

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 41 - MARCH 1996

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Who qualifies as a Christian?

Many church denominations are in turmoil because of internal disagreement about what members should believe and about who can be clergy. The underlying question is what qualifies a person as a Christian. Must she or he accept church-approved doctrinal statements in order to qualify? If so, does that mean never expressing doubt or disagreement?



Is declaring belief in Jesus as savior the only requirement for being a Christian? Or does a person also have to follow a prescribed pattern of behavior in order to qualify? Must he or she repent of all past sins and avoid all behavior that the Bible or church tradition calls sinful? And should some sins carry more weight than others? A related question

is whether clergy and other church leaders should meet a higher standard than other church members.



Jesus made love the standard

For Jesus, the main measure of whether people were his followers apparently was whether they treated people with love. It wasn't whether they observed a set of religious practices or used approved

ways of expressing their belief in him. After Jesus' death, however, various groups of Christians developed doctrinal statements to define what they saw as the essentials of the faith.

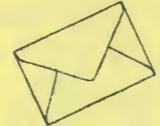


Now some Christians want the church to define acceptable Christian belief and behavior in more specific terms. I don't think that's wise. By doing it we risk giving the false impression that all Christians must be alike and must be perfect. We risk making the church more restrictive than God. ❖

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
John 13:35

Who's liberal, who's conservative?

Recent issues of *Connections*, about heresy, gender-related subjects, and homosexuality, have triggered strong responses from many readers. Most have thanked me for saying openly what they believe our churches need to be saying. Others, however, have assured me that I was wrong.



Some of these critics have called me a liberal, making clear that they considered that an unacceptable thing to be and that it justified their writing me off as someone whose views weren't worth any further consideration.

I'm chagrined by that. Although I realize that many of my present theological views are considered liberal, I've spent most of my life as a conservative, and I'm still conservative about many current political, social, & cultural issues. What seems most ironic to me is that if theologically I'm now a liberal, and if in the eyes of a lot of Christians that's bad, what changed me into a liberal was that in recent years I started paying closer attention to what the Bible says.

Was Jesus liberal or conservative?

It seems to me that by today's standards of what is liberal and what is conservative, Jesus was radical. He advocated abandoning a lot of religious traditions, sharing wealth with the poor, and welcoming all kinds of people into the community of disciples. And he didn't have a wife or children or a home.



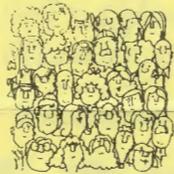
Many Christian leaders in later centuries have also advocated and practiced behavior that most of their Christian contemporaries considered radical and even contrary to the Bible's teaching. In response to what he understood to be God's command, Peter abandoned the food restrictions that scripture commanded. John Wesley spoke against slavery when many Christians were insisting that the Bible justified slavery.



What matters, it seems to me, is not whether a belief or behavior is classified as liberal or conservative. What matters is whether it reflects what God is currently revealing to us and calling us to do.

How do we evaluate beliefs?

The problem with trying to define what all Christians should believe and how they should express it is that no one can see all of God, and no verbal statement can fully describe God. Every denomination therefore includes a variety of views even though all its members believe in God and in Jesus Christ.



Church consultant Herb Miller, in the January 1996 issue of his newsletter *Net Results*, describes five main ways in which American Protestants view belief. Miller finds that when today's Christians evaluate their own congregation or choose a new church home, they look mainly at which of these categories a congregation is in, instead of looking mainly at doctrine.

Now we have received ... the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.
1 Corinthians 2:12

emphasize spiritual gifts, and base many of their convictions on personal communication from the Holy Spirit through prayer and the written word.

[2] Fundamentalist congregations—about 26% of American Protestants—emphasize scripture as God's word, and they believe there is only one correct interpretation of it. They also emphasize the virgin birth of Jesus, Christ's substitutionary atonement for sin by death on the cross, Christ's bodily resurrection, and Christ's second coming. They believe that Christians should separate themselves from their culture and avoid exposure to theologies they consider false. In Miller's view, fundamentalists put more emphasis on personal salvation than on intellectual, social, and emotional growth.

[3] Evangelical Christians—22% of Protestants—rely strongly on the Bible as the final authority for faith and

[1] Charismatic congregations make up about 10% of American Protestantism. Charismatic Christians tend to believe in miracles, em-

All scripture is inspired by God ...
1 Timothy 3:16

Jesus said ... "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."
John 14:6

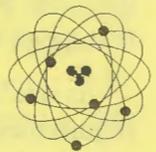
practice, but they tend to emphasize the details of scripture less than fundamentalists do. Evangelicals, Miller finds, give great importance to personal faith in Jesus Christ as savior from sin, and to a personal relationship



Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. ... the one who does not believe will be condemned.

Mark 16:15-16

with him. Because they feel the urgency of evangelizing the world, they emphasize both foreign and local mission work. They believe a distinctive lifestyle results from spiritual rebirth, but they put less emphasis than fundamentalists on prohibiting activities such as drinking and dancing. Unlike fundamentalists, evangelicals don't consider science the Bible's enemy. They often work with other churches and try to relate to their communities and convert their culture.



[4] Moderate Christians—about 32% of American Protestants—belong mainly to seven mainline Protestant denominations. For moderates, Herb Miller finds, social-action programs to help hurting people are the essence of Christian witnessing. They tend to see caring actions as more important than stated beliefs.

What does [God] require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?
Micah 6:8

[5] Liberal Christians—about 10% of American Protestants—tend to see God's character as grace rather than judgment. They consider all people basically good, and they don't believe sin separates anyone from God's love or from a place in heaven. Many liberals mainly emphasize Jesus' teaching and example. They see value in all the major monotheistic world religions, so they consider ministry more important than evangelism. In Herb Miller's view, liberal Christians see the Bible mainly as a record of human efforts to discover

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.
Mark 3:35

You will know them by their fruits.
Matthew 7:16

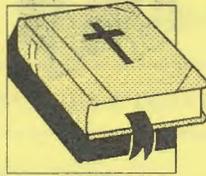
God's nature and God's will as revealed through Jesus Christ. They give more



authority to their personal convictions about Christ's teaching than to official doctrines.

We need to be careful

Some church members insist that only one of these positions—their own, of course—has God's stamp of approval. However, the Bible includes statements that can be seen as supporting each of the positions, and many church congregations and denominations include supporters of each, so we need to be very careful about calling any of them unchristian.



We're in different places

When I read Herb Miller's descriptions of these five categories of Christians, I realize that my view of Christian faith includes ingredients from several of them. Many other Christians probably could say the same thing. For this reason, I hate to see my church denomination or any other one try to shut out people who consider themselves as Christians or who feel called by God to ministry. When we do that, I'm afraid we're rejecting people that God wants in.



We've needlessly driven people away

I've been amazed at the large number of people who have contacted me as a result of a recent newspaper article about *Connections*. When people have phoned asking how to get on the mailing list, I've asked most of them about their church involvement. Many have said they were not currently participating in any church.



That surprised me, because *Connections* is about being the church. In a way, however, it wasn't surprising at all. Most of the callers told about growing up in churches but being turned off by rigid, narrow rules about what behavior was and wasn't permissible, and by unbelievable-but-required doctrinal statements. Deep down these callers felt sure, they said, that such rigidity and narrowness were not what God or the Bible required, yet the churches had claimed to be speaking



for God. The callers saw that *Connections* was saying things that had they had long suspected were true but had never heard at church.

Some have given up on the church

Many of these callers had tried to believe what churches had told them they must believe in order to be Christian. But finally they had seen that they couldn't in good conscience make themselves believe what they were being told.



These turned-off people's views were strikingly similar to some that I'd already been hearing from non-churchgoers who read *Connections* regularly. They remind me of an old saying my mother used to quote—"a woman convinced against her will is of the same opinion still." And this saying doesn't just apply to women. We can insist that our children or our fellow citizens and church members believe and behave in certain ways, but if they don't see that those beliefs fit what they observe about life, or that the behavior brings desirable results, they won't be convinced. Their names may be on our church rolls, and their bodies may even be in our pews, but they won't buy into what we're saying.



We haven't shown them how the gospel can make a real difference

Some church members say, of course, that when people reject the church it's simply because they're unwilling to believe and to do what is right. That's probably true for some church dropouts, but I'm afraid that for many it's not the reason. We've lost some of them by failing to present the gospel in ways that they can recognize as believable.

We've failed to show them how following Christ can really make a worthwhile difference in their personal lives or in the wider world.



I hate to see our churches needlessly turn thinking people off by insisting that everyone have the same view of God and the same way of expressing Christian faith. I don't believe God requires that.

Closing old doors, opening new ones

I set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. ... Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you ...
Revelation 3:8, 20

Easter is a good time to think about closing the doors on some ineffective ways of being the church. It's a good time to open some doors Jesus is

knocking on. It's time to bury some mistaken beliefs and unnecessary rigidity, and to accept some of God's truth that we haven't recognized before.



It's time to discover the new life that God is ready to bring forth from the graves of our earlier efforts. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

Lay and ordained Christians in ministry



Connections 3-96
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Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house ... ?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly ... Then you shall call and [God] will answer; you shall cry for help, and [God] will say, "Here I am."

Isaiah 58:6-9



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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergy wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 10000 readers in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.