

Being a
Progressive
Christian
(is not) for
Dummies
(nor for know-it-alls)

AN EVOLUTION OF FAITH

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Introduction

The progressive Christian movement occurring within Western Christianity has invaded both conservative and liberal ranks. As we evolve in spiritual consciousness as a species, we must continually critique, revise, and reformulate our belief systems. The following reflections challenge a number of traditional Christian teachings and images, while developing some fresh, progressive perspectives. All reconstruction requires some deconstruction, and while I engage in both, the reflections in this book have an overall positive tone that nurtures a vision of Christian faith that, I hope, the reader will find attractive and compelling.

I trust that the criticisms I articulate do not reflect in any way a stance of spiritual elitism or superiority, for such attitudes have no place in the kind of Christianity I am advocating. In theological and biblical discussions and debates it is my practice to say: This is my current perspective—where I am now on my faith journey. That will, no doubt, change. I could be wrong. I am sure I am wrong about a good number of things.

I do not claim any special access to or possession of the truth. But I know that any positive way forward requires two things: a rigorous critique of one's past and current faith heritage and tradition, and a thoughtful formulation of a positive vision for renewal and change. I have tried to maintain a balance between tearing down and building up. Whether or not I have achieved this balance, the reader will have to decide.

My critique focuses on some of the fundamental positions of conservative, evangelical Christianity because that is my heritage and where my journey began. I'm sure progressive Christians who were schooled in the old, classical liberalism could bring just as rigorous a critique to that tradition. My first two academic degrees were from staunchly conservative Christian schools where faculty members were required to teach within narrowly defined parameters that espoused such doctrines as biblical inerrancy and substitutionary atonement. I do not, however, disparage my conservative Christian training. It gave me the strong foundation I needed for that stage in my life, and I am certain I would not be where I am today without those structures and boundaries.

My Bible college training taught me the Scriptures. As part of the curriculum, we worked our way through the entire Bible. Obviously, we brought our traditional biases and presuppositions into this process, but I was required to spend a lot of time in the biblical text itself and thus learned the basic content of the Bible.

Ironically, my studies in a conservative seminary gave me the tools to self-critique conservative doctrines and beliefs. In particular, a class on New Testament textual criticism crystallized a shift in my thinking that began to emerge from my elective courses in New Testament Greek exegesis. I was surprised to learn about the different character of the New Testament manuscripts, the sheer number of variants in those manuscripts, and the subjective process involved in evaluating the external and internal evidence of each variant in order to make a reasonable guess about the original wording. I was also surprised to learn how many variants were intentional—the result of scribal deletions, additions, and alterations to the text in order to support a particular view or interpretation.

Textual critical study was emphasized because of the importance the seminary leadership placed on determining the text of the original autographs, which in their view was inerrant. I reasoned: If it is virtually impossible to determine with any certitude the original reading in a vast number of cases, then why did God not guide the text transmission process to make clear the original reading? Why did God not guarantee the preservation of the inerrant reading, if God went to all the trouble to inspire the original text in the first place? Thus began my questioning of the traditional Christian paradigm.

By the time I enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, I had abandoned belief in the inerrancy of the original autographs. At the time, Southern Seminary was still a highly respected theological school, blending both conservative and progressive elements. That would soon change with the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention. After I received my degree in 1993 and a new president was appointed, there was a mass exodus of moderate and progressive professors. The once highly acclaimed and applauded moderate school, known for its unique capacity to hold conservative and liberal perspectives in tension, devolved into a kind of glorified Bible institute. Many former students and professors are still grieving the loss two decades later.

One of the reasons there was such a fertile field within Southern Baptist churches for conservatives to plant and harvest their political and theological agendas was because of the failure of pastors trained in progressive Christian hermeneutics, theology, and spirituality to inform and teach their congregations what they had learned in seminary. Most churches, before the takeover, had both conservative and moderate members, but even in congregations where moderates outnumbered conservatives there was still a strong reluctance from pastors to teach what they knew about the nature of

Scripture, the process of theological reflection, and historical-critical methods of interpretation. Many pastors feared the wrath of their conservative members who tended to be more dogmatic and outspoken than moderates. It was not vocationally safe to stir up the waters with the truth, and the truth suffered.

In my reflection, “Hope for the Evangelical Church,” I call attention to the way Rob Bell, a former mega-church pastor and the author of *Love Wins*, has revolted against this trend. While he still refuses to be identified as a progressive, rejecting and despising all labels, he has certainly embraced many of the core convictions of progressive Christianity. James K. Wellman Jr. has written a fascinating account of Bell’s journey. He quotes emergent church leader Tony Jones, who in early 2011 predicted what would happen with Bell as a result of his release of *Love Wins*:

The Calvinistas will attack Rob as a universalist. Rob won’t care. *Christianity Today* will write a review that expresses some serious doubt and hesitation about Rob’s new book, but they won’t entirely throw him under the bus (yet). Rob won’t care. Lots of people, like me, will blog about this. Rob won’t care. Some people will even leave Mars Hill Church because they don’t like what’s in the book. Rob won’t care.¹

If the progressive Christian movement is to have a measurable impact upon American Christianity, it will take more pastors like Rob Bell who are willing to teach their congregations that healthy, transformative Christianity is a journey that leads to new places and fuels ever new and evolving questions in pursuit of truth. It most certainly will involve more small-town pastors, like myself, who will dare to elevate the pursuit and proclamation of truth above their professional careers.

This work consists of six chapters that explore the following themes from a progressive Christian viewpoint: Scripture, faith, Christianity, salvation, discipleship, and the Beatitudes. Each reflection is followed by a section titled “Going Deeper” that includes questions for personal reflection and group discussion. Though each reflection is complete in itself, the reflections are arranged in each chapter so that they build on each other, adding to the development of the theme. They weave together personal experiences and vignettes from literature and film, with creative biblical interpretation and theological exposition.

There are several ways to benefit from reading this book. Because each reflection stands on its own, one could use this as a devotional book, reading one reflection each day or however one chooses. The questions in the “Going Deeper” section can be used to provoke thoughtful reflection on the topic or perspective presented. These questions provide an excellent resource for church discipleship and study groups, or any reading group interested in exploring progressive Christian themes. Study group leaders can decide what questions to utilize. The format allows great flexibility for personal reading and reflection, as well as for study and discipleship groups.

These reflections are written with the intent of being intellectually stimulating, emotionally evoking, theologically substantive, and practically helpful. They are designed to stir the imagination, spark critical thinking, and nurture Christian faith and spirituality. Most of all, they are intended to ignite new questions that will inspire the reader to explore, think, and embrace the mystery and wonder of the Christian spiritual path. Thomas Merton said, “In the progress toward religious understanding, one does not go from answer to answer but from question to question. One’s questions are answered, not by clear, definitive answers, but by more pertinent and more crucial questions.”² It is my hope that this book will lead the reader to ask “more pertinent and more crucial questions.”

Notes

¹Tony Jones, “What’s Up with Rob Bell?” <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tony-jones/2011/02/28/whats-up-with-rob-bell/> (February 28, 2011). Referenced by James K. Wellman, Jr., *Rob Bell and a New American Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2012), 22.

²Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 29-30.