Rediscovering Our Progressive Christian Heritage

Delwin Brown

When we are called upon to say who we are, we begin, if we are wise, by telling our story. When we are asked what we stand for, we begin by describing the heritage that has formed us. We tell our story not to boast, though sometimes it makes us proud, nor to reject it, though sometimes it causes us shame. We tell of our heritage because it is ours.

When the Israelites identified themselves they told a story: A wandering Aramean was my father; he went down to Egypt with a household few in number where they had to live as foreigners. Even so, we became a great and powerful people. But we were mistreated and oppressed, forced to serve as slaves. So we cried out to the God of our ancestors who heard us and saw our toil and oppression. And the Lord brought us out of captivity with tremendous strength and power. Then the Lord brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

In this recital of Israelite identity, there is much of which to be proud. And much to regret—not least of which was the fact that the land of milk and honey was already occupied by others who had the distinct impression that it was their place, or the fact that the true Aramean ancestor, Rebekah, somehow got overlooked even in the footnotes of this recitation. But much to be proud of still—an oppressed people, people who toiled diligently, who did not lose hope for deliverance, who trusted a power beyond themselves, who experienced liberation.

And so it is with our human heritages, our histories; they are morally ambiguous—full of virtue and vice, truth and error, successes and failings. But they are ours. They do not bind us, but they ground us. From them we live, through them

we learn, and out of them we reconstruct our identities, remaking our stories sometimes in order to remake ourselves.

This morning I will venture a recital of the modern heritage of a progressive Christian vision for our time. I will not summarize our entire heritage, only its past 150 years. Nor in my account will I focus on its destructive side—its political naivety, its racism, classism and sexism, its moments of dogmatism—though we will have occasion to take note of some of these failings. I will identify what I take to be four important periods of this heritage for progressive Christian thinking and acting today, and what I believe we can take from each period as we continue to forge a rich and effective progressive Christian witness in and for the world.

I will begin my recital of our progressive Christian heritage with evangelicalism—yes, evangelical Christianity in the mid-19th century!—then turn to liberal Christianity before and after the beginning of the 20th century. Next I will cite the contribution of Crisis Theology, or neo-Orthodoxy, to a vital progressive Christian stance today. Finally, I will talk about the family of liberation perspectives, for these must not only be a central element of our story; the truth is that they continue to be the context in which a progressive Christian vision is to be formed and tested, or so I believe.

First, the evangelical heritage of progressive Christianity.[1]

The Contribution of Evangelical Christianity

Abolitionism is perhaps the most significant movement for social reform in our nation's history. Historians used to credit religious liberalism for motivating the movement to abolish slavery, and some of the credit does go there. But in fact the abolitionist movement was grounded largely, not in Christian or secular liberalism, but

---

[1] My account of this history draws from Donald W. Dayton, Discovering An Evangelical Heritage (Harper & Row, 1976).

in evangelical Christian piety. In fact the primary impulse of abolitionism, many have argued, was the revivalistic preaching of Charles G. Finney. Finney insisted that truly changed lives must be committed to bringing about true change in society, and he condemned mainline preachers who were afraid to call "this abomination [slavery] by its true name." Dismissing liberals for their "truckling subserviency to power [and] mendicant sycophancy to the skirts of wealth and influence," evangelicals led the move for reform in most of America. They conducted economic boycotts, refusing to buy sugar grown on slave plantations. They practiced civil disobedience, refusing to abide by the Fugitive Slave Law. Young people at Oberlin College, then a bastion of evangelicalism, rescued escaped slaves being held in northern jails and even went into the South to free slaves and bring them north. In the Midwest the "stops" along the underground railroad were stations of evangelical piety.

Wesleyan Methodists split off from the mainline Church in 1840 because of establishment Methodism's compromising position on slavery. The Free Methodist Church was founded in 1860 to stand for, among other things, "free pews" for all rather than the class system in the mainline churches where ornate pews were sold to the rich and the poor were kept at the back of the sanctuary. The Christian and Missionary Alliance was founded in this same period to serve the "neglected classes both at home and abroad." The Church of the Nazarene came into being to minister to those who were "oppressed" (their term) by "the rich and powerful." Evangelical couples, in some cases, rewrote their wedding vows to insist on the equality of wife and husband, and in one instance we know of the new wife kept her own last name to symbolize the equality of their relationship.

We may ask, what happened to the moral fiber of evangelicalism? We may ask why its history is not known to evangelicals today. Good questions.

I would rather ask, what does 19th century evangelicalism contribute to a progressive Christian vision for our time? Three things, I think.

First, these evangelicals were progressives because they were Christians. Their progressive political and social commitments were not an addition to their Christian faith, not supplements to their Christian convictions, and certainly not ways of modernizing a faith otherwise outdated. They were Christians, therefore they were progressives.

Second, their pursuit of justice was a spiritual discipline. The condemnation of slavery, the struggle against sexism, their defense of the poor—these were not projects adopted because they had a chance of success, because the "time was ripe." Their pursuit of justice was not a strategy; it was a Christian practice, a discipline intrinsic to their identity as Christians.

Third, they subordinated differences over doctrine to an experiential unity from which could follow a shared social practice. They were united in an experience of Jesus. We may be uneasy with their emphasis on a personal experience of salvation; it did, despite Finney's warnings, yield finally to an excessive individualism. But the experiential focus of evangelical revivalism before the Civil War was an effective way of subordinating the intense doctrinal disputes of the day to corporate discipleship without dismissing theology's importance in the life of faith.

They were progressives because they were Christians.

Their pursuit of justice was a spiritual discipline.

They united in Christian spirit rather than theological agreement.

These are not perfect—not wholly unproblematic—models for us, but perhaps we will have to do without perfect models. They express convictions, I believe, that deserve to be part of what a progressive Christianity should become today.

Next I turn to the liberal heritage of progressive Christianity.[2]

The Contribution of Liberal Christianity

In the middle of the 19th century when evangelicalism was at the pinnacle of its strength, a new voice was arising from within it. This voice was at first called the "new theology" and its definitive mark was a bold and daring spirit of innovation. This spirit was perfectly expressed by Charles A. Briggs. "The Bible gives us the material for all ages," he said, but it also gives "us the noble task of shaping [that] material" to fit the needs of our own time. In that statement, perhaps, a distinctively American version of liberal Christianity was born. It was based on the belief that the faithful Christian, in order to be faithful, must reconstruct, and not simply replicate, the Christian inheritance in each new age. To "reshape the faith," as Briggs put it, is not to depart from the faith or to compromise the faith or to weaken the faith, but rather to take on the responsibility that Christian faith itself demands of every Christian in every time.

The Civil War marked the end of a vibrant and holistic evangelicalism, and opened the way for a liberal Christian voice in America's public square. By the 1890's liberal Christianity was in ascendancy, where it remained until the end of the 1920's. Its best known expression was the Social Gospel movement led by Walter Rauschenbusch. Reverence for ideas that are no longer functional, said Rauschenbusch the liberal, is a form of ancestor worship. But Rauschenbusch the liberal continued to revere the social agenda of pre-war evangelicalism. In some ways,

---

[2] For a summary of this history see Delwin Brown and Sheila Greeve Davaney, "Liberalism: USA" in Alister E. McGrath, Modern Christian Thought (Basil Blackwell, 1993).

indeed, his social gospel was a continuation of Charles Finney's revivalism, after evangelicalism had lost its commitment to justice. Rauschenbusch, however, had a different strategy and vastly different theology. Jesus, Rauschenbusch preached, initiated a divine order on earth that is social and inclusive. The goal of salvation is "saving the social organism…not human atoms"—that is his own terminology. "It is not a matter of getting individuals into heaven," he said, "but of transforming life on earth…."

A second expression of early liberalism flourished at the University of Chicago during the first third of the 20th century. Its representatives—like Shirley Jackson Case, Shailer Mathews, and others—were preachers, labor leaders and community organizers as well as the finest Christian theologians, biblical scholars, and social historians of the day. They saw sin and salvation in social and structural terms. And that's how they understood Christianity, as a socio-historical movement, ever developing and ever-changing to meet the needs of the day. One might put their view simply by saying they believed the doctrine of the incarnation: God is in the world, so also then is the Christian Church. Therefore, like their eastern counterpart, Rauschenbusch, the Chicago liberals practiced a worldly Christianity—condemning this world's ills, addressing this world's needs, seeking this world's salvation, and, against the fundamentalists, respecting this world's knowledge.

The liberals, like the evangelicals before them, are flawed models for progressive Christians today. They romanticized progress, they overestimated science, their theological methods vacillated, and their structural analyses of racism, sexism and classism, though advanced for the time, remained sadly limited. But I believe they had commitments worth making our own.

First, the liberals took seriously the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. God is in the world, so they were. God is with the world, so they were. God loves the world so much as to be here fully—after all, that is what the christological councils said: God loves the world so much as to be in and with the world fully. So they chose to be in and with the world fully. We need to think carefully about what this does not mean, but for now we should note what it does mean: This world, according to liberal Christianity, is our home. Its knowledge is our resource. Its evil is our challenge. To seek its salvation is our calling. The liberals were at home in the world.

Second, if they did not understand the human condition as fully as they might have, they did see sin and salvation to be social and structural as well as personal. The discipline of sociology began in the United States, and it began as a part of the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. Social analysis began in liberal Christianity because liberals understood what Finney had perhaps only intuited, namely that individuals are part of social structures, that sin is social and structural as well as individual, and that salvation is, as Rauschenbusch insisted, the salvation of individuals as members of "social organisms," not as isolated "atoms." They understood the structural character of sin and salvation.

Third, they understood that to be faithful to the Christian past is continuously to reconstruct Christian thought and practice out of the vast resources of that inheritance. They saw that true orthodoxy is never bound by old orthodoxy, though, also, it never disparages or fails to learn from the past. To paraphrase Charles Briggs: It is sufficient that the rich plurality of biblical voices and their various interpretations throughout history—it is sufficient that this biblical heritage should give us the redemptive resources for our age; but it is our solemn vocation to shape these

resources anew in order to bring judgment and healing in our own time. Christian life and thought is always the reconstruction of the Christian inheritance.

So these three elements of liberalism are ours, I believe, to integrate into a progressive Christian vision:

The liberals made their home in the world without reserve, because God does.

They saw sin and salvation to be structural as well as personal.

They reconstructed the Christian inheritance in order to be faithful to it.

The convictions implicit here leave questions, to be sure, and the questions must be addressed by us. But these convictions should, I believe, be taken into the progressive Christian project today.

The Contribution of Neo-Orthodox Christianity

In the late teens and the 1920's, liberalism was defeating the fundamentalism of the time but also beginning to break apart, though its fragmentation would not become apparent until later. And in roughly the same time period a young Swiss pastor was preaching, teaching, engaging in politics, and authoring a book that would give rise to a new theological era. He was Karl Barth, and he was writing, and rewriting, and defending a commentary on the book of Romans. It was a critique of European liberalism, but it was just as applicable to liberal Christianity in its American form. Liberalism, Barth said, had reduced God to the world, or more precisely, had equated God with what liberals thought to be the highest cultural values and political movements of the day. The best evidence of this reduction of Christian faith was the support, among German liberal theologians, of the German cause during the First World War. But that was only a symptom, albeit a tragic one. The crisis Barth identified was the equation of God's will with human aspirations and accomplishments

in any form—cultural, social, economic or political. In response Barth insisted on the "otherness" of God. Against the liberal inclination to identify God too closely with the values and movements of this world, Barth said, "let God be God."

Barth's Romerbrief was followed over the years by the volumes of the Church Dogmatics. In them he developed a more extensive theological foundation for his critique of liberal Christianity. It was his Christocentrism—it was his insistence that Christian faith is grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. And only in Jesus Christ! Barth goes too far here, in my opinion, and this was the complaint, too, of some of Barth's neo-orthodox colleagues. Do we only know of God through Jesus Christ? And are the claims we make as Christians only answerable to the revelation of God in Christ? Are our views as Christians not also obligated to take account of modern knowledge—science, philosophy, and social criticism, for example? I believe they are. But clearly (or at least clearly to me) Barth's one-sidedness was a valuable corrective to liberalism's excessive comfort with the world. Liberal Christians affirmed the world so fully, Barth claimed, that they reduced Christian faith to the world's best knowledge and highest values. That, I think, is a temptation that persists within liberalism.

Barth's appeal to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ never came close to being a fundamentalist literalism. Like Luther, Barth and other neo-orthodox theologians found the revelation of God in and through the Scriptures, but it is not reducible to the biblical text. The revelation, they said, is the divine Word spoken through the text, and by extension through the Eucharist, and through preaching. This emphasis on the unique role of Christian ritual and proclamation in communicating the Christian faith stems logically from the uniqueness of Jesus Christ for Christian

understanding. We need not deny that God is known elsewhere, even known savingly elsewhere, in order to acknowledge that God has been made known to us distinctively in Jesus Christ. And if that is true it would seem also to follow that the Good News made present to us in Jesus Christ is continually made present to us in the formation of Christian ritual and the proclamation of Christian preaching.

Although I do not think the entirety of the neo-orthodox perspective is adequate for a progressive vision today, it has much to teach us.

First, the critical theology of neo-orthodoxy insisted on the otherness of God. God is never, ever, to be equated with the world. We may wish to say, with the liberals, that God is fully in the world, fully with the creation, but we should never suppose that God is identical to any human construction, human aspiration or human achievement. God's way is in, with, and for the world, but God's way in, with, and for the world is not our way. We may with the liberals believe that God works in human politics, is present in human knowledge, is manifest in human culture, but we must learn from crisis theology that the God who is in these achievements is never to be identified with them, however noble, indeed, however righteous. God is always "other" to that in which God is fully present. We don't own God; no one owns God.

Second, Christian knowledge of God is rooted in Jesus Christ, the Christ who is communicated through the varied voices of Scripture and subsequent scriptural interpretation. God <u>is</u> still speaking, but we believe it is God who is speaking because of what we have learned from the heritage in which we believe God <u>has</u> spoken. We may believe that God speaks elsewhere, even that God speaks savingly in other religious traditions; but our view of who God is, of how God speaks, of what salvation means, and our understanding of what salvation overcomes—for all of these we are

indebted to a particular historical event interpreted through a particular historical tradition. Christian understandings are grounded in Jesus Christ. Whatever else we claim to know, as Christians we start there.

Third, the Christian faith is communicated through ritual and verbal witness grounded in the particularity of Christian tradition. Against the tendency of liberal sermonizing to be wise political commentary or insightful therapeutic advice wrapped in biblical allusions, the neo-orthodox claimed that there are Christian things to be said and that preaching is to be the communication of these Christian things. Against the liberal tendency to equate ritual and educational formation with secular ideals of self-realization, the neo-orthodox insisted that there is specifically Christian formation. Again, we may resist too-sharp distinctions between Christianity and culture, between religious and secular ways of understanding, but if we heed neo-orthodoxy we will also diligently guard against their assimilation.

These three elements of neo-orthodoxy, and their underlying convictions, should, I believe, be taken seriously:

They proclaim the otherness of God.

They understand the centrality of Christ as the source of Christian identity.

They recognize the importance of ritual and proclamation in sustaining Christian identity.

We may have difficulties with the neo-orthodox formulations of these claims. We may wish to revise them. But an effective progressive witness in our time cannot escape learning from them.

The Contribution of Liberation Christianities

The end of the Second World War unleashed movement against colonialism in Africa, Asia and Latin America, as well as within the borders of the dominant Western powers. This movement was sometimes influenced, and occasionally driven, by Marxist class analysis. But that is not enough to explain the rise of liberation theologies in the 1960's. One must also take account of theological as well as ecclesial developments within Christianity. You will recall that evangelical, liberal, and neo-orthodox forms of Christianity had already sought to address, adequately or not, both the consequences and the causes of social injustice. In the 1960's this heritage came to full bloom in political theologies and in theologies of human hope. These constituted an important theological ground for the rise of liberation theology. The most important ecclesial developments were, among Protestant denominations and in the World Council of Churches, a number of studies and discussions on the nature of social change, and, of even more importance, the Second Vatican Council which opened Roman Catholicism to new ways of thinking.

Out of this context liberation theologies arose, in many richly diverse forms. Their advent began <u>with</u> a conference of Roman Catholic bishops in Medellin, Columbia in 1968, and, in 1971, with the publication of <u>A Theology of Liberation</u> by Gustavo Gutierrez. But the advent of liberation theologies began <u>in</u> what Gutierrez called "the irruption of the poor" in history. Its origin, in other words, was the voice of the people who spoke out from the underside of history against their oppression. The result was a new way of doing theology—theology as "critical reflection," conducted with and by the poor, "in the light of God's Word." The first and last components, "critical reflection" and "God's Word" were not new to theology. What was new to theological thinking is what Medellin referred to as "the preferential option for the

poor," that is, the new location for theological reflection. Theological reflection in light of God's Word was now to be located "in solidarity with" those who are poor, those who are powerless.

Since the powerless are in many places and powerlessness takes many forms, so, too, have liberation theologies, whether or not they have been called by that name: in Latin America among different religious and racial-ethnic groups and among women; in several African settings; in varied East Asian and South Asian contexts as well as among Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Island people in North America; also in the U.S. among African Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos; among women in various racial/ethnic groups, including white women; among lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgendered people; among the differently-abled; and among people everywhere on behalf of and in concert with the rest of creation.

In liberation theology there are many streams, but amidst such rich cultural, religious and conceptual diversity there are, I think, some common themes.

One is that the God of Jesus Christ is for justice, or more precisely, that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. That does not mean that the thoughts of the poor are God's thoughts; it means that the cause of the poor is God's cause. Nor does it deny that God loves all people equally; it means that when some people are denied political and social equality, God seeks to redress the imbalance—just as any parent would do if one child were being severely mistreated by the others. The justification for this claim about God is not only the words and deeds of a man who belonged to an oppressed people, who opted even among them for the least powerful and the most frequently excluded, and who was crucified for sedition against the colonial power of the time. It is also the fact that the Bible itself is the record of people on the underside

of history, their yearnings and disappointments, their failings and persistence, and their trust in God. The God of the Bible, made clear to us in Jesus Christ, is on the side of the poor and powerless.

Second, the Christian pursuit of truth is to be located in solidarity with the poor and powerless. The truth emerges for us not in passive observation, but in engagement—in acting and seeking change from the vantage point of powerlessness. This is the meaning of that rather arcane dictum of liberation theologians, "the epistemological privilege of the poor." It is not intended to romanticize the poor, to place on them the burden of enunciating the truth for the rest of us. Rather, it is to say that the perspective of powerlessness is the place from which the Christian search for truth must begin. It is from this perspective that we are most likely to grasp the distinctive message of the Bible because it is from this perspective that the biblical message arose. And it is also, we must confess, the perspective that is persistently overlooked in the history of Christian reflection when it is conducted by people in power. This is another reason that the perspective of the powerless should intentionally be privileged in our actions and thinking today.

The third theme in liberation theologies is a holistic conception of salvation. Reading the Bible from the underside of history, liberation theologians discovered something that most of Christianity has overlooked—in the Bible, salvation is a promise for the whole of God's creation. Biblical salvation is not a promise for separate souls—not for individuals alone, not for humanity alone. It is a promise for the whole creation. Not only "we ourselves," says St. Paul, but the "entire creation" will be set free from its bondage. What that might mean for the future of the world is surely impossible for us to comprehend, but what it means for our efforts in the world now is clear, and

revolutionary. The salvation God promises and toward which we are called to work, is spiritual, personal, social, political, economic, cultural, and ecological. It is contrition and clean water, forgiveness and full stomachs, justification and good jobs, reconciliation with God and respect for the rest of creation. It is working toward the day, totally unfathomable by the human mind but promised by the God of Jesus Christ, when all created things will be set free from bondage to decay and death.

There are, I have said, three convictions shared by all of the liberation theologies that we must make a part of our progressive theological movement in America.

They believe that God is on the side of the powerless, human and non-human.

They locate the pursuit of truth in solidarity with the powerless.

They proclaim salvation for all dimensions of human life and for all creation.

I said these must be part of a progressive Christian vision. In fact, I think these convictions must be central to progressive Christianity if, in the long run, a truly progressive Christianity can be sustained, if progressive Christianity deserves to be sustained.

Conclusion

Well, I suppose I should stop now. I cannot quite do so.

There is one more conviction, one more that sweeps like a driving wind through every faithful soul in each of the four periods I have identified as our modern heritage. The evangelical Christians of the 19th century, the liberal Christians that came after them, the neo-orthodox Christians in the middle of the last century, and the family of liberation Christians who rose up toward the end of the century and now carry us forward into this new time—from the earliest to the most recent, all of these our

ancestors in a progressive Christian faith have been driven, absolutely driven, by a conviction called "hope," the belief that a radically better day is possible, the confidence that a radically better day is possible, the determination that a radically better day will be made possible and is coming, by God's grace and human faithfulness. They have held this hope not so that their vision would be validated, their beliefs warranted, or their efforts justified. They held this hope because it is the promise of God. This conviction, too, is part of the heritage of progressive Christianity, undergirding each of the others. And I believe it must be ours.

When we are called upon to say who we are, we will begin, if we are wise, by telling our story. When we are asked what we stand for, we will begin by describing the heritage that has formed us. We will begin there.

But the question now is, what should follow? What should we say next?

I do not believe we must have a single set of progressive Christian beliefs. I do not think a common theology is necessary in order for there to be an effective progressive Christian witness in our time. But I do suggest that if we do not have a theology that is shared by all progressive Christians, we must each have a theology, worked out in community, that grounds within us individually the progressive Christian faith that we share together.

Be prepared, the Scriptures say, to give a reason for the progressive faith that is within you. Only in that way will we be able to continue the heritage that has formed us.

Copyright @2006 by Delwin Brown