

## 7. OUT INTO THE WORLD: CHALLENGES FACING PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANS



**FOCUS:** There is a reformation afoot in Christianity – a re-visioning of the traditional understandings of Jesus, the virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and the Christian life as a whole. Long held ideas of divinity and of faith are changing and evolving to reflect 21<sup>st</sup> century thought and spirituality. Inspired by these fresh insights, progressive Christians can claim a distinctive voice by being in solidarity with the poor, countering the idolatry of wealth, practicing non-violence, and by seeking justice and inclusivity in a culture dominated by fear.

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### A PROGRESSIVE WORLD

*“Stagnation in thought or enterprise means death for Christianity as certainly as it does for any other vital movement. Stagnation, not change, is Christianity’s most deadly enemy, for this is a progressive world.”*

– Harry Emerson Fosdick (1922)

For medieval Europeans, it was understood that famines and plagues were sent by God as punishment for sin. Wars were divine earthly retribution. Feudalism, absolute monarchy, and slavery were ordained by God. In the not too distant past those seeking medical help submitted themselves to physicians who slit the skin to “bleed” patients and let the bad “humours” escape. The Bible was cited in turning women away from the polls and relegating African Americans to church balconies. The invention of the lightning rod was vehemently denounced by clergy as unwarranted interference with God’s use of lightning.

How the world has changed! Today, we take for granted wireless phones, ease of travel, education for our children, and miracles of medicine. Daily work and life are inconceivable without our computers, cars, comfortable homes, and instant communication. We’ve long-since left the idea of a flat earth and a three-tiered cosmos behind – and we wouldn’t dream of going back a thousand years. And yet many Christians today make it proof of their faith and a litmus test of their relationship with God that they embrace thousand-year-old religious ideas – and are proud of it.

In virtually every field of human endeavor, new discoveries are praised. Not so with religion. In no area of life other than religion is the denial of progress held up as a virtue. Somehow, the way it was in days-gone-by holds a mysterious authority over people. 21<sup>st</sup> century believers faithfully recite creeds reflecting arcane fourth century questions with little thought given to the political and theological terrain that spawned the creeds in the first place.

When the Bible is held up as a final authority trumping all other arguments, it is good to remember that the early church didn't have any Bible beyond Hebrew Scripture. It was a small gathering of people who sought a deeper understanding of and relationship with the divine. Across the Mediterranean, they gathered in small communities around the teachings and person of Jesus and thus developed the foundations of what we know as Christianity out of their own experience and insight.

What most people "know" about the Bible or understand about religion today has been cobbled together out of assumptions, insecurity, and long-held half-memories that have little basis in rational thought. That being the case, the resistance some people have to expanding their religious horizons can be fiercely irrational. New understandings are feared and discredited: "don't mess with what I've believed since I was a child!"

But even the Bible is full of examples of changing perceptions and descriptions of the divine/human relationship. Not only does the character of Jesus change from one Gospel to the next – sometimes profoundly – but the very nature of the Divine changes over the course of the Biblical story. While wandering in the desert, the Hebrews carried God around in a box. When that proved vulnerable to enemy attack, God was promoted to a throne in the sky above. The God known as Yahweh evolves from a tribal mountain God beating up on Pharaohs and passing down culture-bound rules into a universal God who shows grace to all – a God that Paul had difficulty convincing James, the brother of Jesus, and Peter himself to accept.

The whole of scripture is awash with change, change, and more change. Yet the fallacy that Christianity is a static belief system offering absolute truths for the true believer remains the overwhelmingly predominant message preached and believed by many in the West today.

## FROM LITERAL TO METAPHORICAL

*"By doubting, we come to inquire and by inquiry we arrive at truth."*

– Peter Abelard

Over the centuries, much of our perception of the Divine has been driven by fear, tribalism, and our own prejudices. The God many of us grew up worshipping simply does not exist. When theologian Paul Tillich popularized the phrase "the Ground of Being" to describe the Divine, he, too, was wrestling with a reality we all have to face: using clumsy human terms and metaphors to describe the indescribable. While many Christians continue to cling to an image of God as a coercive and wrathful Middle Eastern potentate, others are progressing toward a more metaphorical understanding of divinity.

Many people may be surprised that a non-literal and metaphorical understanding of scripture has been the norm in academic and mainline Protestant clergy circles for over a hundred years. But out of fear or ease of maintaining the status quo, many clergy are apologetic and simply not honest with their people about what they learned in seminary. Meanwhile, mainline Protestant churches have, as a whole, not fared well in the last forty years membership-wise. It can be argued that many of those who have left the church altogether are thinking people who can no longer weather the shallow and watered-down theology being preached so as to avoid controversy. One of the fastest growing segments of American demographics seems to be what Bishop Jack Spong calls “the church alumni/ae association.”

Meanwhile, conservative churches spoon-feed people rigid doctrines and unchanging “truths” and grow by leaps and bounds – mainly because people are desperately looking for just one place in this crazy life where things don’t change. Ironically, many of the primary doctrines of modern fundamentalist Christians, including the rapture, pre and post-millennial dispensationalism, and other apocalyptic schemes have their primary source in the relatively recent Scofield Reference Bible of 1909. A vast amount of intellectual energy is spent combing the scriptures for passages that support the notion that the Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself were in on this secret knowledge from the beginning of time.

To insist upon the unchanging nature of Christian doctrines and “the way we’ve always done it” will continue to drive thinking people – young and old alike – out of the church. They who refuse to put their minds and personal experience on hold will not be long for church as it exists today. Those who are not allowed to utilize the same faculties on their spiritual journey that they would use in every other part of life have too much integrity to be part of an institution that isn’t honest.

Yet there’s no denying that while we express it in many different ways, most people are “wired” to be spiritual. We long to find others who are wired in similar ways that we might advance our mutual understanding to the next level, perchance to change the world for the better.

But if we take seriously the words of Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” most people are living spiritually worthless lives – unexamined, unquestioned, and uninspired. Out of sheer laziness, they let themselves be led down the primrose path of this religious idea or that, all in the quest for the faith that will prop up their previously held prejudices and justify their own narrow-minded and parochial perspective on the world. At best, they find a group that in the finest of self-help traditions gets them off drugs, drinking, or a penchant for infidelity. But acceptance is more often than not gained by submitting to the influence of some ultra-personalized God who can only be accessed through one particular incantation, prayer, or belief-system. Gathered together in cultural and

theological ghettos, many are satisfied with congratulating one another on how right they are while discrediting and damning the beliefs of the rest of the world.

Many of these popular approaches to being Christian focus on following the rules and on being “good.” Yet a focus on being good is often misdirected into a legalism that makes one’s acceptability conditional – God’s willingness to be in relationship with us is reduced to a measure of how well we adhere to a set of rules.

## BELIEVING VS. RELATIONSHIP

When John Paton tried to translate the New Testament into the indigenous language of the people to whom he was sent as a missionary, he ran into a snag: there was no word for “believe” in the people’s language. When one of the natives came in and draped himself over a chair, he stretched out and rested his legs on another chair. Relaxed, he commented on how good it felt to “lean his whole weight on” those chairs. Immediately, Paton knew he had the word he would use for “believe”: to “lean one’s whole weight on.”

Similarly, the Greek and Latin roots of the word “believe” mean “to give one’s heart to.” Believing doesn’t necessarily mean giving one’s mental assent, but something deeper – giving one’s self at its deepest level. In our friendships and relationships with significant others, we don’t “believe” in the other person (at least the way we talk about “believing” in God) – we are in a dynamic, fluid relationship. We learn more all the time, depend on one another, learn to give and take, and spend time with one another out of sheer enjoyment.

Believing does NOT mean putting your allegiance in with a set of doctrines or teachings: it means moving from a secondhand religion of following rules to a firsthand religion of relationship, from having heard about Jesus to being in a dynamic and fluid relationship with the Spirit of Christ. The day of Christians living in fear, intimidated by some vague sense of guilt that our Creator is waiting to punish us somehow, is obsolete. We have something other than fear to “lean our whole weight on.”

But what is Christianity without “right belief” and the fear of punishment for doing wrong? A criticism often leveled at Jesus and other “liberal” thinkers has been, “You tolerate everything but intolerance!” In fact, progressive Christians cannot tolerate injustice, abuse or exploitation, and are actively committed to eradicating evil in all its forms — including hatred, discrimination and violence. The heart of this “way” is compassion, hospitality, and the embracing of diversity – not for their own sake, but because such behavior was modeled by Jesus putting *people* before the rules. He was about moving beyond belief to relationship.

## WHAT WOULD JUSTICE DEMAND?

When the prophet Micah observed that ritual had become an end in itself in Israel, he determined that the people had lost the essence of their faith. Without

justice, human beings cannot live together as God intended. Without kindness and mercy, life is unbearable. And unless one walks humbly in the presence of the mystery we call God, we are likely to be humbled in ways we least expect. And so, Micah poses the question that stands at the heart of Jesus' ministry:

*“And what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?”*

– Micah 6:8

Jesus' life was about living out Micah's call. We don't prove our faith in God by blind and unquestioning duty to rules. Blind obedience to rules, in fact, gets in the way of faith – because the temptation is to mistake the rules for God.

Perhaps a less saccharine alternative to the popular “What Would Jesus Do?” campaign would be the Micah-inspired “What Would Justice Demand?” It's good to be good – but not because it's the rules to be good. Doing right is what is best for us and for others.

It's in determining what that “best” is that we see the wisdom of understanding the religious life as a journey. Jesus' early followers were called those who were on “the way,” suggesting that our spiritual lives are not about following rules or being “saved” so much as they are about life-long journeys of transformation.

## VITAL FAITH

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Harry Emerson Fosdick was an eloquent spokesperson for progressive Christianity. He preached sermons that even eighty years later would prove scandalous in many of our churches. Fosdick tells the story of meeting a young man for a walk in Central Park. “I'm jealous of your faith,” said the young man. “I'm afraid to ask questions, because I was raised in a faith that provided all the answers and to ask questions is to show unfaithfulness.” Coming upon a reflecting pool, Fosdick mused, “Son, your faith is like this pool: calm, bordered, shallow – you always know what it's going to look like and what the boundaries are. But it's not a “living” faith. It's not going anywhere. Vital faith is like a stream bubbling up from a well deep within the earth. As it makes its way, it twists and turns, sometimes changes course, is shallow and slow in some places and fast and turbulent in others, responding to the geographical reality. It's joined by the waters of other streams and together they make their way back to their source.”

Stagnation, not change, is Christianity's deadliest enemy. Vital faith has always been dynamic, flowing, and moving. So, one of the biggest challenges for thinking Christians today is facing those who conceive of “true” Christianity as something that never changes. While many faith communities have invested untold energy arguing over changing the *style* of liturgy and music used in worship, what *really* needs to be addressed are many of the basic theological tenets espoused by that liturgy and music.

To change those theological underpinnings and recast Christianity as something fluid in nature is going to require a readjustment in thinking for many religious people. Many will not be able to do it out of fear alone. People keep trying, desperately, to hold on to old conceptions as if their eternal life depended on it. But there are alternatives.

## LIVING THE QUESTIONS

*“Don’t search for the answers...live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”*

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Despite the tirades of legalistic preachers, the Christian life is *not* about believing the right stuff or even about being “good.” It’s about a *relationship* with the Divine and with one another. It’s a relationship that does not leave us unchanged, but transforms us into more and more compassionate beings – as Paul writes, into “the likeness of Christ” (2 Corinthians 3:18). It’s not about having all the answers, but about wrestling with and living the great questions of life. When our experience of God becomes limited to memorizing creeds and quoting beliefs, we fail to experience the depth that Christianity has to offer.

While media-savvy fundamentalists preach absolute certainty and would have people believe that theirs is the one “true” faith, Christianity remains an amazingly diverse enterprise as we enter into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In contrast to those who preach absolute certainty, there are those who are convinced that there’s something *more* to Christianity than what they’ve experienced in the past. They are a group of seekers who have a “hunch” about this Jesus. They are not pre-occupied with their own eternal well-being so much as they long to change the world to reflect this Jesus’ vision of the reign of God.

These seekers are comfortable with ambiguity and understand that through difficulties, mistakes, and challenges, it’s finally the journey that is important and what we learn along the way in relationship to the Divine and to one another. It takes work as we go down the road, sharing our experiences, our questions, and our uncertainties with one another and with God. And grace comes in the midst of the search, as we journey down the road together. As Bishop Fulton Sheen observed so many years ago, “The questions of God may ultimately be more satisfying than the answers of [men and women].”

As a corollary to what Bishop Jack Spong calls the “killing certainties” of fundamentalist Christianity, it is good to remember the words of the great mystic pastor and poet, Howard Thurman: “Don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

The challenge of progressive Christianity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to “come alive,” mustering the courage, wisdom, and resources to be a beacon of faithful thoughtfulness for those who have otherwise given up, been hurt by slavish adherence to church doctrine, or otherwise become members of the Church alumni/ae association.

When UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld wrote in his journal, *Markings*, he often expressed the core sentiments held by many exploring progressive Christianity:

*“I don't know Who - or what - put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone - or Something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.”*

To “live the questions” is to live into that same sense of ambiguity and certainty, of faith and doubt, that is at the heart of progressive Christianity. Inspired by insights that are at once fresh and ancient, progressive Christians can claim a distinctive voice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century by being in solidarity with the poor, countering the idolatry of wealth, practicing non-violence, and by seeking justice and inclusivity in a culture dominated by suspicion and fear. In so doing, we may discover that the path of true wisdom is not just *asking* the questions for which there are no answers, but in living the questions which shape our faith, our lives, and our world.

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## DVD DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(Note: Chapter 1 of each DVD session is the introductory story)

### DVD Chapter 2:

According to Varghese, what are the characteristics of being “authentically” Christian?

If progressive Christians need to “get a message” and be intentional about sharing the faith that we have, what are some of the core points of that message?

**DVD Chapter 3:**

Describe some of the ways Townes suggests that we can “live our faith.”

According to Mel White, what do we need to “let go” of?

Why might claiming “what we’re *not*” be a bad strategy for progressive Christians?

Elaborate on how being centered in “Spirit and Wisdom” and “Compassion and Justice” express the core values of the Christian Life.

**DVD Chapter 4:**

According to Brueggemann, what are the three definitive marks of the church which have been kept “secret” and for which so many have been hungering?

Why is “being in solidarity with the poor” often a characteristic of vital faith communities?

Describe what Flunder calls “the last real blind spot on the Body of Christ.”



Levine suggests that we “try to see through each other’s eyes” and still reach an agreement that leads to wholeness for real people. Discuss.

## **SPIRITPRACTICE:**

“Grassroots organizing” with No Longer Silent ([www.nolongersilent.org](http://www.nolongersilent.org))

### **Questions for Personal Reflection:**

What do you find most helpful/interesting from the material so far?

What are the implications of this material for you personally? For your local fellowship? For the wider Church? For Christianity as a whole?

### **Consider the following questions as a group:**

What has this session challenged or changed about the way you think about the Divine? People? The Church? Yourself? The relationship of all these?

## **PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS:**

### **In your community (faith or otherwise)**

Plant a Peace Pole. Over 200,000 poles proclaiming “May Peace Prevail on Earth” in multiple languages have been planted the world over.

Information on ordering a peace pole can be found at <http://www.peacepoles.com/>. Ideas for locations and other elements of planting a peace pole can be found at <http://www.worldpeace.org/peacepoles.html>.

**Personally:**

Socially responsible investments. Assuming that some participants of “Living the Questions” have personal investments, mutual funds, and pension plans administered by others, take time to review what your investments are supporting. There are a number of mutual funds and other services that put a priority on the environment, corporate ethics, and human rights while avoiding investments that support the military industrial complex and unsustainable energies.

Some websites to investigate are: <http://www.calvertgroup.com/>, <http://www.socialfunds.com/>, <http://www.portfolio21.com/>, and <http://www.acumenfund.org>.

**BONUS READING**

*“Your thought is a tree rooted deep in the soil of tradition  
and whose branches grow in the power of continuity.  
My thought is a cloud moving in the space.  
It turns into drops which, as they fall,  
form a brook that sings its way into the sea.  
Then it rises as vapor into the sky.*

*Your thought is a fortress that neither gale nor the lightning can shake.  
My thought is a tender leaf that sways in every direction  
and finds pleasure in its swaying.*

*Your thought is an ancient dogma that cannot change you  
nor can you change it.  
My thought is new, and it tests me and I test it morn and eve.  
You have your thought and I have mine.”*

– Kahlil Gibran

**Be sure to follow up on this session’s theme with Session 7’s *Living it Out:* “Beloved,” distributed by your facilitator.**