.

God is infinite, so God won't fit into any finite, humanly constructed package. Whenever we try to keep God in our packages, God will keep breaking out. We can't expect any religious custom, any pattern of church organization, or any description of

Take up your bed and walk!

I often hear people say that we shouldn't change just for the sake of changing. I question that. I think we need change to keep us flexible and alert. In our worship services we need to use a variety of hymns and creeds, say the Lord's Prayer in a contemporary translation, and take communion by a variety of methods so we'll stay aware of what these familiar practices are really saying.

Without change we get stuck in ruts. We're paralyzed. We're on automatic pilot. Then we can't move when we need to.



If you've had any surgery in recent years you've seen how important movement is, even though it's painful at first. A nurse appears at your bedside only a few hours after surgery, saying "Time to get up and walk!" You think it's impossible, and when you try, the tiniest movement hurts so much you think you can't bear it. You imagine all your stitches ripping loose, and you want to fall back onto the bed immediately, but fortunately the nurse won't let you. Getting into motion that first time is agony, but every succeeding time is easier. Eventually, moving isn't painful at all.

Exercise works the same way. The first time you do yardwork or go to an aerobics class you're a mass of sore muscles, but if you continue the soreness soon goes away. Flab starts disappearing, and flexibility and stamina increase. The exercise is making you healthier, stronger, and able to do things you couldn't do before.

Movement is essential for our churches' health, too. Limiting ourselves to old viewpoints and to familiar hymns, rituals, Bible translations, and organizational structures forever is like staying in bed. It's easy and comfortable, but it's deadly. Change keeps our minds and spirits alive and alert. So Jesus says to us, just as he once did to a paralyzed person, "Get moving!" When we stay motionless, we can't go where God calls us to go.

Get up, take your mat and go home.

Matthew 9:6

God to last forever, no matter how beautiful it may be or how well it may serve us temporarily. Our traditions are merely packages in which God's presence is shown to us for a limited time.

Like my pink foil angel and wrinkled paper, our church wrappings can't last forever.

Tradition-breakers started our traditions

Ironically, many of our present church traditions were begun by Christians who dared to discard older traditions that no longer expressed God's will for the church, but we're rarely willing to do that now.

The United Methodist Church came into existence only because John Wesley, a clergyman in eighteenth-century England, made drastic changes from the religious practices that were customary in the Church of England that he was part of. He discarded old wrappings and developed new ones.

In order to revitalize worship and reach contemporary people, Wesley preached in factories and in town squares instead of in church buildings. He and his brother wrote new hymns, often using the tunes of popular songs, including some pub songs. But we Methodists now tend to consider Wesley's hymns

and methods sacred. We're not willing to change any of them even if they're no longer effective. We try to preserve Wesley's creations instead of looking for equally creative answers to today's needs.

The King James Version of the Bible also came into existence because innovative, God-inspired people saw a need and dared to make changes in order to meet it. King James I of England saw that people needed a translation of the Bible that they could read for themselves. He assembled a group of scholars who translated the Bible into the contemporary English of their time.

The words that were everyday language in 1611 are almost like a foreign language now to Americans who aren't regular churchgoers, and these are the people we need to reach with the Gospel. Yet many Christians still use those outdated words, not only for Bible reading but also for public prayer and for talking about their beliefs. These Christians refuse to take the kind of bold step that King James did. They worship King James's wrappings instead.

When needed change finally takes place and we get used to the new way, we usually wonder why anyone ever opposed it. We feel this way now about banning slavery and racial segregation, for example, and letting women vote. Can't we learn from experience, and make the changes that God through prophetic voices asks us to make?

It's time to grow up

Most of us are terribly selective about what the Bible says. We tend to pay attention only to the verses that confirm what we think and what we want to do. We ignore the ones that urge us to do things we'd rather not do, and those that contradict our opinions. Quite often the ones we ignore are much more numerous than the ones we choose to pay attention to.

Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.

1 Corinthians 14:20

We quote Matthew 18:3, "unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But we conveniently ignore the many other parts of the Bible that tell us not to be childish.

Evidently God wants us to be childlike in relation to God--to be trusting, receptive, and obedient. But in other ways God doesn't seem to want us to stay childlike at all.

If we refuse to go beyond our childhood understandings of God and the Bible, we can't be the faithful adult disciples God calls us to be. As individuals, congregations, and denominations, God wants us to grow up.

We must no longer be children . . . But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ . . .

Ephesians 4:14-15

We can't stay on the mountain



Some of Jesus' disciples were with him at his transfiguration, a spectacular display of God's presence. (Matthew 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-9) They wanted to stay put, just as we often do, and to build something permanent on the mountain top

where they had experienced God's presence in such an exciting way.

God told them not to do that. God told them to listen to Jesus instead. Then Jesus led them down from the mountain and back into their everyday world. He knew they needed to move on, not to preserve the past.

God constantly tells *us*, too, not to try to build anything permanent at the places where we have found God in the past. God keeps moving into new territory and calling us to follow.

We never see all of God

God often has to wrench us loose from strongly held beliefs and cherished traditions in order to show us more of God. Because God is infinite we can never fully see or describe God, so the need to learn more about God, describe God in new ways, and express our faith in new ways never ends.



We miss God's "new thing" when we try to save all the old things forever. We're busy saving cocoons when God has butterflies ready to emerge. We're saving



seeds instead of burying them so they can become flowers.

It's time to let beautiful new life burst forth in our churches like it's

doing along Texas roadsides and in our yards this month. We can't afford to keep stifling the new life God has in store for us, by trying to make it stay inside our traditional wrappings.

Barbara

Next month . . .

new life



Connections 3-93

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Tradition . . .

Tradition--living or dead?

Tradition has been described as the living faith of the dead, in contrast to *traditionalism*, the dead faith of the living. Tradition is valuable, but traditionalism is deadly. It keeps us from growing.

As long as traditions that were started by our ancestors still express our best current understanding of what God is like and what God is calling us to do in today's world, in language that has meaning for today's people, these traditions are alive and helpful. We need to keep observing them. But when a tradition no longer has meaning for contemporary people nor expresses our best insights about God, it is dead.

Keeping something dead in our midst is not healthy. When loved ones die, we don't stop remembering and appreciating their lives and their influence on us, but we bury their dead bodies. We mourn their death and then move on. We rearrange our lives into new patterns. We shift our focus from the past to the present and the future.

We need to bury our dead traditions, too. It's time to go where God is calling us to go as a church in the present and the future. God keeps moving ahead and calling us to follow.