

Progressive Christianity

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Assembly Mennonite Church – 2nd hour elective on “Exploring Progressive Christianity”

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“Progressive Christianity” is an alternative to the dominant understanding of Christianity in our culture today. This session will look at why such an alternative is needed, and what progressive Christianity is.

1) The sorry state of mainstream Christianity

- a) Perceptions of Christians in the U.S. have changed significantly over the decades; from a people who do acts of service and help the poor to people who are judgmental, homophobic, and hypocritical (see research by the Barna Group).
- b) High profile scandals (Catholic priests, John Howard Yoder, etc.), regressive politics, and endless conflict have contributed to negative reputation.
- c) Since the 1980s, conservatives/fundamentalists have effectively defined what it means to be Christian and what “Christian values” consist of.
- d) Anne Rice’s Facebook post, July 2010, spoke for many progressive Christians: *“For those who care, and I understand if you don't: Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. 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. ... In the name of Christ, 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. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.”*
- e) Little surprise that Christianity is numerically shrinking in our culture (mainline churches are noticed this for decades); it’s especially unpopular among young people. As a result we see a significant increase in the percentage of the “Nones” – those who want nothing to do with religion; and the popularity of “the New Atheists.”
- f) Our culture is moving quickly into a post-Christian age (where most of Europe already is).

2) The “answers” Christianity has provided for the last 500 years no longer work

- a) Nearly all Christians use to agree on the answers to such foundational questions as:
 - i) Why did Jesus die and what did his death mean?
 - ii) Is Jesus the only way to God?
 - iii) Does the Bible contain the answers to all important questions?
 - iv) What does it mean that humans are made in the image of God?
- b) We no longer agree on the answers to any of those questions (and many others) (see *“The Great Emergence”* by Phyllis Tickle)

Summary

The meaning of Christianity is being defined by right-wing Christians, and is becoming increasingly irrelevant to younger generations. We can either join the growing crowd that is rejecting Christianity or we can do the hard work of reclaiming it. I believe that championing a “progressive Christianity” is one important strategy to reclaim a living, relevant, authentic Christian faith; one that is worth devoting one’s life to.

3) The challenge of promoting “progressive Christianity”

- a) It is not uncommon for people in progressive congregations to confess that *“We are a little weak in our theology; we know what we don’t believe but have trouble articulating our own faith to one another and to newcomers.”* By regularly distancing ourselves from the excesses of mainstream Christianity, we have lost our ability to articulate a clear alternative faith.

- b) Simply saying “We’re not like those other Christians” offers neither a faith to invite anyone to nor does it define a faith we would give our life to. We need to articulate an attractive alternative.
- c) The term I’m giving this alternative is “Progressive Christianity”
 - i) It’s a term that has no precise or uniform definition (see the varieties of “progressive Christianity on the Internet).
 - ii) It refers more to a social and political outlook rather than a theological outlook (some progressive Christians ground their views in traditional/orthodox religious beliefs and practices);
 - iii) But I think it’s a term preferable to the alternatives (liberal, red-letter, open-hearted). As a general tem, it probably best points toward what I’m talking about.

4) **The key markers of Progressive Christianity**

- a) Progressive Christianity is rooted in the prophetic narratives of the Bible, the life and teachings of Jesus, and various expressions of those teachings throughout the centuries (including Liberation Theology and the African-American civil rights movement).
- b) As a discussion starter, I’m proposing that central to an authentic, vital, progressive, Christian faith are the following as six markers.¹ I expect you will add to these and offer some corrections.

Six markers of Progressive Christianity

I. **Its focus is on Jesus and the Reign of God**

- Jesus’ pivotal question: “Who do you say that I am?”
- We’re still grappling with that. The U.S. culture wars are to a large extent Jesus wars
 - o Traditionalists say Jesus is the savior *in whom* you must *believe*, and *with whom* you have a personal, individual relationship. Jesus’ life purpose was to die and atone for our sins so that those with right belief might have eternal life in heaven.
 - o Progressive Christianity does not dismiss the personal, but emphasizes the central social aspects of Jesus’ ministry and message, in such a way that the personal and political are inter-connected. This Jesus was not simply born to die but came into the world to show humanity how to live.
- This new way of living to which Jesus calls us is called the reign (or kingdom) of God, and it has deep roots in his own Jewish tradition (esp. the concept of *Shalom* and the writings of Second Isaiah).
 - o As the phrase KOG suggests, it is an alternative kingdom; specifically, an alternative to empire and its idolatry of wealth, violence, and domination.
 - o The KOG is identified with the poor, the sick, the repentant sinner, the powerless, and others at the bottom of the social and political ladder.
 - o Citizenship in this kingdom has clear political ramifications. Yet this reign is advanced *not* by might and conquest, but by love, nonviolence, and the cross. In fact, the rule of love rises above any other tradition, creed, or scripture.
 - o What progressive Christians say about Jesus and the reign of God:
 - Marcus Borg: “*Jesus is the decisive revelation of God.*”
 - Brian McLaren: “*At the center of Jesus’ life is the message of the KOG, and that is all about justice and overturning our assumptions about power.*”
 - Nadia Bolz-Weber (paraphrased): “*Jesus offers forgiveness to sinners and status to nobodies, and makes them both first in the Kingdom of God.*”

¹ See “*Progressive & Religious*” by Robert P. Jones (2008, Rowman & Littlefield) for more about many of these ideas.

II. It moves beyond biblical literalism

- We will talk about the Bible the next two weeks so I will say little about this here, except to quote Reinhold Niebuhr who was asked if the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis was literally true. Niebuhr replied, “No, I think it’s truer than that.”
- The problem with literal truth is that it tends to get caught up into superficialities rather than dealing with the deep truths of the Bible, which wrestle with ‘the human condition in relations to God.’

III. It has a rigorous and critical engagement with tradition

- Progressive Christians respect tradition but don’t get trapped by it. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan said, “The past has a vote but not a veto.”
- Dominant figures in the Bible and more recent saints struggled to find the best of tradition in their own time, and to make corrections when necessary.
- This way of engaging tradition is especially important for many women and other minority groups not represented in our sacred texts.

IV. It advances an “Imago Dei” agenda

- An important theological theme for progressive Christians is the conviction that *all* people are created “in the image of God” (rooted in Genesis 1:27). This notion is central, for example, to MLK’s understanding of the “Beloved community.” The imago Dei agenda confronts “the big lie” that some are more important than others.
- It follows that the key moral issues for progressive Christians are these four:
 1. **Persecution/Oppression.** An Imago Dei agenda is particularly concerned about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression which tell us that some lives don’t matter.
 2. **Poverty.** An Imago Dei agenda highlights poverty as a central issue of the Bible, and that God has a particular concern for the poor. The poor are highlighted in Jesus’ description of judgment day (Matthew 25) where, as Ron Sider provocatively says: “*If you don’t feed the hungry and clothe the naked, you go to hell.*”²
 3. **Peace** (a familiar moral issue to Mennonites). Walter Wink observed that nonviolence and love of enemies are “the acid tests of true Christianity.” A Christianity that lacks these teachings about peace is progressive heresy.
 4. **Planet.** The Creation Care movement has grown in part out of the realization that suffering from climate change will disproportionately affect the poor, and therefore is an important part of an imago Dei agenda.

V. It takes seriously the power of religious practice

Religious practice comes in many forms, and these four are particularly important:

- **Prayer & worship:** The media stereotype of U.S. Christianity use to be that it consisted of three separate camps -- heady liberals, emotional evangelicals singing praise songs, and blindly obedient Catholics. Maybe true at one time, but not now. Today’s progressives are no longer satisfied with clear thinking and good ethics; many also want an emotionally textured, deeply participatory, expressively creative Christian worship.
- **Community** is central to progressive religious practice
 - o Progressives put an emphasis on belonging (of the three Bs of faith³) rather than believing;
 - o the worship of a progressive community is participatory, not simply clergy led
 - o community is where progressives do discernment

² It should be noted that most progressive Christians don’t believe in a literal hell.

³ Believing, behaving, belonging

- **Radical hospitality** – is a key religious practice of progressives that takes many forms. Often one important form is the open communion table where are all included.
- **Activism** as religious practice – not something external to Christianity but embedded in the example of Jesus himself.

Fr. John Dear: *“[Christians have] to actually engage in some public action for justice and peace. If we’re not, I don’t see how we can claim to follow Jesus, who by and large is doing things. He’s healing people, he’s teaching, he’s condemning injustice, he’s always doing something. Christians can’t go to church on Sunday and then just go to work and ignore it.”*

VI. It espouses a relational approach to Truth

- Truth is seen as experiential rather than propositional, inductive rather than deductive. It is founding through listening to God, observation, discernment.
- Progressive Christians believe “truly religious people ... don’t overstate their own knowledge or certainty about God’s will.” Truth is stated with humility.
- There is respect for mystery among progressive Christians; for all that we don’t know and cannot know.

What else would you include?

Which markers are evident at Assembly and which not so much?