

# Theology Matters

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## Nein! A Response to Progressives

By Mark R. Patterson

### I. Prolegomena<sup>1</sup>

Through September and October of 1934 Karl Barth<sup>2</sup> gave his attention to writing “an outspoken piece of polemic”<sup>3</sup> directed against a defense of natural theology written by his friend Emil Brunner. Given the clear and provocative title, *Nein!*<sup>4</sup>, this concise statement was seen by Barth as addressing issues so crucial and central that the future of the church and its beliefs hung in the balance. That is not to say that Barth sought battle or relished it. Indeed, he begins by stating,

I am by nature a gentle being and entirely averse to all unnecessary disputes. If anyone, faced with the fact that he is here reading a controversial treatise, should suggest that it would be so much nicer if theologians dwelt together in unity, he may rest assured that I heartily agree with him.<sup>5</sup>

This was made even more difficult by the fact that Brunner and Barth were friends. With his opening paragraph Barth expressed his friendship and respect for Brunner but noted that there was far more at stake:

I should like nothing better than to walk together with him in concord, but in the Church we are concerned with truth, and today with an urgency such as probably has not been the case for centuries. And truth is not to be trifled with. If it divides the

spirits, they *are* divided. To oppose this commandment for the sake of a general idea of “peace” and “unity” would be a greater disaster for all concerned than such division.<sup>6</sup>

As much as Barth was adverse to controversy and disputes, he nevertheless believed that there were times when they were necessary. When the truth of the Gospel was at risk, when the church was in danger of losing the reason for her existence, it becomes not only important but necessary to boldly enter the fray and stand for the Gospel. As Barth wrote his response to Brunner the church in Germany had almost completely succumbed to the populist theology of its day, a belief that was built not upon the unique revelation of God in Christ but a theology built upon human feelings, presuppositions, aspirations, and prejudices. In other words, a natural theology of the very type Brunner espoused. That is not to say it did not use the right words—Jesus, faith, grace, and all the others—or to say that they had flagrantly or

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openly rejected the church's theology and historic perspectives. What they had done was turn to a new revelatory center and from this center redefine classic words and reinterpret traditional perspectives. Barth watched in horror and grief as the church rejected its astonishingly unique message of God's mercy, love, and grace in Christ and replaced it instead with an all too common message that simply affirmed the biases and opinions of the culture. The populist ideas and values were given a theological vocabulary, dressed up as divine, priceless, and authoritative, and presented to a people who had little interest or ability to discern the true and drastic changes that had occurred. Barth was astonished to find his friend and theological partner furthering it by defining grace as more a part of the natural order than a specific act of God uniquely tied to the person and work of Christ.

Barth felt compelled, even obligated, to enter the fray, and setting aside whatever reluctance he held, he directly assaulted Brunner's position and the errors of his theology. Sadly, the theological debate brought profound damage to their friendship, and the two remained estranged until after their respective retirements and not long before their deaths. And this is, of course, not the first time friendships have been broken and the church divided as the essence and center of the Gospel is defended and truth proclaimed. Indeed, it is inevitable. Jesus himself predicted that his word and work would divide (Mt. 10:34). From the earliest days this tragic promise was proven true<sup>7</sup>, and two-thousand years of church history have affirmed it time and again.

The Christian faith and hope have never existed without adversaries. The church has always had to live and grow amidst the real world with all its pressures, claims, lies, and distractions. Faith and hope have always had to exist amid a thousand reasons to the contrary. Many, overwhelmed by such claims, have lost hope and even faith. Some pine for a place from which the Christian life and ministry might be practiced with less distractions and corruptions to faith and hope. Throughout church history some have retreated to deserts or monasteries in search of a place free of faith destroying pressures. Others have sought or created utopian communities or new fellowships in hope of creating a fellowship that is more pure, focused, undistracted, and faithful. These are admirable goals in many ways but both church history and Scripture speak against the success, if not the heart, of such endeavors. For real faith and real hope have never been allowed to exist in a world free of forces and influences passionately at work to destroy them. Even worse, history (and Scripture) reveals that, as often as not, the worst and most effective pressures against the faith come from within the faith and thus actually accompany its success and vibrancy. Paul had to fight through the whole of his ministry with "false brothers" who sought

to distort the faith into rules and religious practices. Athanasius struggled throughout his life with the heresy of Arianism and its corrosion of orthodox Christology. Bonhoeffer's greatest struggles were not with the Nazis per se but with the church that had accepted the values of German culture and Nazi propaganda as Spirit inspired truth. For two thousand years the church has not only had to hope and believe amid a thousand reasons not to, it has had to defend the truth against errors, the worst of which arose from within its own ranks.

Our own day is no different as our church<sup>8</sup> is embroiled in conflict. Even more tragic is the fact that this conflict is largely internal as the church stands bitterly divided over the nature of our message, faith, and witness. Many over the last forty years have lost hope (or are losing it!) under the bitter conflicts that have enveloped us. Many are wondering what the future holds for us. No one, and certainly not I, can answer that with anything more than an educated guess. But there are some things that can be said. First is the fact that the church belongs to God, is established upon the foundation of Christ Jesus, built upon the words of the prophets and apostles and has been made by God into a holy dwelling place for God the Spirit. Second, this church must live amid conflicts and trials from without and heresy and error from within and, in spite of these evils and sorrows, must remain faithful to God and his promise. Third, it must recognize truth and error, Gospel and heresy, faith and folly all exist and exist often side by side. The church must have the wisdom to discern the differences, have the words to describe each for what it is, and have the courage to turn from error regardless of the cost. And thus, it must act. While the details of our future are vague and uncertain, the course for correcting wrong is rarely so obtuse. There are acts we can do and practice, words we can say and stands that we can take that will express our faith and hope in troubled times.

This paper is an attempt to address the current malaise of the church in hope of providing a helpful and accurate diagnosis of the church and to offer at least an initial treatment for restoration of health and function. My approach in these pages is primarily theological. It is first an attempt at diagnosis, believing that without an accurate appraisal of our health and situation, there can be no hope of treatment or cure. There is no doubt that some of what is said in this paper will offend certain persons and constituencies within the church. This is not my intent or desire, for I too despise conflict and strife. But such struggles are, I believe, unavoidable and inevitable when we keep our life and message centered upon the person and work of Jesus or endeavor to turn the church away from the pop theology currently in vogue for the truth of the Gospel centered upon the Christ of Scripture. Such conflict is certain if we are to truly move the church from the dysfunction that has for

decades characterized us, to a real health and a missional life that is faithful and favored by God. This paper calls upon all in the church to look honestly and deeply at the state of the church, at our history, our doctrine and beliefs, and how we relate to one another. It calls for an honest appraisal of ideas and practices in the belief that only by courageously addressing the facts before us will we have any chance of finding peace, health, and faithfulness.

In the end, this paper is also an “outspoken piece of polemic” that seeks to shout to our increasingly blind and wayward church an impassioned NO! to the alien and ungodly values and doctrines of Progressive theology that are increasingly shaping the church. NO! to the culturally shaped gospel that can not see beyond an ethereal natural grace that denies any real work of God. NO! to ear tickling “prophets” who dress the culture’s latest values in theological garb and call it prophetic. NO! to the self-proclaimed authorities of subjectivism, relativism, and secularism that have taken their stand against the Word of God. NO! to the arrogant rejection of constitutional standards established by the church and abandoned by a rebellious and self-centered minority. NO! to lazy and apathetic believers who turn from the Lord and his church in this hour of need and cry “peace and unity” when there is neither. NO! to the centralized bureaucracy that boasts of the Spirit’s leading and power while displaying almost universal ignorance and inexperience of the Lord who is the Spirit. NO! to the neo-paganism that re-imagines God after its depraved visions and then builds high places in the hearts of all who would receive this new gospel. And NO! to those who use the grace of Jesus Christ as license and opportunity to merely fulfill the desires of their flesh and minds.

But this passionate and repeated NO! is dialectically a heartfelt and (at least) equally passionate YES! YES! to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us, in Christ, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. YES! to the cross, declared folly by the world yet revealed to be the power of God and wisdom of God to we who believe. YES! to the Triune God of Grace, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who in the trinity of persons accomplished the singular work of our salvation. YES! to the Father of grace who has freed us from the folly of human religion with all its inherent idolatries and revealed instead his Son so that God might be worshiped in Spirit and in truth. YES! to the mercy and holiness of the Father who does not look with ambivalence upon our sin but confronts it with all the wrath and judgment such rebellion deserves while in the same act freeing us from the chains of sin and darkness that have held us captive. YES! to God’s vast love that makes all people equal, in need and depravity, in love and mercy. YES! to the hope of redemption, the certainty of his love, the reality of his grace, the power

of his Spirit and the coming reign of our Savior and King. YES! to his church, established so solidly upon the rock of faith that not even the gates of hell will prevail against it. YES! to the church that is his Body, the fullness of him who fills all in all. And YES! to his promise that the church will one day be presented to Christ as a beautiful and spotless bride.

This paper is indeed an “outspoken piece of polemic,” not from any desire to cause conflict or even because conflict already exists but because the heart of the Gospel—and thus the future of the church—is at stake. The Progressive worldview and its inherent natural theology is once again eroding the Gospel and replacing it with a vapid and anemic substitute that is compatible with the culture but powerless to address or help it. But truly, truth is not to be trifled with and if it divides the spirits, they are divided. To oppose the commandment, to lose the Gospel, for the sake of some vague hope of “peace” and “unity” would be a greater disaster and act of unfaithfulness than any division that might come when the truth is proclaimed. This polemic is an impassioned NO! to the folly, naïveté and errors of Progressive theology. But it is this in full hope that under the Father’s holiness and grace it is not too late for the Presbyterian Church (USA) to return to its ancient love and with voices raised in clarity and divine anointing that we might proclaim again the YES! of the Father to a world that currently stands without hope and without God (Eph. 2:12).

## II. The Setting

### A. Health and Illness

Problems, difficulties, errors, deficiencies, weaknesses, and failures come in nearly infinite varieties and forms. Some are minor, easily seen, quickly corrected and have only minimal implications. Others are profoundly complex, difficult to diagnose and all but impossible to heal. The former are inconvenient and frustrating. The latter can threaten the very existence of those involved. Illustrations of this abound and we can see the reality and truth of this in many forms. Our bodies are constantly assailed by bacteria and viruses that bring sickness and disease. Some of these are just colds, annoying, miserable, and distracting but hardly destructive or worrisome. But others can be severe, seriously threatening our health and even lives. And it gets even more complex. Initially it may be hard to discern or diagnose the real problem. What feels like flu may in fact be leukemia; what feels like heartburn may in fact be a heart attack. And to someone whose immune system is weak or compromised even a cold can lead to something more serious. In medicine it is essential that the true source behind the symptoms be

accurately and properly diagnosed before one can work to bring healing.

Parallels to this may be found when one assesses the health of organizations. Whatever the form or reason for organizing—business, community, government, service, ministry—all organizations must struggle to maintain institutional health. Threats to the health (and thus the effectiveness) of the institution or organization are inevitable in a world of broken (sinful) people. Some threats are small and are little more than frustrating and time consuming. But others are more far reaching and destructive. Gossip, sexual misconduct, dishonesty, broken relationships, greed, pride, and other ills easily damage the working relationships necessary if the organization is to remain healthy, functional, and effective. If these or other ills are found in “crucial organs” such as those in leadership or if they are allowed to fester and spread, or if they remain undetected or unaddressed, the very life, work, and future of the organization may be threatened. One thinks of the rampant dishonesty at Enron that in the end not only destroyed the company but brought down Arthur Andersen, one of the most respected accounting firms in the nation.

The word *dysfunctional* is used to describe persons, institutions, and organizations whose “illness” has become sufficiently serious as to render them incapable of fulfilling their responsibilities or purpose for which they exist. Even more, dysfunctional behavior is actually counterproductive and destructive; more than merely limiting health and effectiveness it is actually ruinous to life and purpose. One of the powers of dysfunction is its ability to hide within structures, behaviors, and relationships which mask the seriousness of the disease. The depth of a person’s dysfunction may be hid by friends, family members, or colleagues who, through a variety of means and for a number of reasons, actually enable the behavior to continue and even deepen. Shame, ignorance, fear, justifications, and countless other reasons often lead people to allow things to remain as they are (which in reality means get worse), unaddressed, uncorrected and allowed to fester and spread.<sup>9</sup>

Institutional “ill-health” is not merely a possibility but an inevitability, and thus the future health and effectiveness of every organization depends upon constant and courageous vigilance if the institution or organization is to remain healthy and functional. Those in leadership must have the wisdom to see problems and the skills and courage to address them before they become destructive to the institution. It is a necessary part of institutional health and effectiveness that those in leadership are able to accurately diagnose the problems assailing it, from the apparently insignificant to those which are broadly threatening and with an accurate diagnosis immediately take the necessary steps

to encourage health and vibrancy. This will usually require moving beyond feelings to honestly look at what the findings reveal. At times serious diagnoses call for serious and even painful treatments, if the disease is to be checked and fullness of health restored. This is certainly true of the PC (USA). For we are a dying denomination in need of accurate and clear diagnosis, acceptance of what is needed, and courageous submission to the process of treatment and restoration.

My experience, after more than twenty years of pastoral ministry, is that few people in the church are willing to do this. A few prefer vicious fusillades leveled at perceived enemies without ever actually addressing the issues and practices at stake.<sup>10</sup> Far too many prefer to deny the situation, hoping it will go away and everything will get better. This paper is presented in the hope that the church will wrestle with the ideas it presents and the course it recommends. But will this happen? When the paper *Appropriate Response* (responding to PUP)—admittedly controversial in its ideas and recommendations—came before the Presbytery of Santa Barbara not a single critic actually referred to ideas presented in the paper or demonstrated how these might be unconstitutional or unbiblical. Instead, critics used non-specific pejorative statements to denounce the paper and those behind it. Sadly, this has become the Presbyterian way, for it is far easier to malign or ignore our opponents than actually wrestle with what they are saying. While this is done by “both sides” of the debate, my experience is that it is more often a characteristic of the liberal or progressive wing of the church.<sup>11</sup> Fully aware that Scripture, doctrine, tradition, and the history of the church, not to mention logic, bring a devastating critique to Progressive theology, they resort instead to emotional and romantic arguments, pleas for tolerance under a gospel of relativism, and outright refusal to discuss the real points of disagreement between us. Until we talk about the issues and wrestle together over what we believe to be true, the church will not be free of the strife that has engulfed us and will instead only see it worsen.

## **B. Diagnosis**

There can be little doubt that the church we have loved and served is in the midst of a profound crisis that is clearly worsening. The hope vested in the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity has not only failed to materialize, but the passing of its report has served to exacerbate the traumas tearing at the church. Numerous presbyteries have responded by passing statements that call for the strict enforcement of ordination standards believed to have been weakened and even annulled by the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly’s approval of the Task Force Report. The report’s recommendations—now authoritative interpretations—may open the door for local license<sup>12</sup> and certainly have led increasing numbers of sessions and presbyteries to

clearly articulate what beliefs and practices they consider essential and non-negotiable.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, many are taking up issues of property and per capita; initiating legal action between churches and judicatories; and even separating from the PC (USA).<sup>14</sup>

The New Wineskins, a group formed for the renewal of the church, has with its most recent meeting (February 2007) made clear that leaving the PC (USA) to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church may be the more preferred and likely course. This potential exodus, while small in one sense, is nevertheless profoundly significant. With roughly a hundred and fifty churches, they represent the potentially largest mass-exodus the church has seen in many decades. In response to this the Stated Clerk took the unprecedented move of sending to every pastor a letter regarding this situation with the request that it be read before congregations.

Recent reports on finances within the denomination show that while the denomination expected a significant decrease in both membership and giving this year, they are actually occurring at a rate far greater than predicted. The number of churches withholding per capita contributions has increased by over one hundred percent in the last year. The Office of the General Assembly is currently working to reduce its 2008 budget by five percent, giving staff members 45 days in which to accept voluntary separation packages or face terminations.<sup>15</sup> This is the fourth downsizing in the Louisville offices since 1993. While our history as a church is replete with controversy and conflict, it is painfully clear that we stand before the most threatening crisis in our church's long history.<sup>16</sup>

And we are not handling it well. Instead of courageously and openly addressing the issues that are tearing at the health of the church and limiting its witness, we have instead taken every opportunity to avoid the real problems. Task forces are formed that fail to lead the church into anything more than another change in polity, completely ignoring the fact that it is not polity that is dividing us but theology and ethics. And what we all fail to realize is the *fact*, measurable by every standard one might employ, that the church is more divided, smaller, less financially secure, less missional, and increasingly irrelevant and parochial than it used to be and these grow worse each year. In spite of all the church's work and ministry, in spite of every task force and committee, in spite of all our work of renewal, whatever successes we may rightly claim, we have failed to reverse forty years of atrophy and decline. Instead we have become less functional, less productive, and less healthy. We are slowly but truly dying.

### III. The Crisis is Theological

The issues tearing apart the church are neither peripheral nor incidental. At stake is nothing less than our integrity, our future, our mission and our message. At question is whether we will abandon the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, for a populist, culturally determined gospel that is hostile to the work of Christ. Ensnared within claims of piety and words of faith are alien principles that have entered our church, damaging the theological basis and standards that have defined and shaped the church. Examples include the growing belief that all religions are effectively the same, that Jesus is only one savior among others (many?), that the Scriptures are not authoritative or timeless but subject to changing interpretations and meanings. Behind such ideas—and what is really at the heart of our current debates—is a natural theology that forms the essence of the “Progressive theology” in the PC (USA) in contrast to “Evangelical theology” which forms the essence of Reformed theology and thus the church's tradition. In spite of shared language, there are profound, even mutually exclusive, differences between the Progressive theology that has long sought center stage and the Evangelical theology that has long formed the center and foundation of Presbyterian belief and currently defines the majority of our members and congregations. While some may hope for and proclaim that there is room within the PC (USA) for both (or all) sides,<sup>17</sup> the fact remains that these perspectives are mutually exclusive and irreconcilable. One can not declare Jesus “the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only way to the Father”<sup>18</sup> and simultaneously declare that he is but one way among many. One can not affirm the authority of Scripture over all matters of faith and practice<sup>19</sup> while simultaneously proclaiming that experience, emotions, and opinions have equal (or greater!) voice. One can not hold that the ethical standards of Scripture are to be required while simultaneously holding that truth is uncertain and each person must choose his/her own beliefs and behaviors. There is always room for diversity within the church when these beliefs deal with non-essentials or are not mutually exclusive. But that is not the case today within the PC (USA). Essentials upon which the church has been built and which exist as standards in our Confessions are routinely denied or simply ignored while counterfeit alternatives are raised as viable options without any recognition that these contradict Scripture and our confessions. With the loss of our defining doctrines the PC (USA) has become increasingly directionless, messageless, and meaningless.

## A. Differences between Evangelicals and Progressives<sup>20</sup>

Labels are always risky. They may carry with them historical or interpretive “baggage” that forces them to express more than may be intended. They may be, or be felt to be, pejorative and, thus, unfair or intentionally inaccurate. Some are so broadly used in so many contexts that they bear no precise meaning or clear definition. Certainly, such labels as “conservative” and “liberal,” “left” and “right” may be so criticized and, thus, wisely avoided. These terms and others like “centrist” or “moderate” are wholly relative and, thus, without any inherent meaning when separated from their correlation to either or both poles.

Nevertheless, in spite of the difficulties, it is usually helpful and often required that some label be used to define the issues involved. Believing this to be so, and with full awareness that the terms are neither perfect nor without “baggage,” we will use the terms *Evangelical* and *Progressive* to reflect the two sides of the debates addressed in this paper. The reasons for this are obvious, if imperfect. First, the words accurately reflect and convey the realities, ideas and methodologies involved. Second, each is used regularly by both sides as appropriate self-descriptions.<sup>21</sup> And, finally, the historical context—both ancient and postmodern—allow these terms to more deeply express the nature of the conflict we face.

Progressive theology is most simply described as “bottom up” while Evangelical theology may be described as “top down.” Obviously these are over simplified and thus not wholly accurate but they allow us to begin wrestling with the issues at stake. Evangelical (i.e. Reformed) theology has always started at the top, beginning with God’s revelation of himself in Christ as witnessed to in Scripture and then secondarily with questions of how we are to respond to this good news. Progressive theology works from the opposite direction. It begins with us and how we experience God and then deduces from these who God is and what He does. This simple difference has profound implications and leads to vastly different perspectives. To find an example one need only look at the issue of homosexuality. Where Evangelical theology would hold that the will of God—revealed through His acts and testified to in Scripture—declares the practice of homosexuality to be sinful, Progressive theology holds that because such feelings or attractions exist in one whom God made, then God logically approves of the practice and lifestyle. From the top down the lifestyle is viewed as antithetical to the Christian life while from the bottom up it is viewed as a faithful expression of God’s diverse creativity. These views, based upon profoundly different starting points and theological perspectives and methodologies are impossible to reconcile. No significant attempt at evaluating or reconciling such disparate doctrines has

been made and the church has instead been content to grant both the stamp of legitimacy and propriety in the name of diversity and the nebulous ethic of tolerance. These differing starting points are extremely important and lie behind all other differences between Progressives and Evangelicals.

The differences between Evangelicalism and Progressivism are profound. But this does not necessarily mean obvious. In fact, the shared language, combined with a broad desire to avoid conflict, has encouraged many people to assume that the differences are essentially insignificant and only the narrow-minded and bigoted would endeavor to say otherwise. Others may well acknowledge that there are significant distinctions between the Evangelical and Progressive doctrines and values but may think these differences are not sufficiently broad to make them mutually exclusive. In addition, errors that might exist in either camp are not sufficiently heterodox to place them outside of the church or Christian faith. This is a very important point and one that we as a church must address. If the two are saying essentially the same thing; if, in fact, these are merely different ways of explaining what is essentially the same truth and reality, then the conflict and disunity that has consumed us is both misplaced and easily corrected. Acceptance, tolerance and grace are all that is required and there is nothing left but to “celebrate our diversity.” But if, in fact, there are vast differences between the two, then the means of achieving peace, unity and purity are far more difficult and the stakes far greater. If the two are in fact more than different names for nearly identical perspectives, if they present different conclusions regarding truth, then something vast and important is at stake. And if these differences are significant, or even mutually exclusive, then we are under obligation to discern error, wherever it is found, and name it for what it is. If in the end we are about the truth of God and the truth of ourselves, then we must courageously ask if the Progressive and Evangelical theological conclusions are really equally valid. We must with great wisdom discern the real message of each side, evaluate the differences before the Scriptures and doctrinal standards of the church, and boldly denounce any error or belief that seeks to annul or ignore these standards. And where either or both fail to discover, discern, or respond to truth, this must be recognized, confronted, and corrected.

A definition of Progressive theology is, in many ways, an oxymoron.<sup>22</sup> Progressivism is wary of definitions that are fixed, timeless and objective, preferring instead a dynamic and subjective understanding of itself. Any definition of Progressivism or Progressive theology that statically limits or denies its intrinsic plurality likely will be viewed by its adherents as shallow and inaccurate. That is to say, Progressive theology inherently is pluralistic and broad and thus difficult to define. Nevertheless, certain statements may be made.

First, its adherents endeavor to create a theology that is both Reformed and ecumenical. The traditions of Calvin and other reformers are valued and received “with critical respect.”<sup>23</sup> But Progressives want to clearly acknowledge that there is more than one way of being Reformed and certainly more ways of being Christian than Reformed. Progressivism, while seeking to honor the Reformed tradition, would be seen as part of a larger Christian and even non-Christian culture. Believing that God has spoken through more than just the Reformed branch of the Christian faith and, for that matter, through other religions and experiences, allows Progressives to see revelation across a broad plane. The person of Jesus accurately and powerfully reveals the grace of God and, thus, is of extreme importance. But the grace of God revealed in Jesus is so powerful that it can not be isolated or singularly bound to Jesus. Rather, the grace of God manifests itself across the whole of creation. Thus, Progressives reject simple distinctions between the sacred and profane, the Christian faith and faith in general, Special Revelation (Scripture) and General Revelation (creation). The pluralistic character of Progressivism leads its adherents to see and hear God through a broad range of voices, acts and places. Not only is revelation broad, it is progressive—unfolding and enlarging through grand events and personal experience. Yet, all these, because of the very breadth and progress of revelation, only continue to unveil God’s transforming grace. Progressives hold that salvation comes through grace alone. But this grace is so extravagant and generous it can not be limited to one simple perspective or experience but may be expected to manifest in and through other religions and faiths. This makes Progressivism seem extremely hopeful and optimistic.

Thus, Progressives would prefer to describe themselves as theocentric rather than Christocentric. That is not to say that Jesus is unimportant or irrelevant. Rather, Jesus is vitally important, not as the object or the center of faith, but as an important point of its revelation. Jesus reveals God’s grace and love, but the focus and interest of faith is not so much Jesus but the God who is behind him and working in and through him. Nor is Jesus made the center or object of revelation. Jesus “demonstrates and discloses that God is faithful”<sup>24</sup> and, thus, shapes our picture of God. Christ then serves as a window—perhaps even the largest and clearest window—into the gracious heart of God. But he is not the only window, nor is the window meant to be the object of our faith and witness. Jesus unveils or reveals the grace of God. We are saved by this grace alone but not by Christ alone.

Progressivism also is profoundly pragmatic. Its interest is found more in the dynamic of a changed world than a changed life. That is not to say that privatized or inner spiritual experiences are of no value or to be disdained. But Progressivism cares more about addressing issues

of injustice, inequality, ecology, poverty, gender, and other social ills and problems. Progressivism, in its pragmatism, considers itself profoundly humane, ever seeking for the full inclusion and restoration of the outcast and disenfranchised. This, coupled with a broad view of both grace and revelation, leads Progressives to openly accept a wide diversity of beliefs and lifestyles. Grace, revelation, and pragmatic concerns that right perceived wrongs, all combine to define beliefs and practices of Progressives. This can not be overstated. In Progressive theology, the concepts of grace, revelation and practical response intertwine. Because of the efficacy and breadth of grace, its revelation may be found in a variety of places, voices and experiences. Because God reveals himself through many and diverse means, few (none?) should be excluded as incapable of receiving, knowing or bearing his revelation of grace. And anything that breaks the power of injustice, regardless of the source or larger message, may be seen as part of God’s redeeming love and grace. The Progressive, of course, decides what is and is not unjust.

While Progressivism is difficult to describe because of its dynamic and pluralistic nature, an accurate definition of Evangelicalism is equally difficult, but for very different reasons. Evangelicalism, while being less fluid, is far older and more widely used. Across the centuries, many definitions—some accurate, some not; some friendly and some pejorative—have combined to create a word so broad in meaning as to be almost meaningless. But it is this history and the fact that its roots lie in the Bible itself that renders this word important and illumining.

Evangelical comes from the Greek word *euangelion*<sup>25</sup> meaning, literally, “good news” and referring to the message of salvation made available through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This simple summary touches upon many important characteristics. First, Evangelicalism (and the Evangelical message) essentially is optimistic, hopeful and positive. It is good news. It refers to the will and work of the Triune God who is for us, and to the message of how this has occurred. Even where this message is hard or perceived as judgmental, the aim always is positive as the lost are found, the broken made whole, and the sinful redeemed. This optimistic and hopeful message is further enhanced by its focus on salvation as wholly the work of the grace of God who has made our plight and need his own. The Evangelical message is centered on the joyous good news that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, and this work is efficacious and gracious. According to Karl Barth, “Evangelical means informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, as heard afresh in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation by a direct return to Holy Scripture.” Evangelicalism, when used in its strict theological sense, is not bound to a particular tradition but cuts through all sectarian lines. Evangelicals are

first upwardly or vertically focused with the horizontal focus coming as a certain and necessary response to revelation and relationship with God. Evangelicalism is centered upon God, not humanity; the sacrifice given to us, not the sacrifice we make; the power of God to heal and save, not the intrinsic power or worth of the human being. It draws its guidance from Scripture, finding here the authoritative revelation of both God and the faithful human response to his revealed will. Donald Bloesch has noted that “Evangelical theology aims not only to be faithful to Scripture, but also to expose the unfaithfulness of the Christian community to Scripture.” Evangelicalism is profoundly concerned with the poor and the righting of injustice. And it is all these (and more!) because of its passionate Christocentrism which rigorously holds Jesus Christ at the center of all of life, the focus of God’s activity, the revelation of his will, and the source and goal of all creation.

Evangelicalism is missional. It is the message of God’s act of salvation and the means by which it may be known and experienced. Even more, it sees this proclamation as the means by which this salvation comes to people and is received by them. The message of the Gospel is seen as unique and authoritative and, thus, entails an appeal to repentance, decision and conversion from that which is false to that which God demands and offers. Not only is grace uniquely bound to the person and work of Jesus, but the message of the church, if it is to be truly a message of grace, is singularly bound to his incarnation, life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension. In contrast to Progressivism, Evangelicalism holds that this message must be told, taught, proclaimed, and received if salvation is to become known and experienced. For God is not known rightly or completely outside of Christ, making the message of his person and work necessary for salvation.

Even more precisely, the Gospel message is focused on the cross and the atoning work of Christ. The Evangelical message, from the preaching of Paul to the preaching of Billy Graham, has had no interest in human religion, spirituality or rituals. Its interest always and only has been on the utterly unique and incomparable sacrifice occurring with the death of Christ. Thus, Paul could write:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the Gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made

foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.<sup>26</sup>

These words reflect the message that has characterized the Evangelical theology for two thousand years. Believing that the Father has demonstrated his grace and love through the death of his Son in our place, has rendered all other philosophies, theologies, religions, and rituals powerless.

Consequently, grace is bound to and explained in and through this event. Grace is not an esoteric kindness or abstract acceptance but the primary characteristic of a specific act within time and space. Grace is not a divine benevolence generally offered but a divine act precisely offered. Grace is a description of this event and its effect. Grace describes not a general attitude, but the mysterious exchange wherein our sins became no longer ours, but Christ’s; and Christ’s righteousness remains no longer his alone, but ours. On the cross, God addressed sin, showing its depth and severity, exercising his righteous judgment of sin by evoking the penalty of death, yet bearing this penalty himself so that we might be ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. Jesus Christ “has not only borne man’s enmity against God’s grace, revealing it in all its depth, he has borne the far greater burden, the righteous wrath of God against those who are enemies of His grace, the wrath which must fall on us.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, grace, within the Evangelical tradition, means the gift of salvation freely given in and through the cross where Christ gave his life as an atoning sacrifice.<sup>28</sup> To define grace apart from this event is to understand nothing of either grace or the cross.

The Evangelical faith is unashamedly Christocentric. The person and work of Christ, as the primary work of God for our salvation, is held and proclaimed as the one way of salvation. The power of the Christ event—from incarnational birth to ascension—is seen as so uniquely magnificent that all other points of grace pale in comparison. Christ is not of course the only place or point of grace. Indeed, every breath we draw, every beat of our hearts, every act of love received is a gift of God and thus an act of grace. But these, for all their value and wonder, are but pale impressions of God’s defining act of grace seen in the person and work of Jesus. The Evangelical therefore does not deny grace broadly given and experienced. But a distinction is made between this general grace and special grace, between gifts commonly given and the gift uniquely given in Christ, between gifts in life and the gift of life that leads



to salvation. For Evangelicals, grace is never allowed to describe an abstract benevolence nor is it isolated from the concrete event of the incarnation. For here alone is grace defined, understood, and received.

Evangelicals are people of Christ because they are people of the Word. Scripture is not merely important, it is uniquely authoritative. Human authors in specific historical settings and contexts were divinely inspired to produce the authoritative record of God's revelation. The Bible is not God nor does it replace him or stand in his stead. Rather it reveals God's saving works in history. And because the focus of these saving acts in Scripture is Jesus Christ, Evangelicals have centered their faith, witness, and life upon him. This reflects the simple and profoundly important fact that Evangelicals passionately strive to remain faithful to Scripture.

In the end, regardless of labels or self-description, what is important is whether or not what we believe is true. At issue is not merely who we are within the Christian spectrum or how we describe ourselves. Something far deeper and significant is at risk. In the end, it is not about us, what we think or believe, or what we call ourselves. In the Christian faith, and especially within its Reformed branch, the focus has been and must always remain upon God. The Gospel is his story. It is about the Father's heart, the Son's sacrifice, and the Spirit's sanctifying work which together brings redemption to a fallen and hurting human race. The task of theology is to determine the means by which this reality may be known and accurately described. At issue is nothing less than the truth of God and the truth of who we are. And to fail, in methodology or conclusions, is to live a lie and proclaim a lie.

The differences between Progressive and Evangelical theology are not only vast but are, at many points, mutually exclusive and thus irreconcilable. In spite of shared vocabulary, history and structure, Evangelicals and Progressives are describing two different realities, two different worldviews, two different methodologies, two different theological perspectives. Evangelical faith shares with Progressivism a theocentric emphasis, yet with essential distinctions. Evangelicalism is ever, only, and always Trinitarian in its understanding of God. This places its accompanying Christocentrism in perspective. Evangelicalism is not Christomonist—a singular focus upon the person of Christ that ignores or denies the Father and Spirit—but Christocentric. That is, Christ is seen as the center of three crucial issues: revelation, redemption and relationship. Evangelicals hold that while revelation occurs generally in creation (Rom. 1), this revelation remains obtuse and incapable of providing salvation. One can not know God apart from or outside of the person of Jesus, for it is here that God has chosen to reveal his nature and work of redemption. Evangelicalism denies that revelation occurs in the breadth or variety believed by the Progressive school.

In light of this, Evangelicalism holds to the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to salvation.<sup>29</sup> Jesus is not only the focal point of revelation, he is, through the saving efficacy of this revelation, the single means of salvation. Salvation is something that occurs in and through him.<sup>30</sup> This differs from the perspective held in Progressivism, where salvation occurs within a community or social structure. Progressivism is reluctant to limit God's saving and revelatory work to the person of Jesus and instead sees both as occurring on a far broader scale. Jesus is seen as the way to salvation for Christians but not necessarily for all who may find the truth of God through other means, beliefs, and practices. They do not deny Jesus as Savior but do not limit salvation to Christ alone.

While both Progressivism and Evangelicalism are optimistic, they are so for different reasons. The former finds its ground for optimism in the breadth of God's grace to accept people as they are. This acceptance-grace flows broadly and generously through many conduits. Evangelicalism's optimism rests on the power and depth of that grace manifesting in the singular point of Jesus Christ. The difference is profound and has far reaching implications. Progressives focus upon the concept of grace while Evangelicals focus on the person in whom it most powerfully manifests. Progressives are significantly more optimistic regarding inherent nature of the human race and the power of sin. While sin is certainly real, Progressives generally shy from such Reformed concepts as "total depravity." Sin is often (but certainly not always) identified with unjust social structures rather than the condition of the human heart. Evangelicalism, while affirming that sin will certainly and inevitably manifest within social structures, nevertheless holds that sin is a disease of the human heart that is reflected in society. This sin is pervasive and powerful, affecting the whole person and staining every thought, word, and act with its tint. Or, to use classical theological language, Evangelicalism holds to the doctrine of total depravity. But where Evangelicals are more pessimistic at the start, they are in fact more optimistic at the end; believing that the saving work of Christ Jesus has not brought minor adjustments or simple changes but a new birth of indescribable proportions. Jesus is more than a mere guide or moral or spiritual example. He has delivered us from an inner blindness and addiction to self and remade us in the image of Christ that had been effectively lost through human sin.

Evangelical faith is a confessional faith while Progressivism is not. That is to say, Evangelicalism holds to standards of faith and practice that have been passed down through centuries. Though ever striving to deepen and expand its understanding of revelation, Evangelicalism seeks this in a way that remains faithful to earlier traditions and conclusions of the church. The reasons for this are consistent with the larger

perspectives of Evangelicalism. Because of its Christocentrism and belief that Christ is the focal point of God's revelation, it seeks to affirm and hold to faithful interpretations of this event as they have appeared across time. Progressivism, on the other hand, is only loosely or mildly confessional. Because revelation is progressive and thus not bound to the Christ event, past interpretations or expressions of this event are of only limited interest. They may or may not describe how and where God is revealing himself today. These again reflect profound differences which affect our understanding and pursuit of peace, unity and purity. For at issue is, once again, the truth about God, how he is known, how he acts, and what he does. Evangelicalism, with its confessional perspective holds that God has acted finally and perfectly in Christ and the purpose of theology is to describe this event and its implications in faithful detail. Progressivism, on the other hand, holds that this event, while important, is not unique, and thus looks for God's revelation in the grand panoply of human diversity.

## B. The Theological Struggle

Conflict is not new to the church. We all may wish this were not so, but the fact remains that the church, through the whole of its history, has had to weather squabbles, strife and schism. Some of these conflicts center upon issues that are small and isolated in time, place, and persons. These did not deal with ultimate issues at the center of faith, but with marginal questions of belief and practice. But other controversies are universal, threatening the very life of the church and the message of the Gospel. One thinks here of Arianism, which championed a heretical Christology, and Pelagianism, which taught that salvation was earned and grace helpful, but unnecessary. These ancient conflicts, unlike the others, were not lost to history, but remain influential today. It is incumbent upon the church to carefully discern the issues at hand and respond appropriately. The church must be guided by the ancient axiom *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas* (In necessary things unity, in doubtful things liberty, in all things charity). Secondary issues, those things we might call *dubiis*—such as worship styles, music, liturgy, method of baptism, etc.—allow for a great breadth of liberty. The worship of God from a pure heart, in Spirit and in truth, is an essential and necessary element of the Christian life. How this worship occurs—high church or low, seeker sensitive or traditional, organ or guitar—are secondary and non-essential issues. And there rightly is a great deal of freedom to be granted across the church as it worships through a variety of ways.

But there are, and always have been, issues that are neither peripheral nor secondary, but are essential. The church has never existed without such essential tenets and practices—even when not explicitly stated—and

often has had to risk her very life to maintain and proclaim them. The uniqueness of Christ's atonement, his dual nature, salvation by grace through faith, his bodily resurrection, and the authority of Scripture are and always have been understood and held as essential tenets of the Christian faith. Perhaps more important is the fact these are not doctrines unique to the Reformed tradition but are held across the whole of the Church for the whole of its existence. Such doctrines are not secondary, but necessary elements to the church's faith, life and witness, and their loss means—at the very least—a complete redefinition of the church and—at worst—its dissolution and loss. While liberty and breadth are to be granted to secondary issues of faith and practice, those doctrines that are essential to the faith require genuine unity. And, where unity over essential tenets is denied, there can be no hope of peace or purity.

The crisis we face revolves around primary and necessary, not secondary doctrines. The issues disrupting the peace, unity and purity of the Presbyterian Church (USA) are neither peripheral nor incidental, but are, on the contrary, threatening the life of the church. While many of the battles and controversies have swirled around various issues of homosexuality, it would be a grave mistake—indicative of only the simplest discernment—to assume that homosexuality is the real battle or point of primary concern. At stake is something far deeper and, therefore, far more important. The crisis before the Presbyterian Church (USA) today is one that challenges our understanding of God's very nature, how it is that we know him, and how we are healed, restored and forgiven. Thus, at issue is nothing less than the first commandment and what it means to worship God rightly and truly.

We are facing a crisis over the nature of revelation. And in this crisis, we are being called to decide whether we will remain faithful to the Reformation principles of faith alone, Scripture alone, grace alone, and Christ alone or whether we will, at the same time, allow revelation and salvation to be found in other places, voices and events. With this, we see again that the issues involved are not peripheral, but central to our Reformed tradition and essential to the Gospel. The divisions and discord so prevalent within our church are theologically bound. Their resolution requires the precision and particularity of our theological confession.<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

The church is dying of tolerance. The politically correct but ultimately vapid act of accepting any belief and any practice has led to an anemic church that has lost sight of what it believes. In attempting to stand for everything, we have become a church that stands for

nothing. And in a country where countless churches are growing and thriving, our witness is drastically shrinking each year. Where the churches of Africa and Asia are thriving and reaching millions, the mainline churches of North America and Europe have withered and become functionally irrelevant. The difference between us and churches that are growing and flourishing is our faith and message. Where they have something to believe in, something greater than themselves, something magnificently true to look toward, we present the gospel of tolerance which is the good news that no belief is significantly better than another, and each person is free to choose what is right in his or her own eyes. While in Africa they have the grace of God manifesting in Christ with the power to give spiritual rebirth, we proclaim grace as a divine benevolence abstractly spread through every religious belief and kind act. While they have a message of shattered lives made whole through Christ, we have a Christ who affirms all are whole and need nothing more from him. They offer the power of God; we provide religious programs. In all this, we have become a church that has lost the Gospel. Not totally and not universally to be sure yet nevertheless, we have increasingly rejected the good news of the Gospel, the message of God's atoning work through the death of his Son and the life giving power of the resurrection. In rejecting this message, we have become a denomination without a message of any power or significance.

It is time that we adopt, formally or informally, a zero tolerance policy toward that which distorts the truth of God, the message of the Gospel, and the life of the church. We must acknowledge that much of what is believed and disseminated today within the Presbyterian Church (USA) is outside of and contrary to the Christian faith. If such beliefs are allowed to coexist with orthodox doctrine, the church will divide. If this is to be avoided and peace restored, we must act in a way that is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive: we must say NO! We must no longer tolerate the ambivalent doctrines and immoral ethics that the Progressive wing of the church continues to force upon the church as the only true interpretation of the Christian faith. For we can not remain Christian when our beliefs reject and deny all the Word means. We can not remain God's church when we accept as truth ideas that contradict his Word and work. We can not call ourselves godly when we take up the ethics and values of the culture and extol these over his command. In the name of love, for God and others, we must be intolerant of all that defames and distorts the truth of the former and forbids the latter from finding real life through the singular saving work of Jesus.

It is time for the church to choose whom it will follow: whether it will be the magnanimous gods of the age who rise without form or reality and who speak equally through every opinion and feeling or whether we will

turn again to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. Many of our number have chosen the former and effectively left the fold of the PC (USA) and its theological traditions. Their boasts of faithfulness and full participation to the contrary, they have already left the church, if not in fact, then in principle. It is time, in the name of integrity and honesty, for those who have denied and rejected the central tenets of the Reformed faith to graciously separate from the body and leave the church to those who have remained faithful to its standards, doctrine, and traditions. It is time for all within the PC (USA) to decide afresh whom it will follow. It is time for us all to say NO! to that which annuls, corrodes, and distorts the Gospel (the YES! of God), NO! to that which has never been a part of Scripture, the Church, or our Confessions, NO! to the apathy that has made us a model of dysfunction and irrelevance. It is time to bow the knee to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, in reverence, love, and awe, and then stand to proclaim without apology, doubt or fear, the truth of his gospel.

<sup>1</sup> *Prolegomena*, literally *to say beforehand*, is a statement made before the main body of writing in which the rules and methods of study were set forth. In the nineteenth century the prolegomena was believed to be and written as an objective, unbiased, undogmatic statement. Karl Barth rightly rejected this, stating that there is no such thing as “an undogmatic prolegomena” and held that these words not only set the rules for what follows, but they convey the writer’s underlying perspective and assumptions. So it is here.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth (1886-1968) is among the most important theologians in church history and unquestionably the most important and influential theologian of the twentieth century. Born in Switzerland, Barth studied in Germany under the greatest liberal theologians of his day, including Herrmann and Harnack. In 1914 he broke with this tradition over liberalism’s support of the Kaiser and Germany’s war effort. Barth was a pastor for ten years in Safenwil Switzerland and then taught at several universities in Germany. In 1936 he was removed from his teaching post for refusing to sign an oath of loyalty to Hitler and returned to Switzerland, teaching at the University of Basel until his retirement. Barth is the author of hundreds of articles and books, most notably of which is the massive *Church Dogmatics*.

<sup>3</sup> *Briefwechsel Karl Barth—Edward Thurneysen, 1914-1925*. Quoted in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), p. 248.

<sup>4</sup> German for No!. Originally published as *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1935). An English translation of both Brunner’s work and Barth’s response may be found in Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, translated by Peter Fraenkel with introduction by John Baillie, *Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Natural Theology*, *op. cit.* p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Italics original.

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<sup>7</sup> See for example: 1 Cor. 11:19; 2 Cor. 11:13, 26; Gal. 1:7; 2:4; 2 Pet. 2:1; Jude 1:4.

<sup>8</sup> The word *church* is used throughout this article to refer to the Presbyterian Church (USA). In instances when the larger church or another denomination are in mind the context or specific wording will make the distinction clear.

<sup>9</sup> One of the great surprises of ministry for me was how often apparently healthy families or persons suddenly disintegrated or crashed and in the process revealed long standing issues (addictions, adulteries, anger, abuse, etc. etc.) that had remained carefully hidden but powerfully destructive. Over the last two decades I have seen marriages fail, families torn asunder, pastors removed from ministry and companies fold all because of deep seated, long standing dysfunctions that remained concealed and unaddressed.

<sup>10</sup> It would be unfair and regrettable to see this paper described as an example of the former for the simple reason that its every word is written to accomplish the latter. Of course some will no doubt fall into such simplistic reductionism.

<sup>11</sup> To give one example: I have yet to meet anyone among those who are fighting for homosexual rights within the church who has actually studied Robert Gagnon's *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) or wrestled with its ideas. It has been renounced, decried, and ignored, but not studied and addressed. The closest anyone in the progressive wing has come to this is Jack Rogers' *Jesus, The Bible, and Homosexuality: Explode the Myths, Heal the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). But even here Rogers never addresses Gagnon's principle thesis and only barely addresses a few points. Gagnon's book of over 500 pages is in fact explicitly addressed in only six pages and one footnote in Rogers' book (of 169 pages).

<sup>12</sup> Local license or local option refers to a local governing body (session or presbytery) abandoning, ignoring, or annulling (whether temporarily or permanently) standards of the national church in favor of locally agreed upon values or rules. The PUP report, in allowing conceivably any doctrine or practice to be declared a scruple by a candidate, theoretically allows the national standards of the church to be trumped by locally held opinions and interpretations. It is interesting that Laurie Goodstein, the national religion correspondent for the *New York Times*, recently stated on NPR's *Talk of the Nation* that the General Assembly's reception of the PUP report was an attempt to solve the crisis surrounding homosexuality through "local option" (*Talk of the Nation*, airing February 27<sup>th</sup> 2007), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7623452>.)

<sup>13</sup> The following may be noted as examples: Both San Diego and Santa Barbara presbyteries have passed "essential tenets" guidelines for ordaining, installing, and receiving ministers into their membership. In direct response to the PUP report nearly thirty presbyteries have now passed resolutions affirming ordination standards with many explicitly declaring that G-6.0106b is an essential requirement for ordination and will not recognize any ordination done in violation to this standard (though four of these are being challenged by their respective synods). In the September 12<sup>th</sup> 2006 edition of the *Charlotte Observer* twelve pastors representing nearly 3,500 members of the PC (USA) published a full-page statement which declared the actions of the 217<sup>th</sup> General Assembly "collectively represent grievous error and a significant departure from the biblical and confessional principles of the

Christian faith." On February 10<sup>th</sup> 2007 the Presbytery of Santa Barbara overwhelmingly passed the most far-reaching statement and call for reform thus seen. This document entitled *Appropriate Response* may be found at <http://sbpres.org/appropriateresponse.doc>.

<sup>14</sup> To give some examples: First Presbyterian Church of Baton Rouge and Kirk of the Hills in Tulsa have both filed suit against their presbyteries seeking affirmation of full rights and ownership over their property. Kirk of the Hills, the largest church in its presbytery with over 2,800 members has gone even further with its pastors renouncing the jurisdiction of the church and the congregation overwhelmingly approving a resolution to leave the PC (USA) and join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Signal Mountain Presbyterian Church (2000 members) voted at the end of January 2007 to withdraw from the PC (USA) and join the EPC. Recently a pastor of one of the nation's largest Presbyterian churches predicted that eight out of the forty largest churches are poised to leave the denomination. First Presbyterian Church of Corinth Mississippi is currently immersed in a bitter court battle with the presbytery of Saint Andrew over their desire to leave the denomination with their property. Sadly, examples abound in the news with each week it seems bringing another announcement of a congregation leaving the denomination. Exacerbating issues, advisory papers drafted by the offices of the General Assembly and the GAC show the denomination intends to squelch all dissent and retaliate against any seeking to retain control over church property. Tactics advised include defrocking offending ministers, lawsuits against ministers and elders, and removal of sessions. Trust and co-operation are all but non-existent.

<sup>15</sup> In May 2006, the General Assembly Council reduced the national staff by 75 positions and terminated 55 missionary assignments for 2007-2008.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Walker (King's College, London) and Robert Wuthnow (Princeton) have both suggested that the larger church is heading for the third great schism. The issues tearing at the PC (USA) are similarly affecting many other churches and denominations and leading to the unique situation in which evangelicals within the PC (USA) have more in common with evangelicals in the Episcopal and Methodist Churches (to give two examples) than they do with progressives within their own church (and vice versa). The whole of Christendom may well be heading towards a split across and through countless denominations and traditions which divides the holy catholic church into two camps or perspectives: evangelicals and progressives. Certainly the gap between these two within the PC (USA) is expanding.

<sup>17</sup> To give one recent example, last fall advice on the Presbyterian Women page of the PC (USA) web site stated: "Talk about Christianity in a way that is not imperialistic. Do not assume that ... Christianity offers something better than other religions" (<http://www.pcusa.org/pw/resources/bias-free-guidelines.htm>). It is impossible to reconcile this with the Evangelical perspective set forth in either the *Book of Confessions* or *Book of Order* (cf. G-1.0100, "All power in heaven and earth is given to Jesus Christ by Almighty God, who raised Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, all power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. God has put all things under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and has made Christ Head of the Church, which is his body"). The Reformed tradition has always held that it has something better to offer than other religions and his name is Jesus.

- <sup>18</sup> John 14:6, 8, 10, *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part I.
- <sup>19</sup> 5.003; 6.001-006, *Book of Confessions*, Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part I.
- <sup>20</sup> Much of the material that follows was first published in Gerrit Scott Dawson and Mark R. Patterson, *Given and Sent in One Love: The True Church of Jesus Christ* (Lenoir, NC: Reformation Press, 2005). I am grateful to the publishers for graciously allowing me to include and expand upon that material in this study.
- <sup>21</sup> For example, the Witherspoon Society frequently has stated on its web site that it offers news “from a progressive perspective.” The magazine *The Progressive* long has been a voice of social justice issues that, while generally secular, reflects nearly identical values and perspectives. An article titled “Taking on the Religious Right” (Z Activism Online, <http://zmagsite.zmag.org/JulAug2005/chenelle0705.html>) describes progressivism as the antitheses of the “religious right.” Interestingly, the use of the term progressive to describe a theological perspective or methodology is older than many may know. It was used as both a self-description and critical assessment to New School theology in the Presbyterian Church through the 19<sup>th</sup> century.
- <sup>22</sup> For a fuller description of Progressive theology from a self-described Progressive theologian, see the helpful statement at [http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ottati\\_address.htm](http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ottati_address.htm). This is the text of an address made at the Witherspoon Society luncheon June 16, 2002, during the 214<sup>th</sup> meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA).
- <sup>23</sup> Douglas F. Ottati, [http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ottati\\_address.htm](http://www.witherspoonsociety.org/ottati_address.htm).
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup> The word *euangelion* occurs in 73 verses in the NA27 Greek text. The definitive reference work, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, uses 30 pages to describe the fullness of meaning and importance of the word and its cognates.
- <sup>26</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:17-24. Paul summarizes his message by stating: “When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:1-2).
- <sup>27</sup> Barth, Karl; *Church Dogmatics*; (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Publishers; 1969); Vol. II.1; p. 152.
- <sup>28</sup> “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Love, like grace, is not understood in abstract terms, but as the act of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.
- <sup>29</sup> For a helpful study, see James R. Edwards; *Is Jesus the Only Savior?* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005).
- <sup>30</sup> This would certainly be the perspective of the New Testament. In the doxology of Ephesians (1:3-14) the phrases “in him,” “through him,” “in whom,” and other such phrases occur 12 times. This does not include such phrases as “by his blood,” “in Christ,” and other more explicit phrases, all referring to the centrality and unique efficacy of Christ.
- <sup>31</sup> One of the principle failures of the Peace, Unity, and Purity Report is its attempt to create peace and unity through process and polity rather than theological unity.

*Mark R. Patterson, Ph.D., is pastor of Ventura Presbyterian Church, Ventura, CA and has written extensively about theology and the state of the church.*

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# An Unworkable Theology

by Philip Turner

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*Although Philip Turner writes from his perspective in the Episcopal Church, the theology he describes is the same Progressive theology described by Mark Patterson in the article beginning on page 1 of this issue.*

It is increasingly difficult to escape the fact that mainline Protestantism is in a state of disintegration. As attendance declines, internal divisions increase. Take, for instance, the situation of the Episcopal Church in the United States. The Episcopal Church's problem is far more theological than it is moral—a theological poverty that is truly monumental and that stands behind the moral missteps recently taken by its governing bodies.

Every denomination has its theological articles and books of theology, its liturgies and confessional statements. Nonetheless, the contents of these documents do not necessarily control what we might call the “working theology” of a church. To find the working theology of a church one must review the resolutions passed at official gatherings and listen to what clergy say Sunday by Sunday from the pulpit. One must listen to the conversations that occur at clergy gatherings—and hear the advice clergy give troubled parishioners. The working theology of a church is, in short, best determined by becoming what social anthropologists call a “participant observer.”

For thirty-five years, I have been such a participant observer in the Episcopal Church. After ten years as a missionary in Uganda, I returned to this country and began graduate work in Christian Ethics with Paul Ramsey at Princeton University. Three years later I took up a post at the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. Full of excitement, I listened to my first student sermon—only to be taken aback by its vacuity. The student began with the wonderful question, “What is the Christian Gospel?” But his answer, through the course of an entire sermon, was merely: “God is love. God loves us. We, therefore, ought to love one another.” I waited in vain for some word about the saving power of Christ's cross or the declaration of God's victory in Christ's resurrection. I waited in vain for a promise of the Holy Spirit. I waited in vain also for an admonition to wait patiently and faithfully for the Lord's return. I waited in vain for a call to repentance and amendment of life in accord with the pattern of Christ's life.

The contents of the preaching I had heard for a decade from the pulpits of the Anglican Church of Uganda (and from other Christians throughout the continent of Africa) was simply not to be found. One could, of course, dismiss this instance of vacuous preaching as simply another example of the painful inadequacy of the preaching of most seminarians; but, over the years, I have heard the same sermon preached from pulpit after pulpit by experienced priests. The Episcopal sermon, at its most fulsome, begins with a statement to the effect that the incarnation is to be understood as merely a manifestation of divine love. From this starting point, several conclusions are drawn. The first is that God is love, pure and simple. Thus, one is to see in Christ's death no judgment upon the human condition. Rather, one is to see an affirmation of creation and the persons we are. The life and death of Jesus reveal the fact that God accepts and affirms us.

From this revelation, we can draw a further conclusion: God wants us to love one another, and such love requires of us both acceptance and affirmation of the other. From this point we can derive yet another: Accepting love requires a form of justice that is inclusive of all people, particularly those who in some way have been marginalized by oppressive social practice. The mission of the Church is, therefore, to see that those who have been rejected are included—for justice as inclusion defines public policy. The result is a practical equivalence between the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and a particular form of social justice.

For those who view the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops and its General Convention from the outside, many of their recent actions may seem to represent a denial of something fundamental to the Christian way of life. But for many inside the Episcopal Church, the equation of the Gospel and social justice constitutes a primary expression of Christian truth. This isn't an ethical divide about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. It's a theological chasm—one that separates those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* from those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*.

Look, for example, at the increasingly common practice of inviting non-baptized persons to share in the Holy Eucharist. The invitation is given in the name of “radical hospitality.” It is like having a guest at the family meal, so its advocates claim: it is a way to invite people in and evangelize.

Within the Episcopal Church, a sure test of whether an idea is gaining favor is the appearance of a question about it on the general-ordination exam. Questions on divorce and remarriage, the ordination of women, sexual behavior, and abortion all preceded changes in the Episcopal Church’s teaching and practice. On a recent version of the exam, there appeared a question about “open communion for the non-baptized,” which suggests that this is far more than a cloud on the horizon. It is, rather, a change in doctrine and practice that is fast becoming well established and perhaps should be of greater concern to the Anglican Communion’s ecumenical partners than the recent changes in moral teaching and practice.

Indeed, it is important to note when examining the working theology of the Episcopal Church that changes in belief and practice within the church are not made after prolonged investigation and theological debate. Rather, they are made by “prophetic actions” that give expression to the doctrine of radical inclusion. Such actions have become common partly because they carry no cost. Since the struggle over the ordination of women, the Episcopal Church’s House of Bishops has given up any attempt to act as a unified body or to discipline its membership. Within a given diocese, almost any change in belief and practice can occur without penalty.

Certain justifications are commonly named for such failure of discipline. The first is the claim of the prophet’s mantle by the innovators—often quickly followed by an assertion that the Holy Spirit Itself is doing this new thing, which need have no perceivable link to the past practice of the church. Backed by claims of prophetic and Spirit-filled insight, each diocese can then justify its action as a “local option,” which is the claimed right of each diocese or parish to go its own way if there seem to be strong enough internal reasons to do so.

All of these justifications are currently being offered for the practice of open communion—which is the clearest possible signal that it is an idea whose time has come in the Episcopal Church. But the deep roots of the idea are in the doctrine of radical inclusion. Once we have reduced the significance of Christ’s resurrection and downplayed holiness of life as a fundamental marker of Christian identity, the notion of radical inclusion produces the view that one need not come to the Father through the Son. Christ is *a* way, but not *the* way. The Holy Eucharist is a sign of acceptance on the part of

God and God’s people, and so should be open to all—the invitation unaccompanied by a call to repentance and amendment of life.

This unofficial doctrine of radical inclusion, which is now the working theology of the Episcopal Church, plays out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.

The Episcopal Church’s working theology is also congruent with a form of pastoral care designed to help people affirm themselves, face their difficulties, and adjust successfully to their particular circumstances. The primary (though not the sole) pastoral formation offered to the Episcopal Church’s prospective clergy has for a number of years been “Clinical Pastoral Education,” which takes the form of an internship at a hospital or some other care-giving institution. The focus tends to be the expressed needs of a “client,” the attitudes and contributions of a “counselor,” and the transference and countertransference that define their relationship. In its early days, the supervisors of Clinical Pastoral Education were heavily influenced by the client-centered therapy of Carl Rogers, but the theoretical framework employed today varies widely. A dominant assumption in all forms, however, is that the clients have, within themselves, the answer to their perplexities and conflicts. Access to personal resources and successful adjustment are what the pastor is to seek when offering pastoral care.

There may be some merit in putting new clergy in hospital settings, but this particular form does not lend itself easily to the sort of meeting with Christ that leads to faith, forgiveness, judgment, repentance, and amendment of life. The sort of confrontation often necessary to spark such a process is decidedly frowned upon. The theological stance associated with Clinical Pastoral Education is not one of challenge but one in which God is depicted as an accepting presence—not unlike that of the therapist or pastor.

But this should not be an unexpected development. In a theology dominated by radical inclusion, terms such as “faith,” “justification,” “repentance,” and “holiness of life” seem to belong to an antique vocabulary that must be outgrown or reinterpreted. So also does the notion that the Church is a community elected by God for the particular purpose of bearing witness to the saving event of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.

It is this witness that defines the great tradition of the Church, but a theology of radical inclusion must trim such robust belief. To be true to itself it can find room

for only one sort of witness: inclusion of the previously excluded. God has already included everybody, and now we ought to do the same. Salvation can not be the issue. The theology of radical inclusion, as preached and practiced within the Episcopal Church, must define the central issue as moral rather than religious, since exclusion is in the end a moral issue even for God.

We must say this clearly: The Episcopal Church's current working theology depends upon the obliteration of God's difficult, redemptive love in the name of a new revelation. The message, even when it comes from the mouths of its more sophisticated exponents, amounts to inclusion *without qualification*.

Thinking back over my thirty-five years in the Episcopal Church, I was distressed to realize that this new revelation is little different from the basic message communicated to me during the course of my own theological education. Fortunately, in my case God provided an intervening event. I lived for about ten years among the Baganda, a people who dwell on the north shore of Lake Victoria. The Baganda have a proverb which, roughly translated, says, "A person who never travels always praises his own mother's cooking." Travel allowed me to taste something different. It was not until I had spent a long time abroad that I realized

how far apart the American Episcopal Church stood from the basic content of "Nicene Christianity," with its thick description of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, its richly developed Christology, and its compelling account of Christ's call to holiness of life.

The future of Anglicanism as a communion of churches may depend upon the American Episcopal Church's ability to find a way out of the terrible constraints forced upon it by its working theology. Much of the Anglican communion in Africa sees the problem. Can the Americans? It is not enough simply to refer to the Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer and reply, "We are orthodox just like you: we affirm the two testaments as the word of God, we recite the classical creeds in our worship, we celebrate the dominical sacraments, and we hold to episcopal order." The challenge now being put to the Episcopal Church in the United States (and, by implication, to all liberal Protestantism) is not about official documents. It is about the church's working theology—one which most Anglicans in the rest of the world no longer recognize as Christian.

*Philip Turner is the former Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale. He currently serves as Vice President of the Anglican Communion Institute.*

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