

What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? Points for Reflection

Chapter 1 What Progressive Christianity is not

- Liberal Christians held that the Bible provides the material relevant for all ages, and calls each generation to reshape those biblical insights and convictions for its time, based on reason and experience.
- Liberal Christianity too often became little more than the sanctimonious expression of common cultural beliefs and values.
- Early “evangelicals” coupled personal holiness with the pursuit of justice. Their leaders condemned slavery, challenged the inequities of capitalism, and championed the rights of women.
- Evangelicalism no longer preached “social holiness.” Now its focus was exclusively on abstinence from “sins of the flesh.”
- The Princeton “fundamentalists” gradually concluded that “inerrancy” applied only to the first (now lost) manuscripts of the Bible.
- Eventually the fundamentalist movement let a dogma about the Bible obscure the truth about the Bible and thus, too, the nature of biblical truth and biblical authority.
- A progressive Christian movement, if it is to be more than a fad, must be resolutely theological as well as active in the pursuit of justice.
- To pretend that our past histories are absolute or inerrant is a mistake, but to ignore the power of our fallible traditions to transform the present is also a grave mistake.

Chapter 2 Bible: Negotiating the Heritage

- The claim that tradition can be protected from error is false and dangerous. The belief that the Bible is free from error is no less so. Both lead to arrogance and bigotry, and both contradict the facts.
- There are not only conflicting factual accounts in the Bible, there are also different and sometimes conflicting theologies, even with respect to Jesus and salvation.
- How can a Scripture containing diverse theological views be authoritative? Add to this the morally despicable views in the Bible and the question is forcefully underscored. What does biblical “authority” mean?
- The dominant concept of “authority” in the New Testament has to do with the right and power to act creatively. Biblical authority does not command conformity, it commends freedom. It is formative, not normative—it is empowerment.
- The diversity of viewpoints in the Bible does not undermine its authority. It is a means through which the Bible teaches us to think for ourselves as Christians in new circumstances.
- Among the voices of Scripture are those that critique our individualistic notions of salvation, condemn our indifference to the rest of creation, challenge our “free” market assumptions, and denounce our religious and national exceptionalism.
- We are empowered by the diverse voices of Scripture to decide for ourselves how we shall respond to their sharp challenges, but as Christians we cannot avoid wrestling with them.

- The Bible is our authority because in our engagement with it we are authored as Christians. It grants us freedom, guides our thinking, challenges our conclusions, and empowers us to act responsibly as citizens of the world.

Chapter 3 Christ: Overturning the Categories

- The New Testament is an interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth by those whose lives he had transformed. Their interpretations varied because Jesus was experienced differently by different followers.
- The diversity of interpretations of Jesus is not a problem. It is a reservoir to enrich, provoke, and challenge our own interpretations of Jesus. We should maintain this reservoir of manifold understandings.
- Each of the varied interpretations of Jesus calls us to be no less specific today about the meaning of Jesus for our time. For this, quite surprisingly, we might find guidance in the creeds of the ancient councils.
- The claim of Nicea, however arcane it sounds, was extraordinary— it said that the God made present in Jesus is the “truly true” God, not some lesser form of divinity.
- The claim of Constantinople was as audacious as that of Nicea. It insisted that the true God was at one with true humanity, not some unusual or extraordinary humanity.
- The councils at Ephesus and Chalcedon were no less bold. They said the oneness of true divinity and true humanity was not partial; it was full and complete. This is the doctrine of divine “incarnation.”
- The councils insisted on the full union of full divinity with full humanity in order to claim that in Jesus full salvation is possible. Underlying their claim was the insight that God saves by becoming one with that which God seeks to save.
- St. Paul claims that salvation is not only for “we ourselves,” but also for the “entire created order” (Romans 8). If God becomes one with what God seeks to save, then God is incarnate in the entire creation—fully God, fully world, fully one.
- In Jesus Christ we believe we see intimations of a God who is incarnate—a God who is with us fully, and fully, too, with all creation.

Chapter 4 God Exploring the Depths

- Many Christians view God as the cosmic monarch whose will controls all things. There may be temporary comfort in this view of God, but there is also puzzlement and great moral distress.
- Belief in a monarchical God emerged in the ancient world when powerful rulers rose up to unify people, impose order, and provide protection.
- There is another understanding of God. It did not fit well with the growth of empires, but it persisted nevertheless. It is the view of God as incarnate.
- A manger, a prophet, a cross—these are not the symbols of a cosmic monarch. They symbolize a patiently working God, one who inspires, undergirds, and heals by being present. This is the incarnate God made known to us in Jesus Christ.
- Progressive Christian understandings of God begin with the conviction that love is God's fundamental character. Love is vulnerable, and the vulnerability of God leads us rapidly away from the concept of a cosmic monarch.

- The incarnate God is experienced as guide, presence, and mystery—as the call to move toward more wholesome ways of being, as the immediacy felt in communion with others, as the sustaining confidence in a power that works for good in all things.
- Awareness of God’s mystery does not hamper the quest for truth; it tempers that quest with modesty. It does not enervate the search for justice, it tempers it with humility. It does not weaken our capacity to hope, it fills us with patient expectation.
- The “absolutizing” of our religious beliefs is a sign of fear, and a corruption of faith. All too often, Christians, under the spell of a monarchical deity, illustrate that corruption vividly and destructively. Christian faith, which ought to banish fear, becomes its mask.

Chapter 5 Humanity: Continuing the Creation

- More often than not, what Christians have to say about Jesus, God, salvation, and the church get a hearing among others because of what Christianity has to say about being human.
- According to Genesis 2, God creates the world but humans are to arrange it, to order it. We are not called to conform to an already established plan. Our task is to assist in continuing the creation, as co-creators with God.
- Genesis says humans are given “dominion” over the earth. Dominion is not a special entitlement or privilege; it is a vocation of service undertaken for the good of the whole creation.
- What are our guides in deciding how to care for the creation? Jesus named two interconnected guides—to love God, and to love others as we love ourselves.
- Who is the neighbor? The neighbor, understood biblically, is the one or ones in need—individuals and groups, friends and strangers, allies and enemies, and the earth itself.
- Christianity does not offer rules applicable for all times. Our abiding guide is the two great commandments. The validity of other teachings depends on the extent to which they fulfill these commandments in specific contexts.
- Diversity is essential to a healthy church and a healthy human community. It is a God-given check on the presumption of perfection in every human community, a means whereby we critique and enrich each other.
- No one way of life, culture, or religion is perfect. God’s gracious presence everywhere is refracted through fallible human beings. For this reason we must not only honor each tradition, we must also look at it critically.

Chapter 6 Sin: Failing and Hiding

- Modern discussions of sin have not been very useful. Sinitalk has been anti-world, anti-sex, anti-female, anti-pleasure, and opposed to equality and self-affirmation, just to mention a few of its drawbacks.
- In classical Christian theology, sin takes two forms, pride and sensuality. Already our hackles are raised! We are all supportive of pride, and why should anyone think sensuality is a sin?
- By “pride” the tradition meant excessive self-regard in relation to others, assuming for oneself more than that to which one is entitled. “Sensuality” meant the opposite failure, thinking of oneself less highly than one ought to think.
- Viewed in terms of the two great commandments, sin is loving too much, or loving too little, any part of the interconnected web of life, from God to all of those whom God loves and in whom God is incarnate.

- The more insightful Christian traditions ask, Why is our failure to love as we ought so persistent and pervasive? The answer it gives has to do with self-deception, hiding the truth from ourselves.
- Sin is not simply the failure to love properly. It is that failure accompanied by the pretense that we have loved as we should. We hide our failure, even from ourselves!
- The doctrine of “original sin” is not a denial of human goodness, and it is not about sex. It is about the layers of evil— racism, sexism, consumerism, egotism, etc.—structured into our existence. We begin our lives in the midst of these.
- Christian tradition “suspects” that we rather happily acquiesce to the evil structures in which we find ourselves. Our failings build into unjust and self-serving structures . . . and we find them to be quite comfortable!

Chapter 7 Salvation: Seeking and Finding

- Religions say that however good life may be, still something fundamental is “out of joint.” It may not be too simplistic to say that religion is about God, God is about salvation, and salvation is about the most basic form of health.
- If Christology is the clue to our concept of God, it is also the clue to the salvation that God makes possible. The God at home in the world saves the world through processes that are part and parcel of this world.
- Two biblical metaphors are instructive for an understanding of salvation. One is the idea of the “reign of God.” The other is the image of “eternal life.”
- The reign of God is fullness of health throughout the whole web of life. It is already breaking in upon us through the processes of nature, history, interpersonal relationships, and through our individual lives.
- Eternal life is the quality of a life that is lived in the belief that our world and our individual lives have been “assumed” into the life of God. It is living in the incarnate reality of God.
- In a nonliteral but disturbing sense, there is hell as well as heaven. Heaven is the permanence of our every achievement on behalf of love in the everlasting life of God. Hell is the permanence in God’s experience of our every failure to love.
- Christian talk of the “reign of God” and “eternal life” is fragmentary, intuitive, metaphorical. These are guides to the vision of an “entire created order” being set free from sin and more open to the love of the incarnate God.

Chapter 8 Church: Serving and being Served

- Beliefs and values are sustained most effectively in communal practices that mesh thinking and feeling. The long term power of a progressive Christian worldview will depend on being integrated into the affective life of communities.
- The image of the Church as the “people of God” is arrogant and more than a little triumphalistic—“Jews lost, Christians won, and now we are God’s chosen people.”
- The image of the Church as the “body of Christ” rightly suggests that the Church somehow “embodies” the event of Jesus Christ. But it might also tempt us to believe that the Church embodies a special virtue, “Christ-likeness.”
- The idea of the Church as the “community of the Spirit” testifies to the coming infilling of the Spirit of God. But if it is taken to mean that the Church already possesses that Spirit, it is disastrous.

- The Church as the “servant people” has unattractive connotations. Who wants to be a servant? But what about “service people” or “people who serve”?
- The Church is the community of those who seek to serve God’s healing work in the world, as that divine activity is understood through its ongoing interpretations of Jesus Christ.
- We should not claim too much for the Church, but neither should we hope for too little. The consequences of serving the God who “makes all things new” could quite unexpected and remarkable.

Epilogue Rightly Mixing Religion with Politics

- There are good reasons for urging that religion be kept out of politics. The only problem is that it is not possible. But not all “mixing” of religion and politics is equal.
- How can we properly advocate our point of view in a democratic society where that viewpoint is not shared by all? The secular humanist should face this question as seriously as should the Christian.
- My grandmother used to say, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” The ground is also level at the foot of the flag pole, or it should be.
- We need to hear the secular humanists’ stories of the Enlightenment and science, the Muslims’ stories of the Prophet, the Jews’ stories of the Torah, the evangelicals tell how Jesus changed them and pentecostals how the Spirit filled them.
- We do not disagree on everything, and our actual disagreements become exaggerated because we lose sight of what we share.”
- If politics is the art of compromise, compromise is art of acknowledging that we are human. It is a way of confessing that we are all creatures with partial perspectives.
- Our ways are not God’s ways, so a restriction on anyone’s freedom requires special justification, based on what is broadly affirmed to be absolutely necessary for the common good.
- Having differences is not a sign of failure. The struggles we have in the Church and the broader culture are part of the process of divine creation. In our differences we are together ordering and reordering the world.