

**Progressive Theology:
Some Musings from a United Methodist Perspective**
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Many of us have said that the division within The United Methodist Church goes beyond the issue of homosexuality. We recognize that our division goes to the very core of our theological divide. We need to recognize further that our theological divide is rooted also in our biblical interpretation and the nature of the Bible as sacred text. My friend Wesley Allen has pointed this out in a recent article in The Christian Century. He writes:

United Methodists answer the following questions in significantly different ways:
What is the root problem of the human condition (i.e., what constitutes sin)?
How does the good news of Jesus Christ's birth, ministry, death, resurrection and exaltation both reveal and address this problem (i.e., what is salvation and how is it effected)?
What is the mission of the church as the Body of Christ in cooperating with divine salvation in addressing the human condition (i.e., what ecclesiology is to be affirmed in light of answers given to the first two questions)?
And underlying all of these questions: What is the proper understanding and use of scripture in answering these questions?¹

Within such a recognition is often the call to articulate our progressive theology succinctly. However, before we jump too quickly into such an articulation, we need to take into consideration what that will mean and what it can lead to. It has been pointed out that one of our problems as progressives is our lack of cohesiveness or a unified voice. Nonetheless, instead of seeing that as a problem, should we not openly embrace that as a strength and a gift for the broader church and not succumb to the pressures to be like the religious right, which tends to speak with a unified voice and with a univocal and universal theology? That diversity of thought and multiplicity of theological voices and perspectives is to be valued is not

¹ O. Wesley Allen, Jr., "Let's Talk Theology: How Divided Are United Methodists?," The Christian Century 121/12 (June 2004): 11.

really anything new. Our scriptural tradition has much to commend itself and teach us in this arena. In the Old Testament, the authors of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes propounded theological ideas that contradicted the dominant theological perspectives of their days. In the New Testament, the four gospel writers did not tell the story of Jesus from a unified voice, but with very different perspectives. Even Paul seemed to be contradicting himself in his letters. Thus, if we take our scriptural tradition seriously, we need to learn how to appreciate diversity of thought and multiplicity of theological voices as a gift to the church rather than as a hindrance to communal life.

There is, on the other hand, grave danger in uniformity of thought and theology. It not only stymies creative and critical thinking, but is also often used as a form of control of a faith community. In such situations, those who dare to venture outside the boundaries of such thought and theology pose a threat to the community and thus are often dealt with quickly. This is evident most recently in the treatment of stalwart evangelicals like Randall Balmer and Jack Rogers by others on the Christian right because Balmer and Rogers are rethinking the views they once held on homosexuality and abortion.² This kind of rigidity, not altogether uncommon in the Calvinist tradition, is inconsistent with the Wesleyan spirit.

It should be clear, then, that progressive theology by nature is not uniform, univocal nor universal, and, especially in The United Methodist Church, it should not attempt to be. While it is important to articulate what a progressive theology is, we must be equally careful not to articulate a theology that will eventually be used to

² The Associated Press, "Biblical Disputes Revive Question: What is an Evangelical?," [Faith in Public Life Newsletter](#), August 17, 2006.

claim univocality and universality and thereby be used to judge and devalue other theological expressions. As a biblical scholar, I am very wary of notions of univocality and universality, which often imply that someone else's voice and agenda set the standard by which all others are measured. As an ethnic biblical scholar, I know and have experienced how the textual interpretation of a dominant group has been used as a means to silence and delegitimize the interpretations of other groups. The same is true of theological discourse. Instead, what we need to do, as progressive theological thinkers, is to set the framework and parameters of our theological discourse. Simply put, how do we do theology?

In The Book of Discipline (2000) of The United Methodist Church, there is a section in ¶104 which spells out "Our Theological Task" as United Methodists. It begins by defining theology as "our effort to reflect God's gracious action in our lives," adding that "our theological explorations seek to give expression to the mysterious reality of God's presence, peace, and power in the world. By so doing, we attempt to articulate more clearly our understanding of the divine-human encounter and are thereby more fully prepared to participate in God's work in the world." Our Book of Discipline states further that our theological task is both critical and constructive, individual and communal, contextual and incarnational, as well as practical. What this implies is that our tradition recognizes that doing theology—knowing God—takes effort. While we do have a set of Articles of Religion, our ever-changing contexts necessitate that every generation engage its own theological task and rethink God anew. If our theology is to be critical and constructive as well as contextual and incarnational, no one theological articulation can pretend to be univocal and universal. If the reality of God's presence in our lives is indeed

mysterious, we cannot pretend that anyone of us at any given time and space has a full comprehension of God that is not in constant need of rethinking.

In addition to the criteria set forth in The Book of Discipline, I would argue that progressive theology must work within the framework of pluralism, feminism, liberationism, post-colonialism, and ecological and environmental responsibility. Each provides something of importance for an authentic progressive faith.

Societies and communities have become increasingly religiously pluralistic. As Christians, we have to come to terms with the fact that we are not the sole possessors of religious truth and values. Thus, there is great value for a progressive theology to be constructed in dialogue with other religious traditions, whereby we can learn new modes of religious discourse as well as come to a better appreciation of our own traditions.

It is hardly necessary to rehearse the contributions of feminism to theology. A progressive theology within the framework of feminism will continue to be attentive to destructive powers of patriarchy and a patriarchal concept of God and the damage they have done to women and the church as a whole. Feminist perspectives, thus, will continue to help the church to affirm the whole and not only parts of it.

A liberationist framework, with its attention to issues of class, race, gender and economics, will prevent a progressive theology from being an elitist theological formulation and enable it to become a theology that is shaped by the lived experience of the people. For example, if “God’s preferential option for the poor” is not to remain a mere slogan, such a theology would move into action.

A post-colonial framework can be a helpful reminder to Christians of Christianity’s destructive colonial past and to help work against colonial assumptions,

representations, and ideologies that were so much a part of earlier theological thinking. It will also help to dislodge western theological formulations from the center.

Finally, a progressive theology must address ecological and environmental issues more than ever before. Kathryn Tanner notes: "Contemporary Christians are citizens of a planet gravely troubled by the reckless and rapacious enterprises of its human inhabitants. Human industries, spurred by the technological innovations of the last several centuries, have turned the earth into a commodity for human purposes."³ Hence, a progressive theology must address our human responsibility for and accountability to our planet earth.

Yes, there is an agenda that drives progressive theology and we need to embrace that openly. Such an agenda will lead us toward justice for all of God's people and God's creation. Within such a framework, we must be willing to allow for variety in theological articulations. If not, we will end up with liberal fundamentalism. My colleague, Doug Adams, has always reminded us that fundamentalism, either on the right or on the left, is still fundamentalism and equally oppressive and harmful.

A framework for doing theology that is both critical and constructive, individual and communal, contextual and incarnational, and that takes seriously the values of pluralism, feminism, liberationism, post-colonialism, and ecological and environmental responsibility impacts our biblical interpretation and what we see as the nature of the Bible. In my life as a student of the Bible, I have come to a conclusion that biblical interpretation is public discourse. Thus, we must take seriously our ethical-political responsibility as readers. More importantly, we must

³ Kathryn Tanner, "Creation, Environmental Crisis, and Ecological Justice," in Reconstructing Christian Theology, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 99.

learn to read “as if” life and death were hanging in the balance. We must learn to read responsibly because the lives of *others* can be impacted by how we read. For example, the Native American scholar, Robert Allen Warrior talks about the reference to Native Americans as Amalekites and Canaanites by many Puritan preachers. The implication was clear, namely, that the Native Americans, like the biblical Amalekites and Canaanites, “if they would not be converted, were worthy of annihilation.”⁴ The annihilation of Native Americans during the colonial period was grounded in irresponsible biblical interpretation and bad theology. In doing “as if” and responsible readings, we will find ourselves in situations where we *must* speak and preach against the text, unmasking and rejecting harmful ideologies and bad theologies.

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⁴ Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, rev. ed., edited by R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis/SPCK, 1995) 283.