

- Salvation, in the biblical view, is the promise for all dimensions of human life and for all creation. To be sure, salvation is the promise for individuals, too, but as St. Paul insists, salvation is also for “the entire creation” --as unbelievable as it seems, for individuals, communities, and even the earth.

Progressive Christianity draws from each of these traditions in its distinctiveness. But it must share, too, the one belief that adherents of these traditions held in common, namely, their Christian hope. They believed that a radically better day is possible, by God’s grace and through human faithfulness, and so they each sought, in their own ways, to serve its coming.

—By Dr. Delwin Brown, dean emeritus of Pacific School of Religion



The Progressive Christian Witness

A Ministry of Pacific School of Religion

The Progressive Christian Witness: A Ministry of Pacific School of Religion, www.progressivechristianwitness.org, aims to strengthen the voices of progressive Christianity in the public square by publishing theologically grounded resources—brief articles like this one and longer essays—for laypeople and pastors on significant issues in American life. Contact us at pcw@psr.edu or 800/999-0528.

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OUR PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY TODAY IS NOT A single party line; it is a family of perspectives and practices that seek to be faithful to Christ. It is diverse because it draws from a variety of Christian expressions rooted in the biblical witness.

Progressive Christianity draws from the witness of evangelical Christians in the middle of the 19th century. These first American evangelicals were on the front lines of the movements to abolish slavery, to give women the right to vote, to mitigate poverty and overcome sharp class divisions. What can we take from their example?

- They understood that their progressive, even revolutionary, stances were required of them as Christians. They were not progressives who also happened to be Christians. They were progressives because they were Christians, in order to be faithful to the gospel.
- Their pursuit of justice was a spiritual discipline. Their efforts were not dependent on the likelihood of success. They were not based on calculations; they sprang from the conviction that Jesus came to overcome socially and culturally created injustices.
- They were united in Christian spirit rather than Christian beliefs. They understood that Christians could disagree on matters of theology and still be united in service to God and neighbor.

Progressive Christianity also draws from the witness of the liberal Christian movement around the turn of the 20th century. The liberals welcomed progress as a gift of God. They supported the advance of the physical sciences and democratic practices. They led in the analysis and critique of structural injustices in society. They were intellectuals and reformers. What should we honor in their example?

- They took seriously the doctrine of the incarnation, the Christian claim that God is in and with this world, so they, too, made their home in the world without reserve.
- They saw sin and salvation to be structural as well as personal. For them, sinful relations had to be addressed through collective action and public policy as well as through personal spiritual discipline.
- They believed that Christian faith requires, not repetition of the past, but the obligation to re-think the meaning of discipleship in each age.

Progressive Christianity learns from the neo-orthodox Christians of the mid-20th century who openly opposed the equation of Christian faith with the political ideology of the Third Reich. They insisted on the distinctiveness of Christian identity. What can we take from them?

- They proclaimed the otherness of the incarnate God. They insisted that God is always with us, but God is never reducible to our cultural practices, our political convictions, even to our religious beliefs.

- They understood the centrality of Christ as the source of Christian identity. The Bible is the primary source for knowing God's revelation in Christ, but that revelation is Christ, not the Bible. From modern knowledge we have much to learn and nothing to fear, but our best knowledge does not displace the Christ of the biblical witness.
- Being Christian means being something in particular, so the purpose of Christian community is to explore, develop, and sustain Christian identity through preaching, liturgy, and education.

Finally, progressive Christianity must hear and be transformed by the manifold witnesses of the liberation forms of Christian faith that emerged in the last part of the 20th century and continue with force today. These include the voices of the racial/ethnic communities, the feminists and womanists, those who have suffered from colonialism, the poor and other previously voiceless people, and indeed the silent cries of the earth itself! From them, to be authentic, progressive Christianity must learn that:

- God is on the side of the powerless, human and non-human. God loves all equally, but to overcome injustice God joins with those who are its victims. Those who would follow God in Christ are called to serve "the least of these" among us.
- The search for truth must be undertaken in the company of the powerless. Wisdom and virtue is to be found in all people, in all classes, in all races and ethnic groups. But the persistent habit of humanity is to demean and ignore what the "least ones" have to say, their insights into the gospel, their voices as vehicles of judgment and grace.