



Is “Progressive Christianity” Christian?

By

Mark McGee

We receive many questions from readers at FaithandSelfDefense.com and a recent one was about "Progressive Christianity." What is it? What do "progressive" Christians believe and practice? Are they right? Should all Christians embrace "progressive" Christianity? Let's investigate.

"Progressive Christianity is a form of Christianity which is characterized by a willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity, a strong emphasis on social justice and care for the poor and the oppressed, and environmental stewardship of the Earth." Wikipedia

That's how Wikipedia defines Progressive Christianity, but how do "progressive" Christians define themselves?

"Progressive Christianity is an open, intelligent, and collaborative approach to the Christian tradition and the life and teachings of Jesus that creates a pathway into an authentic and relevant religious experience." ProgressiveChristianity.org

By calling ourselves progressive Christians, we mean we are Christians who...

1. Believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life;
2. Affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey;
3. Seek community that is inclusive of ALL people, including but not limited to: Conventional Christians and questioning skeptics, Believers and agnostics, Women and men, Those of all sexual orientations and gender identities, Those of all classes and abilities

4. Know that the way we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe;
5. Find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes;
6. Strive for peace and justice among all people;
7. Strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth;
8. Commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love." The 8 Points of Progressive Christianity

The Center for Progressive Christianity

The Center for Progressive Christianity was founded by Episcopal priest Jim Adams in 1994. He was rector of St. Mark's Church in Washington D.C. at the time and is remembered for speaking before Congress in support of gay rights in 1992. The Washington Post [wrote this about Adams](#) after his death in 2011 –

“James R. Adams, an Episcopal priest who was rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church on Capitol Hill from 1966 until he retired in 1996, was skeptical of religious dogma. He interpreted miracle stories in the Bible as more metaphorical than historically factual, and he shared these thoughts from his pulpit ... In 1994, Mr. Adams founded the Center for Progressive Christianity, a nonprofit corporation that he wrote “encourages churches to focus their attention on those for whom organized religion has proved to be ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive.”

Here's more insight into the beliefs of Progressive Christianity from the history portion of its website –

“From its inception, the focus of TCPC has been primarily about rethinking and re-conceptualizing the theological and Christological foundations of the Christian faith. The leadership of the organization was and has remained convinced that our supporters and readers are expressing a deep desire to find resources and constructive ways to understand and teach what the newest science, biblical, sociological and historical scholarship has to say about the Christian religion and ways to

integrate that information into one's faith and to create healthy, dynamic Christian communities." Progressive Christianity Our History

Progressive Christianity Books

Jim Adams authored several books about Progressive Christianity, including *So You Think You’re Not Religious* (Saint Johann Press, 2010) and *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* (Pilgrim Press,2008) –

“The beauty of returning to the original metaphorical language is that this approach opens up the wisdom of the ancients to twenty-first century readers who may not be of a theist or a supernaturalist persuasion. Thinking people who have been educated in the natural sciences can approach the Bible and Christian tradition without compromising their intellectual integrity. When biblical language is understood primarily as metaphor, the insights of the scriptures are revealed to the skeptic as well as the conventional Christian, to believer and doubter alike.” (Introduction, *From Literal To Literary*)

Former Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, another leader in Progressive Christianity and “fellow” of the Jesus Seminar, recently wrote a similar book with a similar view of the Bible titled *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy: A Journey Into A new Christianity Through The Doorway Of Matthew’s Gospel* (HarperOne 2016). The book came from lectures he gave at Harvard Divinity School –

“Since I regard biblical literalism as a Gentile heresy, I feel a burning necessity to expose fundamentalism for what I believe it is. Unless biblical literalism is challenged overtly in the Christian church itself, it

will, in my opinion, kill the Christian faith. It is not just a benign nuisance that afflicts Christianity at its edges; it is a mentality that refers the Christian faith unbelievable to an increasing number of the citizens of our world. The irony of the task that I undertake in this book is that many literalistic Christians will see this book as an attack on Christianity itself. Not knowing any other way to read the Bible except to claim literal truth for it, they will suggest that I have abandoned 'every tenet of traditional Christian thought.' I have heard that charge more than once. So distorted will this point of view be that they will be unable to see either how deeply Christian I am or how deeply Christian this book is." (Introduction, *Biblical Literalism: A Gentile Heresy*)

Spong also wrote *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic* (2014), *Re-Claiming the bible for a Non-Religious World* (2013), *Eternal Life: A New Vision: Beyond Religion, Beyond Theism, Beyond Heaven and Hell* (2010), *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (2008), *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love* (2006), *A New Christianity for a New World: Why Traditional Faith is Dying & How a New Faith is Being Born* (2002), *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (1999), *Resurrection: Myth or Reality? A Bishop's Search for the Origins of Christianity* (1995), *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth and the Treatment of Women by a Male-Dominated Church* (1994), *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism: A Bishop Rethinks the Meaning of Scripture* (1992), *Living in Sin?: A Bishop Rethinks Human Sexuality* (1990).

Reading Spong's books leaves no doubt concerning his views about orthodox Christianity –

"I do not believe that Mary was in any biological sense literally a virgin. I do not believe that someone known as a virgin mother can be presented with credibility to contemporary men or women as an ideal woman. I do not believe that the story of Mary's virginity enhanced the portrait of the mother of Jesus. To the contrary, I believe that story has detracted from Mary's humanity and has become a weapon in the hands of those whose patriarchal prejudices distort everyone's humanity in general but women's humanity in particular." (Chapter 1, *Born of Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Virgin Birth*)

"I still assert with deep conviction that my understanding of Christianity is rooted firmly in the reality of Easter. My faith in Jesus' resurrection, however, does not today demand that I claim a non mythological literalness for the words I use to talk about that resurrection. Nor do I insist that Easter be understood as an objective supernatural event that occurred inside human history ... I must also state that I today approach and understand that critical moment in the life of Jesus called Easter and the Christian hope of life after death quite differently from the way I once did. I would describe that difference as both less literal and more real, and both parts of that statement are equally important." (Introduction, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*)

Spong does not believe in many of the truth claims of orthodox Christianity, but the Virgin Birth and Resurrection of Jesus Christ should suffice as a demonstration of his position as a leader and the predominant theology of the Progressive Christianity movement.

Pastors David Felten and Jeff Procter-Murphy wrote *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity* in 2012 (HarperCollins Publishers).

This is their view of the Church and its mission –

“A lot of people just don’t care anymore. They stopped going to church long ago because nothing they heard or experienced resonated with them. Despite claims by church-growth gurus, the fields are not ‘ripe for harvest.’ Far from it. As one Christian pollster noted, the large numbers of people not involved in faith communities are not just waiting to be invited to church. They are passionately disinterested in the church.

The graying and abandonment of so-called old-line churches is but one symptom of this disinterest and dissatisfaction with the way churches do religion. Many speak of being ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious,’ honest rather than hypocritical. Evangelical and fundamentalist leaders attribute the atrophy of the old-line church’s influence and its ever-decreasing numbers to those churches having failed to proclaim the ‘true’ gospel. Meanwhile, superficial arguments over issues like the preference of music styles and levels of formality in worship only continue to serve as a distraction from the real problem: people are dissatisfied with the core message, dogma, and practice of the Christian faith in today’s world.

The fields are not filled with faithless people in need of the gospel. They are filled with people of deep spiritual integrity who simply cannot suffer the shallow message of the churches of their birth any longer. These people have an intuitive sense that there is more to Christianity than the rigid rules and theological constructs of the past. As philosopher Sam Keen reminds us, ‘History is littered with the remains of civilizations that chose to die rather than change their organizing myth.’ Without a reevaluation of the organizing myths of Christianity, the church seems poised to pass into the same irrelevance as so many religions of the past.” Introduction, *Living the Questions: The Wisdom of Progressive Christianity*, HarperOne, 2012

Roger Wolsey is a United Methodist pastor, professor and campus minister. He is the author of *Kissing Fish: Christianity for People Who Don't Like Christianity* (Xlibris, 2011) and included this insight to progressive Christianity on his Amazon bio page –

“A big part of why many are leaving the Church is because they aren't aware of progressive Christianity or progressive Christian congregations. Granted, this isn't the only reason – but it's tragic that so many folks aren't aware that there is a form of the faith that many of them would actually like a lot.

Whether or not there is a literal heaven, we are Christians not for the sake of some future reward/glory, but rather for the sake of living faithfully to Jesus and his Way here and now — for the sake of experiencing and partaking in salvation/wholeness and the Kingdom of

God here and now. Faith isn't fire insurance to avoid going to “hell.” We seek to follow the religion *of* Jesus not the religion *about* him.

Progressive Christians believe that Jesus *is* “the way, the truth, and the life,” and we believe that all who follow Jesus' teaching, Way, and example, by whatever name, and even if they've never even heard of Jesus, are fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and his Way.

That said, we're rather enamored by the uniqueness of the Jesus story and we invite others to join us in sharing that specific journey — even if we feel no dire need to convert them.

It is this non-exclusive approach to our faith that many young adults find compelling. So we're evangelistic even as we're not. ;)

Ultimately, let's just be as faithful as we can and not worry about “the Church dying.” We have no fear of death for we follow a savior who gave it all up for the sake of others. Indeed, if we do anything to “attract” people out of desperation on our part, it'll be fruitless. It's like dating someone who is insecure and anxious — not attractive. Let's just boldly be who we are — and maybe even more so — yes, more so.” (Roger Wolsey, amazon.com)

Other voices of Progressive Christianity in the United States include:

- Fred Plumer, President of ProgressiveChristianity.org
- Deshna Ubeda, Associate Director of ProgressiveChristianity.org and Project Director of Children's Curriculum Project
- Bishop Gene Robinson (first openly gay Episcopal bishop, author of *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God*; *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk About Gay Marriage*; *Homosexuality: What the Bible Says & Why It Matters/Audio*)
- Marcus Borg (member of Jesus Seminar, author of *Reading the Bible Again For the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*; *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*; *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth*; and *Putting Away Childish Things: A Tale of Modern Faith*; *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*)
- John Dominic Crossan (served as Co-Chair of the Jesus Seminar from 1985-96, author of *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*; *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*; *The Historical Jesus: Five Views*; *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus Became Fiction about Jesus*; *How to Read the Bible and Still be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation*; *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus*; *Who Killed Jesus?: Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus*; and *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict*)
- Brian McLaren (read more about [Brian McLaren here](#))

- Rob Bell (pastor and author of *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*; *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*; *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*; *How To Be Here: A Guide to Creating a Life Worth Living*; *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile*)
- Diana Butler Bass (writer for New York Times, Huffington Post and Washington Post, author of *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*; *A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story*; and *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church*)
- Jay Bakker (son of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker and longtime champion of LGBT equality)
- Dr. Mel White (founder of SoulForce, openly gay minister of Metropolitan Community Church, author of *Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America*; *Holy Terror: Lies the Christian Right Tells Us to Deny Gay Equality*; *Grace and Demion: A Fable for Victims of Biblical Intolerance*; and *Religion Gone Bad: The Hidden Dangers of the Christian Right*)
- Tony Jones (read more about [Tony Jones here](#))
- Randy Roberts Potts (grandson of televangelist Oral Roberts)
- Fred Clark (Slacktivist blog writer, author of *The Anti-Christ Handbook: The Horror and Hilarity of Left Behind*)
- Ray Boltz (gay singer-song writer)
- Senior Pastor Emily C. Heath (author of *Glorify: Reclaiming the Heart of Progressive Christianity*)
- Robin Meyers (author of *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus*)

There is much more I could share in answer to the question "What is progressive Christianity?", but hope this introduction helps. Progressive Christianity is simply a continuation on the old theme of "religious liberalism." So-called "progressive" Christian leaders deny many of the truth claims of orthodox Christianity – including the Deity of Jesus Christ, His Virgin Birth, Atoning Death on the Cross, and Physical Resurrection. Many of them believe the Bible is merely the work of fallible men and inspired only in the sense that other great literature is said to be "inspired." Many deny the miracles in the Bible and the reality of Heaven and Hell.

A serious question I must ask of "progressive" Christians is whether they are "Christian" at all? Can a person deny the Deity of Jesus Christ and be a true Christian? Can a person deny the Virgin Birth and be a true Christian? Can a person deny the sacrificial-atoning death of Jesus Christ on the Cross and be a true Christian? Can a person deny the physical Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and be a true Christian? In a word – no. And I don't say that in a flippant way. I'm seriously concerned about what "progressive Christianity" has done, is doing and will do to millions of people. **They think they are Christians when they are not.**

Do the "progressive Christians" have a point about mistakes the Church has made and is making? Absolutely. However, rightly dividing the Word of Truth is never a mistake. The problem of the Church is that it has strayed from the Truth: Doctrinal and Practical. There is a way for the Church to return to the Truth the Lord of the Church has given it, but denying Him and His Word is not the way to get there.

You may find an article about Progressive Christianity by Natasha Crain helpful. You can read it here – [Progressive Christianity is as Much of a Threat to Your Kids’ Faith as Atheism.](#)

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