

Progressive or Regressive Christianity?

It all began when Bishop John Shelby Spong concluded that the historic Christian faith was just too rigid, and it needed a make-over. Spong advocated a radical reappraisal of traditional Christianity for what is largely a secular human rights agenda. Over time the term '**Progressive Christianity**' *has* emerged and been adopted by many around the world and within the Uniting Church to describe what is said to be a relevant, creative approach towards new ways of understanding traditional Christian belief. (*According to the Wikipedia web site 'Progressive Christianity' is currently officially aligned with the Uniting Church in Australia*) The interesting irony however is that with all the focus being on a tolerant, trendy, relevant humanitarian agency, churches embracing the new ideology, including the Uniting Church, are now numbered among some of the fastest-declining churches in Australia.

The significance of the word 'progressive' in a sociological sense is rather deceptive in that it misrepresents and downplays the very gospel the church exists to proclaim. It implies and claims that the traditional Christian faith has served its purpose, it is now old fashioned, restrictive, irrelevant and even repressive.

While church halls are seen as facilities to serve the community and are ventures for everything from cake decorating, square dancing and yoga to art classes, the use of church facilities for specific Christian purposes seems to have been replaced with much-needed new income streams from property hire and fees.

In an attempt to be contemporary and to move beyond '*the faith once delivered to the saints*', a new updated version of Christianity (that can no longer really be called 'Christian') has emerged. By adding the adjective 'progressive' as a prefix to the word 'Christianity', it is hoped that the projected *make-over* will present a new image of a dynamic, relevant institution that has now come of age. The reality is that this development is neither 'new' or 'progressive'.

Battles over the faith have stretched over centuries so it should not surprise us that sincere people within the church with a low regard of the Bible as sacred revelation reject many crucial teachings of Christianity and consider themselves to be now liberating the church. This is seen as similar to the way that the early church liberated people from the bondage of ancient Judaism, and so today in a similar way it is done by reinventing or rejecting essential themes grounded in New Testament Christianity.

The sad thing is that many young people in the Uniting Church, rather than first responding to the challenge to accept Jesus Christ as Lord are attracted to social justice issues and to react against what are simply regarded as old-world prejudices and biases. They are also vulnerable because they rightly know that all Christians should have a heart of solidarity for those who are marginalised and outcast.

Others see progress as liberating the church from being mistakenly locked into thinking that all truth has been discovered. This means the ‘new progressives’ are intent on reshaping the inherited Christian gospel in a desperate attempt to relate to a post-modern world. While it is true, as the old hymn says, ‘*The Lord has yet more light and truth to break froth from his word,*’ instead of humbly seeking the aid of the Holy Spirit, the approach that parades itself as new and creative, in reality is more ‘regressive’ than ‘progressive.’ It is no more than old theological liberalism dressed up to appeal to human rationalism and activism. In the name of relevance, it is a return to ‘reason’ and passion as being the only guide in matters of religion. In other words, Progressive Christianity seeks to be practical and to reason away anything that is supernatural in the records of sacred history in order to appeal to the contemporary mindset.

The old liberalism dressed itself in denying the miraculous while the new garment in the form of Progressive Christianity parades itself with an overlay of being both enlightened and relevant to the 21st century. Os Guinness notes:

”After two hundred years of earnest dedication to reinventing the faith and church to being more relevant in the world, we are confronted by an embarrassing fact: Never have Christians pursued relevance more strenuously; never have Christians been more irrelevant.”

In his book “*The Gagging of God*”, D.A. Carson writes:

“Study after study has shown that pursuing relevance may achieve a certain instant ‘success’.”

Yet he states that such apparent success “... *is frequently the advance warning to bitter failure in the long run. A prime example would be many mainline churches that sought greater social impact and respectability but ended up being devoured by liberal theology and denying the gospel. ... As Paul wrote in Romans 12:2, each new era brings with it new temptations to ‘conform to the world’ and new opportunities to be ‘transformed by the renewing of your mind’ so that we can know God’s will for us in our time.*”

Middle Ground Denial.

Decision magazine from The Billy Graham Association points out that today the new liberalism under the progressive banner is gradually encroaching on more conservative churches amid a culture that paints Biblical values as oppressive and bigoted. (*Decision*, June 2019) However while church attendees may not be used to making new faith choices, it needs to be clear that a Christianity that simply reflects and conforms to secular cultural trends is a counterfeit gospel. In churches with an ageing membership many are still not used to having to distinguish between secular social trends and the core Christian gospel. Like it or not, today we are forced to respond to the political/social shifts of our time that appeal to an inclusiveness that leaves us with no option but to either affirm the lifestyle embodied in the LGBTQ movement or to affirm the unique revelation and teaching of Holy Scripture.

For many faithful people raised in the tradition of the Uniting Church these confronting issues of prevailing culture are just too emotional and tricky.

Bill Muehlenberg puts it rather bluntly:

‘The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ.’

With years of church attending but limited instruction in the core elements of the faith, when facing real social issues involving life or death or sexual ethics, it is just easier for many to seek **‘middle ground’**. For many it is easier not to rock the boat and to decide not to decide.

There is a certain naivete among some church attendees that suggests that the world’s values are neutral and harmless and that it’s more a matter of convenience and how one feels about the issues of the day. Muehlenberg suggests that some think of Christianity as a *vague idealistic aspiration of a simple consoling kind---* instead of a *‘tough, complex doctrine steeped in a drastic, uncompromising realism’*. In other words, it is not a matter of how issues like abortion on demand or homosexual practice sit with us, it is a matter of discerning how God’s world works best through the unique guide of Christian revelation.

To say ‘the world is changing so we must adapt’ is just a simplistic way of rebuking the traditional church for not keeping up with the world. Progressive Christianity and the Uniting Church is all about how the church must conform to the reality of this age. The Uniting Church has become a culture driven church where the consumer becomes all important instead of being led by Christ and his Word.

Instead of exposing a culture that is drifting from its Christian heritage there is a complete reversal by some within the church who charge those who respect biblical revelation as being hostile towards God and subversive to contemporary society. Ironically this was like the way early Christians were thought of by the established Roman Empire.

R.A. Mohler Jr. of Kentucky says:

“These are issues in which there is no middle ground. There is no middle ground between affirming and denying the bodily resurrection of Christ. There’s also no middle ground between defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman and saying it can be something else ... so Christians are going to have to answer with the full measure of conviction, or they’re just on a slower track than some others to denying the faith.”

Theological Liberalism.

From the very beginning Jesus warned the disciples about impostors and distortions in terms of the wolf who snatches and scatters the flock. He stressed the importance of obeying his teaching (John 10:23-24). From the outset the early Christians devoted themselves to the apostles teaching. (Acts 2:42). The church was exhorted to hold to sound teaching. Right doctrine was stressed and regarded as vital from the very beginning. (Galatians 1:6-9, 1 Timothy 6:3-5, 2 John 1:9-10). However, the church has always lived with heresy, apostasy and revisionists of some sort. In linking ‘Progressive Christianity’ with old liberalism Muehlenberg says:

“Heresy is always as old as the hills and so we have nothing new here. But as Peter cautioned, ‘Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion for someone to devour.’” (1 Peter 5:8)

Those promoting a progressive form of Christianity use Christian words and concepts with sincerity, but words are stripped of their rich biblical content. J. Gresham Machen in *Christianity and Liberalism* goes as far as saying:

‘despite the liberal use of traditional phraseology modern liberalism is not only a different religion from Christianity but belongs in a totally different class of religions.’

Well before the formation of the Uniting Church the traditions from which it arose were all greatly influenced by this sort of thinking. In fact, during the 19th and 20th century, liberal movements were mostly tailored towards the theologically-educated but in our time the appeal for revision comes from social change as much as it comes from radical theology. With this brand of faith still clearly impacting the church it is worth elaborating on how liberalism currently shapes the roots and direction of Uniting Church thinking.

Muehlenberg provides a brief overview.

“Springing from movements such as the German Enlightenment, human reason became the source of all truth as opposed to biblical revelation. Mankind, aided and abetted by science and rationality, became the authority of all things, not Scripture. Enlightenment naturalism replaced biblical supernaturalism. Thus, the Bible was criticised as being outdated and errant, and core doctrinal truths were downplayed or denied. And the miraculous—including the resurrection of Jesus— was strongly attacked.”

Today’s progressive Christianity basically runs on a similar watered-down agenda. Muehlenberg continues:

“The Bible is not (regarded as) a divine record of revelation, but a human testament of religion and Christian doctrine is not the God-given word which must create and control Christian experience ... Liberalism swept away entirely the gospel of the supernatural redemption of sinners by God’s sovereign grace. It reduced grace to nature, divine revelation to human revelation, faith in Christ to following His example, and receiving new life to turning over a new leaf; it turned supernatural Christianity into one more form of natural religion, a thin mixture of morals and mysticism.

Liberalism in the modern church represents a return to an un-Christian and sub-Christian form of the religious life. ... In the 1930s when H. Richard Niebuhr was lamenting the emptiness of liberal Protestant theology he nicely summed it up as something in which ‘a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a Cross.’” Despite having much in common with left wing politics, it has been said that progressive Christians focus on a theology that shuns certainty and celebrates a mystery that is essentially a different gospel.

Being Birthed in Liberalism

By the latter part of the 20th century and during my youth, liberalism was well entrenched in the Methodist Church. During three formative years in a Bible College, I explored and was bathed in the background and texts of scripture. My faith journey was marked by a sharp contrast between the riches of the revealed historic faith and an invading church liberalism that rationalised the biblical texts. While the process towards my ordination as a minister of religion took place during the exciting birth of the Uniting Church in 1977, I was left in no doubt I was entering a formal ecclesial institution that was also being chastened and reproved by the providential hand of God.

With the new Basis of Union playing down the final authority of the Bible and the Church's evangelical heritage, I understood the mixed bag in hand. There was all the potential of leaving past baggage behind and of embracing the birth of a new church but also the pain of a church being chastened by a recalcitrant liberalism. I was excited by the biblical concepts expressed in the new Basis of Union and of a church opened to new horizons. While I was about to become a professional clergyman, the concept of every member being equipped by the Spirit to be a minister was a radical concept that I embraced with enthusiasm. I made my contribution to the challenge and creatively participated in that period that forged the early unique identity of the new Australian born institution.

By 1986 Rev John Harrison, in his book fittingly described the first ten years of the Uniting Church as a 'baptism of fire', a tumultuous time. With the passing of time, as someone of evangelical persuasion serving in a largely liberal church, I ministered in a context marked by ecclesial schizophrenia, experiencing both the rich benefits and the painful chastening of the hand of God within the Uniting Church. I have witnessed the potential of a new historic direction, but also a distinct turning towards a marginalising and hostile rejection of faithful members and colleagues who have embraced biblical faith values.

While there are those who passionately hold the view that the flexibility and numerical decline of the Uniting Church is actually evidence of its vitality and relevance in a changing world, I stand with those who pray for the renewal of an institution that excels in social dynamic but that has lost its first love, its core message and heart. I pray for a church with a passion to proclaim the good news of Jesus in a dying world and in a bold way that makes it distinct from the ever-increasing neo-pagan patterns of Australian Society.

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Also see: www.tedcurnowhistory.wordpress.com/