

“Imagining a future for the Bible in tomorrow’s churches and a post-Christian world.”

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The core question in this session can be stated quite simply: How can we use the Bible with confidence (and with that term, I include the concept of “integrity”)—if indeed it is read at all—in the new world whose outlines are glimpsed in the realities we already experience? The question is simple enough but radical uncertainty is introduced by the final few words: “in the new world whose outlines are glimpsed in the realities we already experience.” This session will therefore focus on the question of how the Bible will be situated in the new era of human experience that lies ahead.

What kind of world?

We begin with a brief sketch of what the present and immediate future looks like. That will provide a context for a consideration of the kinds of churches likely to be found in our kind of world over the next several decades, and how the Bible might have a future in that scenario.

One underlying dynamic that needs to be acknowledged and integrated into our discussion is the increasing gap between the contemporary human experience and the ways in which humans understood themselves in the past. That gap is obvious for the

cultures and societies of antiquity in which the Bible was formed, but it is also true for the modern period (which began around 1500 CE in western Europe). It is not just that 500 BCE was a long time ago. Even 1950 CE is a long time ago relative to the ways in which we now experience life.

As we contemplate what life is going to be like in the next 50 years or so, a number of themes seem worth noting. Each of these themes involves a significant shift away from the cultural assumptions and shared wisdom of earlier times when the Bible was both created and received as sacred text. We teeter on the edge of change unimaginable by any previous generation.

A *new cosmology* seems likely to be one of the principal hallmarks of the new era into which we have already moved. We have a new sense of the vast size of the universe and of the immense time scale for its coming to be and its projected end. The meticulous calculations of Bishop Ussher have lost all credibility. Creation was not an act by a supernatural deity a mere 85 lifetimes ago, but a complex natural process extending over billions of years. A new cosmology has implications for the future of the Bible, and that may explain some of the fierce opposition by conservatives of various kinds to the new insights that are arising from the sciences.

Related to the new cosmology is a *new anthropology*. The story that tells us “where we came from” is no longer the narrative of Genesis that place humankind at the pinnacle of creation. Rather, we find ourselves deeply embedded in a web of life that extends from humans to microbes. We have some appreciation of the forces that shape us as people and the limited constraints within which our treasured autonomy functions. We look to the stars, but not for gods to protect us; rather we gaze in awe at the immense reality in which we participate. We are puzzled by our self-consciousness and wonder whether life such as ours evolved only on this planet, and what forms of life may have evolved in other parts of the universe.

As the implications of the new cosmology and its related new anthropology take hold on the human imagination, a *new society* is taking shape. The emergence of the so-called new world order is complex and contested, but the historical forces at work will—in

time—sweep aside the resistance offered by vested interests and ignorance. Sadly, religion, and especially conservative expressions of Christianity, often seem to be the refuge of those opposed to the new ways of living together as global citizens. Despite the obstacles, mistakes and setbacks, it is clear that civil, economic and political opportunities are going to be enjoyed by the poor, by women, by gay and lesbian persons, without respect to ethnicity or religion. This is not to suggest that a social utopia is about to dawn, or that poverty is about to be made history. Nor do I wish to ignore the threats of climate change, rising sea levels and environmental destruction as a result of reckless industrialization and a gross failure to develop green practices. However, an international humanitarian consensus that acknowledges these problems and seeks to redress them is emerging and will transform the ways we live together. Lloyd Geering has even argued that the post-Christian secular age into which we are moving is both the legacy and the fulfillment of Christianity.ⁱ That is a challenging prospect for Christians to contemplate and naturally has implications for the future of the Bible in western culture.

New technologies will be a feature of the new society, and their impact is already very evident as technological innovation seems to proceed at a speed that makes all but the “digital natives”ⁱⁱ feel uncomfortable. At the risk of a poor pun, it is virtually impossible to predict what the next generation of technologies will be and how they will impact on our lives. However, we get some sense of what lies ahead by reflecting on the impact of the internet and the popularity of social networking sites. As the smart phone puts the internet in our hand, some of the seemingly fanciful ideas we watched in the sci-fi movies are turning into everyday reality. These technologies also shape the new society that is emerging and threaten to destabilize authoritarian societies that now struggle to block citizens’ access to tools that allow them to share information, advocate for change and organize for direct action.

A new apocalypse is coming into view as the new society takes shape. We no longer live in fear of judgment day, when the good will be ushered into heaven and the damned consigned to the fires of hell. The threat that hangs over our society, at least as reflected in the dystopia films of the post-apocalypse genre, is either a massive environmental crisis or a collapse of the technological infrastructure on which our lives increasingly

rely. In both cases it is human agency that typically triggers the catastrophe, including the horror of nuclear warfare.

A *new spirituality* is taking hold of the human imagination as people find traditional religions of little value in the face of these profound changes in the way we experience life. As science eliminates the claim of religion to possess some form of leverage over those events once described as “acts of God” in the schedule to insurance policies, and as the biomedical sciences make progress in areas such as fertility, disease and ageing, the God of the gaps has been consigned to the dustbin of history. That kind of God is indeed dead, although there are traditionalist pockets in contemporary society that hanker for his resurrection. The new spirituality is less about guilt, and more about affirming the value of life. While deeply personal, it is less concerned about the salvation of an individual soul and more interested in the web of life. Tree-hugging replaces genuflection. Life is to be lived as deeply and completely as possible here and now, rather than spent in preparation for a future life in a world beyond the grave. Wisdom from many different sources is appreciated and valued, and no particular religion is given a monopoly on the truth. While meditation can still be a school of wisdom, the fruits of a holy life are to be demonstrated in compassionate action, ecological stewardship and a commitment to justice for those in need. No doubt the remnants of religious fundamentalism will linger long past their expiry date. They may even retain sufficient power to cause great suffering through religious conflict and communal strife. But they no longer hold sway over the hearts of humanity, and their power to explain the human experience is broken.

In the strange new land of the future, the Bible will not be the only meta-narrative that gives meaning to people, nor will it be the dominant story in western culture. Rather, the Bible will be reduced to one sacred text alongside others. It may even become a counter-cultural text that serves as a source of hope and meaning for a shrinking minority of people who still identify as Christians.

What kind of churches?

While the broad trends of the emerging global village can be traced with some confidence, it is more difficult to trace the outlines of the future church. We can be confident, however, that we shall be dealing with a plurality of churches engaged in a more or less open contest with one another. To some extent this will be a case of back to the future, since this seems to have been how it was in the beginning of Christianity.

Increased rigidity will doubtless be the hallmark of groups such as the Roman Catholic church and the churches of the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Overall numbers will decline as a percentage of the population, and participation rates will collapse among the younger adherents. The conservative clergy who hold power in these churches will tighten the theological controls in a vain quest for stability, rather than trusting their own minority traditions that value openness and innovation.

Fragmentation and numerical decline will presumably be the fate of those churches, such as the Anglican Communion, that sought to find a middle way between the past and the future. As an Anglican myself, I foresee this outcome with sadness, but I do not think the liberal churches that genuinely value the great intellectual tradition can sell our souls to the theological thought police. A lack of vision—and perhaps a fear of losing property through civil cases brought by traditionalists—has held us back from engaging in the root and branch reforms that were needed for our church to refashion itself to serve as an effective instrument of hope in the future that is almost upon us. After decades of debate over the ordination of women and the human dignity of gay persons, we have little credibility in the eyes of the citizens. Anglicans and liberal Protestants have much to celebrate from the past, but little to anticipate in the future.

Rising confidence (if that is possible to imagine) and great influence will be enjoyed by the conservative Evangelical expressions of Christianity, and especially the Pentecostal churches in their various guises. The foundations for this have been laid by the expansion of church-sponsored colleges offering academic programs in the Arts, Business, Education and Theology. In some cases, these institutions have also been accredited to offer graduate programs and research higher degrees. In Australia, a majority of students

enrolled for academic courses in theology and religion are to be found in such colleges. These institutions aim to protect their students from the secular values of mainstream universities and especially from critical religion scholarship. While this may equate to little more than collective whistling in the dark as the influence of Christianity inevitably declines during the twenty-first century, conservative Christians are in an expansionist mood. I suspect we are destined to experience a new dark age as a defensive Christianity turns its back on engagement with the intellectual tradition and withdraws into a pious enclave.

Christian progressives face an especially challenging environment. Most likely there will not be a particular denomination that will provide a home for progressive Christians, but they will continue to be found in small groups that enjoy different degrees of affiliation with mainstream churches.ⁱⁱⁱ The Christian progressives will most likely constitute a movement within and beyond the formal boundaries of the churches, rather than a formal corporation with leaders, property and constitution. The key features will be the grassroots nature of the movement, its activist agenda, its local focus and its dispersed network of participants. These, of course, are classic features of social networking in the digital era. It is to be expected that local gatherings in home groups and regional chapters will be supplemented by the sharing of information and resources online. This is the sector of Christianity that will engage most deeply with the emerging global society, and it may prove to be a laboratory for the future of a Christian faith that connects with the pulse of a world that will ever remain a hostile environment for the theological dinosaurs whose worlds are fast vanishing.

What kind of Bible?

If these broad brush strokes represent the nature of the future into which we are moving, what can we say about the future of the Bible? The first thing to note is that the transmission of the religious tradition encapsulated in the Bible has always been shaped by technological developments in various periods of history.

Technology and the Bible

In the beginning was the word—oral tradition, that is; not written texts. Even if we imagine Moses to have been a historical figure who played at least some role in the formation of the traditions now found in the Pentateuch, he did not have a team of ox drawn carts filled with stone tablets covered in Egyptian hieroglyphics. The stories of Israel's origins were transmitted orally for many generations; only making the transition to literature at a relatively late stage in the process.

Happily for the OT tradition, the origins of the alphabet seem to have happened in Canaan. That much-maligned pagan culture developed a simple and flexible writing system that made the Bible possible: no alphabet, no Bible. With the invention of the alphabet, literacy rates in Palestine were higher than in older cultures with their more complex writing systems that restricted literary activity to a scribal elite. A Judean farmer could keep simple records on pottery shards; the ancient equivalent of notes scribbled on the back of used envelopes.

Sometime during the first one hundred years after Easter, Christians took the lead in making the transition from scrolls to the codex. This was a cheap and convenient form of recording and sharing biblical texts, and Christians were among the early adopters of the new technology. For convenience and to reduce costs, specialist codices were developed for particular contexts. Lectionaries were created, and have come to be a major source of data for reconstructing the history of the biblical manuscripts.

After hundreds of years of painstaking effort, hand copying of the Bible was replaced by the mechanical printer. Once the typesetting was completed, numerous copies could be made with significant cost savings. The cost of Bibles plummeted and every pious home could now afford their own copy of the Scriptures. For the first time, family Bible reading was a possibility. Until the printing press, only wealthy churches and monasteries could afford to have a copy of the Bible.

More recently new technologies have seen the Bible made available to people in ways that Paul could never have imagined. Radio allowed the text to be broadcast over great

distances, accompanied by commentary and sermons. Film allowed the Bible to move from script to screen; and also provided ghastly movies to fill gaps in the programs of television stations on Good Friday. People who may never read the Bible now had an opportunity to become familiar with the biblical narrative on the silver screen or the TV set in the lounge room.

The invention of the personal computer was to release a whole new set of possibilities. While scholars appreciated the power of the computer for analyzing syntactical features in the biblical writings, a wider community of Bible readers began to appreciate Bible software. With the transition to the internet and the wonder of hyperlinks, the computerized Bible offered new possibilities for scholars and serious Bible readers alike.

The potential of information technology was not yet exhausted. The development of WiFi technologies allowed for access to the internet without being tied to a desktop computer. The digital age arrived. Social networking became a major phenomenon, with user-generated content and the emergence of an “anywhere, any time” culture. With iPhones and the iPad becoming mainstream products, we can anticipate new developments in the ways that people use the Bible.

Assuming they still choose to do so, how will the digital natives actually encounter the Bible? It will not be as a serious paper volume, bound in black leather and with gold edging to the sheets. It will not even be as a cheap paperback edition distributed in bulk by Evangelical activists. Eventually even the Gideon’s Bible in the bedside drawer of the motel room is likely to be replaced by a digital file for viewing on guests’ iPads.

We are already well into the technological transition that will make paper Bibles as rare as handwritten scrolls. They will still exist, but increasingly will be found only in libraries, museums and—of course—traditional church buildings. However, just as many readers already take a printed version of the Bible passage to read from when standing at the lectern, in the near future people will ignore the large volume laid open on the lectern and read from a digital text.

For everyday use, the digital edition on my iPhone, laptop or iPad is already the way I most often read the Bible. As a digital immigrant, I am more likely to look up a passage in my *Accordance Bible* software than to reach for the large study Bible just a few inches from my computer. The digital natives may not even own a paper edition of the Bible.

The Canon

My hunch is that the formal canon of the Bible will not change. There will be no new books added to the Bible, and none will be deleted. The scope of the literary texts people may access while reading the Bible will perhaps increase, since digital publication makes it easier to consult other ancient writings that lie outside the canon but are relevant to our reading of the Scriptures.

As always, it is not their inclusion in the Bible but their selection for a lectionary that causes the biblical texts to be encountered. In the liturgical traditions of the church, selected passages will continue to be designated for particular Sundays and other festivals. In the ascendant Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions, Bible reading plans will guide people through portions of the Bible, or even through the whole Bible (excluding the Apocrypha) from Genesis to Revelation. In progressive circles, traditional lectionaries will be supplemented by readings from other sacred texts as well as non-canonical writings from the Christian past.^{iv}

While the explicit focus of Evangelical and Pentecostal communities will be on reading the Bible and making it central to personal piety, the Scriptures will be supplemented by a vast library of biographical writing, commentaries, devotional texts, dictionaries, and manuals for success in marriage, parenting, etc. We get a glimpse of this in the business model of *Logos Bible Software*, which boasts of more than 9,000 “electronic Bible study resources.”^v A scan of their top ten most popular downloads indicates an interest in devotional and practical topics, including very dated material that has little relevance to the dynamics of life in the twenty-first century. These materials constitute the *de facto* canon of sacred texts that shape the mindset of Evangelicals and Pentecostals.

Biblical Authority

There will be no explicit change in the authority attributed to the Bible in various expressions of Christianity. The dominant Evangelical and Pentecostal churches will continue to claim that God's direct involvement in the Bible makes it inerrant, infallible and the ultimate authority for Christian belief and practice. In these circles the principal spiritual discipline will be reading the Bible each day and reflecting on what God has to say to the reader through that portion of Scripture. Traditional Christians and Christian progressives will also continue their own practices of reading the Bible, but will nuance the authority attributed to Scripture in both explicit and implicit ways. Roman Catholics will adhere to the hermeneutical matrix that requires the Bible to be read in the light of Tradition, with a special role for the teaching authority (*magisterium*) of the church. Anglicans will continue to assert the importance of Reason and Experience alongside Scripture and Tradition. In progressive circles, any authority enjoyed by the Bible will derive from its perceived spiritual value as a Christian sacred text; not simply as a result of its canonical status. In these circles it is not significant that "the Bible says ..." this or that, but rather that new insights emerge as we engage with Scripture in the light of our experience.

Participation in Bible reading

We have already observed how technological and theological developments will impact the ways in which people access the Bible. The most significant change is going to be the shift from paper publication to digital editions. This will do much more than influence how we access the biblical content. It will also affect the relationship between church communities and the Bible, with the churches losing any residual spiritual property rights they may once had over the Bible.

No longer will readers check for the imprimatur of their church authorities before buying the book or taking it from the library. Few of the digital editions will be authenticated by

traditional religious authorities, but code phrases like “New International” will indicate to insiders the theological perspective of particular authors or publishers. Digital Bibles can already be downloaded from iTunes, and the internet is awash with sites offering resources for biblical studies.

Increasingly there will be options for people to access “rich” versions of the Bible, with embedded links to supplementary resources (chronological charts, glossaries, maps, images, etc). Subscription Bible reading plans will provide daily posts with excerpts from the Bible, thoughts for the day, and other similar services. Beyond the text itself there will be online communities that allow readers to share their insights, ask questions and contribute to the social construction of knowledge around the Bible. The *YouVersion* project^{vi} is a particularly good example of this trend and will be the subject of the final cameo. This development suggests a model of church as “Bible-user community.” This definition is highly compatible with Evangelical and Pentecostal understandings of faith, but is less likely to sit well with traditional and progressive expressions of Christianity.

Cultural Impact

Despite the explosion of Bible technologies, the Bible is likely to have a diminishing role in the larger culture of the third millennium. Unless there is a global revival of interest in Christianity, such as the Evangelicals and Pentecostals seek, the historical trends suggest we are in a period of sustained decline for Christianity—and its Bible. In some parts of the world we already see the post-Christian era well established, while in other places there has never really been a Christian era. Even in societies where the Christian tradition has been dominant, levels of biblical literacy are at historically low levels. With less attention to the Bible in educational curricula, and decreased participation in church activities, people simply have fewer opportunities to know the biblical story. This trend will continue, with the result that allusions to shared biblical knowledge will vanish from public discourse and the Bible’s cultural impact will greatly diminish.

Access, Justice and Subversion

There is no denying the positive consequences for the Bible of technological advances, from the printing press to the internet. However, the move from print to radio and more recently to digital media also poses questions about access, equity, opportunity and privilege. These new technologies are overwhelmingly the products of those societies that enjoy advanced economic and social development. They are not so easily accessed by people in third world countries, or those from the less privileged classes of first world societies. The ancient biblical question, “how are they to hear without someone to proclaim ...?” (Rom 10:14c), takes on a fresh urgency for those without convenient and low-cost access to digital technologies.

At present it seems that those most interested in developing digital biblical services typically come from the most conservative elements of Christianity. Just as the churches with the most emphasis on relevance to the contemporary audience often promote a dated and irrelevant version of Christianity, so the digital evangelists tend to be deeply hostile to the core values of the digital age. The perspective of critical religion scholarship is scarcely to be found among the burgeoning array of religious web sites and internet services. It is rare to find any interest in social justice or climate change. Where are the subversive voices of the progressive Christians to be heard amongst the internet chatter?

Cameo: The *YouVersion* Project

YouVersion is a highly developed and impressively implemented example of Web 2.0 tools being brought together to create a unique cyber experience. The project is a ministry of LifeChurch.tv, a US-based Evangelical church that was formed in 1996 and is affiliated with the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC). The LifeChurch.tv site describes the ECC as a multi-ethnic denomination founded in 1885 by Swedish immigrants to North America. While adhering to beliefs that are considered to be “the clear teaching of the Word of God,” the ECC allows individual members to hold different opinions “on theological issues that are not clearly presented in Scripture.”^{vii}

From its beginnings in 1996, LifeChurch.tv has grown into a multi-location church. It launched the beta version of *YouVersion* in October 2007. While development of the site is continuing, it represents a mature example of deliberate exploitation of Web 2.0 technologies to create and sustain a distinctive Christian ministry. One of the features that impresses me is the theological openness of the project. While the beliefs of LifeChurch.tv are clearly stated, there is no requirement for users to adhere to any particular set of beliefs. Users establishing an account undertake to abide by the terms of service, but there is nothing explicitly religious about these conditions. The project already reports more than four million downloads of its applications for mobile phones, and has many million more members.

The site provides a searchable online Bible, available in multiple translations—all of them clearly from a Protestant and Evangelical perspective. Users can bookmark the text and return to the same spot when they next check in. Verses can be tagged, in a large scale project to create a thematic index to the Bible. This is new knowledge being socially generated and made available to others, even if they are not subscribers to the service. A private journal allows users to record their own thoughts and insights as they read the Bible; effectively guiding people in the practice of spiritual journaling. To protect privacy these entries cannot be shared with other users, although a member could choose to copy and paste the content into another communication.

One of the most interesting aspects of the project is the capacity for members to contribute comments relating to any verse or series of verses. These contributions may be in a number of forms: video, audio, images, text and links. The contributions created in this way are available to anyone else accessing the same verses. Several dozen such contributions may be published on any given day, and that will no doubt increase as the number of subscribers grows and as their familiarity with the tools improves. These contributions by members draw on the capacity of the web to harness the energies and insights of multiple users to create something new; something greater than the sum of its parts.

The project also offers reading plans; with Scripture portions delivered to your handheld device each day. Churches and other organizations can establish groups with many of the features found in a service such as *Facebook*. Users can also link to live events, with access to the Bible on the mobile phones during a church service or other religious event. The site indicates that users can answer questions, respond to polls, request prayer, take notes and even make a financial contribution to their congregation through the *YouVersionLive* service.

This project impresses with its application of technology to the dynamics of Evangelical Christianity. However, it also has the weaknesses we might expect in such a project. The definition of Christianity is narrowly Evangelical, as indicated in the statement of beliefs from LifeChurch.tv and the selection of Bible versions offered to users. There is no evident interest in critical religion scholarship. If my random sampling of contributions is a valid indication, participants tend towards traditional fundamentalism. They tend to be creationists, whose literal interpretations of the Bible involves the acceptance of supernatural miracles, and they demonstrate a strong expectation of an imminent “second coming” typical of dispensationalist premillennialism. The *YouVersion* tag cloud indicates no interest in climate change, no concern for refugees, no passion for justice, and no engagement with gender issues. The good news is mostly for comfortable first world citizens with high speed access to the web, and it involves personal concerns such as identity, guilt and meaning.

While drafting this presentation I set up a progressive Christianity group within the *YouVersion* web site and invited a few progressive friends to join me there. We formed a kind of colony of differently-minded Christians on the foreign terrain of this dynamic cyber community. Being conscious of our status as resident aliens in someone else’s space, from the outset I encouraged the participants to be sensitive. There were to be no provocative engagements with the mostly conservative natives who are indigenous to this space. The colonists were to conduct ourselves with courtesy and respect. It remains to be seen what will come of this project, but it serves as a reminder that religious progressives tend not to be good at evangelism. While we may not wish to be good at certain kinds of evangelism, and some people might question whether we have any good news to share, it

seems to me that there is value in representing as well as we can those beliefs, concerns and practices that we find to be engaging and life-affirming. Rather than hiding our lamps under baskets, perhaps we should be establishing colonies of the *basileia* on the cyber hilltops as exemplars of an alternative way of responding to the message of Jesus?

A progressive reclaiming of the Bible

It is too easy to recite the problems posed by the Bible, but we can also appreciate the Bible as a sacramental encounter with the Sacred. Rather than cede the Bible to Fundamentalists and their conservative cousins among the Evangelicals and Pentecostals, I want to reclaim the Bible as a sacred text for religious progressives; and especially for progressive Christians. So how might a progressive approach to the Bible be described?

In the first place, a progressive approach to the Bible will be an “eyes-wide-open” process. The Bible will be accepted in its historical reality, with no attempt to disguise its human foibles or its complex textual history. These Scriptures are surely as “red in tooth and claw” as the proverb would have us imagine the natural order to be, with sacred violence and systemic prejudice embedded deep within its literary world. Yet these same writings imagine a world where violence will cease and in which love prevails. With no personal need to defend the Bible as the inerrant product of an infallible God, the religious progressive can accept the Bible—warts and all—as a mixture of diverse traditions, with varying degrees of relevance to our contemporary situation.

The kind of reading of the Bible that I find helpful is sensitive to the complex worlds behind the Bible. Without elevating the biblical past to timeless stereotypes that later generations should emulate, the Scriptures can serve as a treasury of spiritual wisdom from which the scribe trained for God’s *basileia* will draw as the circumstances of the time seem to require. Some knowledge of the past may assist in our reading of the Bible, but our reading of the Bible does not commit us to act as they did in the past.

Progressive readers of the Bible can “profit with delight”^{viii} from their encounter with these sacred texts. The stories, letters and poems—even the legislative sections that may reflect prophetic imagination as much as ancient practice—can be enjoyed on their own terms. Alongside this delight in the literary art of the Bible, a more serious purpose can be served as perspectives and worldviews are shaped and consolidated through the reader’s exposure to the Bible. Whether Abraham ever existed and, if he did, whether he responded to God’s call on his life in the way depicted in Genesis, the story of Abraham has been a lesson in holy living for generations of Jews, Christians and Muslims. That Abraham means very different things to the adherents of these three faiths has no relevance for the person who profits with delight as they read the ancient narrative.

Perhaps more than any other category of reader, the religious progressive reads the Bible with one eye on the questions that arise from her own experience of life. This kind of reader is seeking practical wisdom for life in the here and now, not reassurance about life in the hereafter. This may require reading against the grain of the biblical text, and posing questions never in the mind of the ancient authors. Rather than immersing herself in the literary world of the Bible, the progressive reader will demand that the Bible speaks to her world.

A progressive reading of the Bible will be profoundly connected to contemporary Christian praxis.

One of its hallmarks will be an *openness to the sacred*, including insights from other religious traditions. Scripture will be valued as one of the ways in which spiritual wisdom can be accessed, but the wisdom gained through an engagement with the Bible will not have a priority over wisdom from other traditions. The Bible has a unique role to play as the distinctive and canonical text for Christians, but the progressive reader of the Bible will also be alert to wisdom from other texts. In the process new symbols and fresh rituals may emerge, sometimes drawing on biblical sources and sometimes drawing on other religious traditions.

Matching this openness to the Sacred will be a *world-affirming outlook*. Religious progressives have a distinctive interest in the welfare of the world in which we live and of

which we are an integral part. Rather than delighting in prognostications about the end of the world, progressive readers of the Bible will be looking for wisdom that assists us to live gracefully in the world. The integrity of creation is a core value for religious progressives, and life before death is to be lived as fully as possible— not seen as a prelude to life after death. The greatest of all mysteries is that our universe exists rather than nothing being here at all. As self-conscious beings within the web of life, we draw on Scripture to help us serve creation better; not simply to secure our destiny after death.

Progressive readers of the Bible will seek to form and sustain *inclusive communities* that model the biblical themes of *basileia* and covenant. A profound sense of covenantal obligation will be nurtured by our engagement with Scripture. We belong to one another. Together we are the body of Christ. God’s call on our best instincts makes us a chosen people, a light to the nations. At the heart of our covenantal community is the ancient dream of a *basileia* in which the least are first, the mighty are cast down, the hungry are fed and the captives are released. That vision finds classic expression in the life and death of Jesus, but it is also to be found throughout the Bible.

With this openness to the sacred, this affirmation of the physical world and this base in inclusive communities, religious progressives will find that our reading of the Bible calls us to be agents of *basileia; activists for justice and reconciliation*. Inspired by the prayer attributed to Jesus (“your *basileia* come ...”), we will abandon attempts to convert others to share our beliefs and conform with our practices. Instead we shall willingly spend our lives in service to others, in the cause of peace, and for the integrity of creation. Lives spent in such a manner are never wasted, and the world may indeed be a better place for our having been here. When quizzed about our response to Christ in his hour of need,^{ix} we will be able to confirm that we have welcomed the stranger, visited the prisoner, clothed the naked, and cared for the sick. We may not have realized it at the time, but in doing so we were indeed serving Christ and we offered God the best kind of worship.

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ⁱ Lloyd Geering, *The World to Come: From Christian Past to Global Future* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 1999).

ⁱⁱ The term was coined by Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001). Prensky has continued to research and write on the educational implications of digital technologies, see: <http://www.marcprensky.com/writing/>. See also the interdisciplinary "Digital Natives" project of the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University and the Research Center for Information Law at the University of St. Gallen: <http://www.digitalnative.org>. John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2008) is also essential reading for anyone wanting to understand these issues.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a recent study of grassroots progressive Christianity, see Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home. Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*. (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2006).

^{iv} For an example of a lectionary that makes use of early Christian texts from outside the Bible see John Beverley Butcher, *An Uncommon Lectionary* (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2002).

^v See <http://www.logos.com/about>

^{vi} <http://www.youversion.com/>

^{vii} See <http://www.lifechurch.tv/believe>

^{viii} This phrase comes from Richard I Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1987). Pervo derives the phrase from Horace, *Ars poetica*.

^{ix} See Matt 25:31–46.