

Connections



A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 218 – JANUARY 2011

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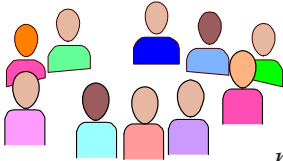
Time to stop getting it wrong

“Churches that ‘get it wrong’ may lose an entire generation of young adults,” fears United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton.



Hamilton is the 46-year-old founding pastor of a Kansas megachurch. His newest book, *When Christians Get It Wrong* (Abingdon Press, 2010), is a ‘how-not-to’ manual for modern churches. It’s short, easy to read, and ideal

for group discussion. A video and leader’s guide are available.



What I hear from *Connections* readers tells me that the church has essentially lost a lot of older people, too, by getting it wrong in many of the same ways that Adam Hamilton sees it turning off young people. But what can we do to turn this trend around?

Abandon whatever is not like Jesus

“It is not only the attitudes and actions of Christians that are off-putting,” Hamilton finds, “but also the theological convictions that often give rise to these actions.” Does that mean Christians should abandon essential parts of Christianity in order to make it attractive to non-Christians?

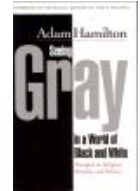


No; but it means we need to re-examine our beliefs and practices, even our most basic assumptions, and to ask whether they are really consistent with what Jesus taught. Then we need to revise or abandon those that contradict his teaching.

Two groups turned off by the church

Hamilton’s church set up a website inviting young adults under 35 to say where they thought Christians got it wrong. His congregation also interviewed others who had opted out of church. Their answers

Black, white, or gray?

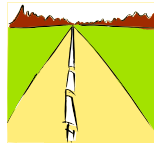


Does Christianity need a second reformation? It does, according to Adam Hamilton in his book *Seeing Gray in a World of Black and White: Thoughts on Religion, Morality, and Politics* (Abingdon Press, 2008), and the needed change will be led by people who can find a strong middle ground.

Hamilton feels that the world gets a mistaken impression of Christianity by listening mainly to Christians whose religious beliefs and positions on social issues are extreme. He sees interpretations of Christianity as stretching across a spectrum that extends from fundamentalism or extreme conservatism at one end to extreme liberalism or progressivism at the other. As examples, he names Jerry Falwell at one end and John Shelby Spong at the other.

Is the middle way really faithful?

Hamilton observes that increasingly large swaths of the Christian population yearn for a more centered or balanced faith. A faith in shades of gray is tempting if the only other options look like shrill, angry extremism.



But is the middle way the way of Jesus? Surely that depends on what kind of middle it is. Is it a place of individual kindness and generosity, a place that promotes justice and compassion in today’s society? A place for examining current issues and seeing that there are pros and cons on several sides, not just on one Christian side? That kind of middle could be a welcome oasis that offered faithfulness as well as comfort.

Yet static, restful middle ways can be a copout. The church needs to move forward, to take a stand on today’s issues. We must seek even tentative conclusions about which religious beliefs deserve to survive, and which systems nurture progress rather than undermining it. If the church only dithers in the middle of the road, it risks going nowhere, being run over by traffic from both sides. A bland, ineffective middle may be worthless, even dangerous.

Which way will Christianity take? What can you do to help it follow the way of Jesus more closely?

reminded me of the many *Connections* readers who say they feel like misfits in relation to the church.

No surprise when people turn away

Hamilton cites recent research that has focused on non-Christians' perceptions of Christians. These surveys, like Hamilton's conversations, find that high percentages of young adults who are outside the Christian faith see Christians as overly



judgmental, anti-homosexual, critical, too political, and insensitive. "If these words accurately describe how young adults have experienced Christians," he asks, "then is it any surprise that they are turning away from the Christian faith in droves?" Criticism of "typical" American Christians, he finds, centers on five key themes.

- **Christians acting in unchristian ways**

When Hamilton asks non-Christian young adults what they think Jesus stood for, they correctly say it is love. But what they often see Christians doing is very different, such as speaking in harshly judgmental ways about others, or even to them.

This perception doesn't surprise Adam Hamilton. He tells of the funeral of a young man who had taken his own life and whose parents were experiencing shock and intense grief. Some attendees asked, "Why didn't you tell them that their son is in hell today?" It's hard to imagine a more callous, mean-spirited reaction. It's harder still to see why such a negative Christianity would attract anyone.

Hamilton rightly reminds us that Jesus did not condemn others. "The only people Jesus had words of judgment for," he emphasizes, "were the religious folks." What angered Jesus most about them was their judgmentalism, their hypocrisy, their failure to love.

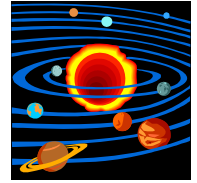


"Like many modern Christians," Adam Hamilton observes, "they failed to see that God's primary concern is not rules but people." Jesus taught that God's main rule was love.

- **Anti-intellectual, anti-science views**

Many thinking people, Adam Hamilton finds, see Christians as being what they euphemistically call "less intellectually active." These Christians seem

to fear that science will disprove or debunk their faith, so they avoid taking its findings seriously. But Hamilton is sure that God is not threatened by science. In fact, he feels that "scientists act as God's docents, whether they believe in God or not." In his view, when science helps us understand how the universe works, it gives us a proper sense of awe for nature. Theology and faith can then teach us what life means and how we should live in the world.



I wish Hamilton had also emphasized that in order to be credible, religious faith must take both recent theology and other disciplines seriously. The impression that Christian traditionalists dismiss academic knowledge is a big part of what turns off many educated people. For me, Hamilton's portrayal of God as a person-like creator of the universe is an example of outdated religious beliefs that fly in the face of modern knowledge.

Meanness and apathy in politics

In what he calls a postscript to his section about science, Hamilton rightly criticizes the angry politics that dominate current news. He sees that young adults are turned off by Christian politicians who indulge in "the antithesis of the gospel: slander, gossip, malicious talk, mean-spirited rhetoric, disrespect, and worse."



Of course avoiding these kinds of personal sin is important, in politics as elsewhere. Yet I wish Hamilton had also mentioned politically apathetic Christians. Their failure to speak out on policy issues, on ethical grounds that all religions should share, also turns off many young adults and others.

If Christians revere God's creation, why don't more of them resist environmental damage, and baseless "creation science" in schools? If they want all children to have loving homes, why don't they give birth-control information to teens and support gay parents? If they care for the poor, why don't they support fairer tax policies, including access to health care? Focusing only on individual misbehavior lets Christians off the hook when it comes to the political action needed to address corporate sin.

“Christians get it right when they work for justice, and when grace, truth, and love mark their political activities,” Hamilton rightly observes. That’s true, but we must also go further. In today’s world, resisting injustice usually requires political action, because individuals alone can rarely change the systems that perpetuate social injustice. If Christians don’t seem to care enough to speak up as a group, young people will see the church as irrelevant.

• **Negative views of other religions**

Hamilton tells about a study he led on four of the world’s great religions, in which he compared and contrasted them with Christianity. “Several dozen people actually left our church,” he reports, “but several *hundred* people chose to become Christians after hearing how we approached these other faiths with respect and a willingness to learn from them.”



To young adults, Hamilton finds, it is rightly unthinkable that God would welcome to heaven only those who call on the name of Jesus, regardless of one’s character, actions, or actual love of God and neighbor. His position on that question is what he calls Christian inclusivism, inviting everyone to be

Christian. It says Jesus is the Son of God and salvation comes only by and through Christ, and what Hamilton sees as inclusive about this position is that it sees salvation as a free gift from God, available to anyone.



But to many people today, merely saying that others are welcome to adopt the religion we were fortunate enough to be born into is arrogant and un-

reasonable, because it seems clear that no religion can be the only one with the truth. Saying that non-Christians won’t go to hell may be a small step in the right direction, but better would be to model a Christianity that shared ethical concerns with all great religions.

• **God’s role in human suffering**

In Adam Hamilton’s view, as in mine, “Christians really get it wrong when they begin to diagnose the suffering of others as acts of God’s judgment.” Hamilton urges us to question the common assumption that everything happens because God wills it — that God has a predetermined script that covers everything. Young adults see Christians getting it wrong, he suggests, when God is portrayed as the supreme micromanager, or the direct cause of good and evil in the world.



Again, it would be better still to go further. Why should “God” refer to a person-like being at all? If Christians can understand God instead as something like the principle underlying reality, outsiders won’t have to wonder why a benevolent God seems to cause suffering. Yet most churches fail to explain this possibility.

• **Christians’ view of homosexuality**

Adam Hamilton sees that the main issue here is the nature of scripture and its authority for our lives. In his view, which is similar to mine, “the Bible captures God’s word as it was given in specific historical circumstances, understood, and recorded by authors who were shaped by and addressing their own cultures.” I found helpful his citing as an example Acts 10:11-15, in which Peter



This issue, many back issues, a list of books I’ve written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my website, 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 18 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.

learns that a particular teaching of scripture is not God's timeless word and must be set aside.

I was dismayed by a recent newspaper article quoting military chaplains as saying they didn't know how they could do their ministry if "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" were removed, because they considered homosexuality sin. Why would that present them with an unbearable moral dilemma, I wondered, if working where killing is taught doesn't seem to bother them? As a generation, younger adults are ahead of the church on gay rights, just as they have been on civil rights, women's rights, peace, and the environment.

For them and others, it's a turnoff when the church lags behind the rest of society on justice issues.

To get it right is to love

Adam Hamilton sees Jesus as the pure and complete Word of God. That's a more exclusive understanding than mine, but he advises reading all scripture in the light of what Jesus said and did, and I agree that that's good advice for Christians. When we read scripture that way, we see that to get it right is to love — and also to speak out for justice and compassion.



Barbara

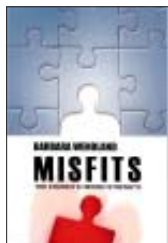


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Time to stop getting it wrong

January 2011



Misfits: The Church's Hidden Strength

My new book, which came out last month and is my first without a co-author, is about the many people who feel like misfits in relation to the church, often for the reasons Adam Hamilton describes. Using my own story and quotes from other writers and *Connections* readers, I discuss how I feel the church needs to change in order to get it right and reach people today.

Chapters on "What misfits want to know" and "What the church and the world need to know" give information about Christianity that many young adults and other outsiders want to hear from Christians but rarely hear. "What misfits can do" and "What congregations can do" offer practical suggestions and a realistic basis for hope. Study questions encourage reflection or discussion.

You can order *Misfits* from Amazon.com and other booksellers, and you can look inside it at Amazon.com. You can also order it from its publisher, St. Johann Press, using a credit card, by e-mailing owner Dave Biesel at d.biesel@verizon.net or phoning 201-387-1529. The book is \$18.95 from either St. Johann or Amazon. St. Johann's shipping is \$5 for the first copy and \$1 per additional copy. Or to get signed copies from me, mail me your check for \$24 per copy, which includes the cost of shipping.