

Progressive Christianity and the Christian Future

Prologue:

*The difficulty of speaking in a different country: what I know best is American Christianity. In the U.S., progressive Christianity is growing. A poll from July 2013: 28% identify as religious conservatives (the Christian Right), and 19% as religious progressives (“the Christian Left”). Large generational difference: among people over 68, four times as many identify as conservative (47%) as progressive (12%). In the 18 to 33 age group, more identify as progressive (22%) than as conservative (17%).

I. Progressive Christianity is Very Different from the “Common Christianity” of a Generation or Two Ago - what most Christians took for granted, the beliefs that most Protestants and Catholics shared in common. Still shared by millions.

*To see its “shape,” I suggest a *memory exercise*. Think back to the end of childhood (age twelve or so?). **In a sentence**, how would you have answered the question: **“What is the heart of the Christian message, the ‘good news’ of the Christian gospel?”** Why should you or anybody be Christian? What impression had you absorbed? (A good exercise in an adult ed setting – can be followed by, “And now?”)

*My answer at age twelve: *Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven if we believe in him*. Note what it emphasizes:

- (1) The afterlife.
- (2) Sin and forgiveness as the central dynamic of the Christian life.
- (3) The purpose of Jesus within this framework: he died in our place to pay for our sins (known as “*substitutionary*” or “*satisfaction*” atonement)
- (4) Believing – and often believing that Jesus and Christianity are “the only way”

*Other names for “common Christianity”: because of the emphasis on the afterlife and believing, “*heaven-and-hell Christianity*” and “*belief-centered Christianity*.”

*Not all Christians accepted this fifty years ago, yet many (most?) did. But increasingly over the past several decades, it has become unpersuasive to millions who have left the church and many within churches

*The Spirit of God has worked and does work through “common Christianity.” But there’s a lot of “static” in it. For millions, it has become a stumbling block.

II. “Common Christianity” is Neither Ancient Nor Traditional Christianity

*Many people think of the “common Christianity” of a generation or two ago as “traditional” Christianity. This is inaccurate. There is much about it that is neither ancient nor “traditional” but innovative and recent. **Examples:**

**Biblical inerrancy* (an issue for many Protestants) is first mentioned in 1600s

**Insistent biblical literalism* is modern. Prior to the modern period, the metaphorical meaning of the Bible (its *more-than-literal meaning*) mattered most.

*The death of Jesus as a **substitutionary** sacrifice for sin is less than a thousand years old (first explicitly articulated by Anselm around 1100; more in second lecture)
*Finally, *progressive Christianity* in some ways involves **a recovery of tradition** and thus has significant continuity with pre-modern Christianity (“*neo-traditional*”?)

III. Major Features of Progressive Christianity: The “Shape of the Whole”

1. About This Life More than the Next Life – about **transformation in this life** rather than about an afterlife. No denial of an afterlife, but little emphasis on it.

*In the Bible, transformation in this life – of ourselves and of the world – is not only central but the primary meaning of “salvation.” Liberation from bondage, return from exile, sight to the blind, resurrection from the dead (new life here and now).

2. Intentional Rather than Conventional – both as motive and emphasis.

***Motive:** until recently in the U.S., there was a conventional expectation that everybody would be part of a church; thus many were Christian because of this cultural expectation. That convention began to disappear in most parts of U.S. about forty years ago

*Increasingly, churches will be made up of **intentional** Christians

Emphasis: *Intentionality leads to an emphasis on spiritual practices, for practices are central to *intentional Christianity*. *The purpose is transformation.*

3. Progressive Theologically.

(1) A historical and metaphorical approach to biblical and Christian language.

***Historical approach.** *Not* in the sense of ‘how much of this happened,’ but *ancient text in ancient context*. Example: Isaiah 40 in historical context

***Metaphorical:** the **more-than-literal meaning** of language.

*The contrast to “common Christianity”: in harder or softer forms, a literalist and absolutist interpretation. If the Bible says something happened, it happened; if the Bible says something is wrong, it’s wrong

*Not only is a historical-metaphorical approach more illuminating, but all the problems associated with biblical literalism disappear.

(2) It sees no fundamental conflict between Christianity and science, and considerable complementarity. They are not rivals – except when science becomes “scientism”

(3) It affirms religious pluralism – not just out of tolerance, but conviction – namely, the conviction that the God of the whole universe has been known not just in one religion but in the enduring religions of the world. Each is a specific cultural response to the sacred.

4. Progressive Socially and Politically:

*Socially, it moves toward inclusiveness. In the U.S. in the last half century: ordination of women; more recently, the full status of gays and lesbians within the church

*Politically progressive – because of a recovery of the political passion of the Bible. The Bible is also religious and spiritual, of course. But it emphasizes, from beginning to end, God’s passion for a different kind of world.

5. Christianity is Not Very Much about “Believing” but about “Beloving”

*Before 1600, the English word “believe” did not mean believing statements or teachings or doctrines to be true. Rather, its direct object was always personal; and “believe”

meant what we mean by “belove.” Faith/believing is about *believing God*, and *Christian faith* is about *believing God as known especially in Jesus*.