

# STUDY GUIDE FOR THE EIGHT POINTS

by which we define

## Progressive Christianity

Revised Edition





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## **Progressive Christianity 2005**

Written by

**Fred C. Plumer**

The Center for Progressive Christianity

4916 Pt Fosdick Dr NW #148

Gig Harbor, WA 98335

Phone: 253-303-0022

Website: [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org)

Email: [center@tcpc.org](mailto:center@tcpc.org)

## **The Center for Progressive Christianity**

The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) is a nonprofit corporation that encourages an approach to the Christian message for those who search for a more inclusive, innovative, informed and open religion. TCPC supports congregations and individuals that embrace the search for meaning—rather than a particular brand of certainty. TCPC provides guiding ideas, networking opportunities and resources for progressive churches, organizations, individuals and others that have more concern for the way people treat each other than for the way people express their beliefs. Through conferences, a newsletter, our website and correspondence, TCPC is building a network of people who have an interest in recovering our Christian symbols and in redefining what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

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# Table of Contents

Introduction .....	6
Some Suggested Guidelines .....	8
Eight-Point Discussion Group Ground Rules.....	8
The Directory of Progressive Churches .....	9
Study Guide for the Eight Points by which we define Progressive Christianity 2005 .....	10
Conclusion .....	27
The Center for Progressive Christianity .....	28
Honorary Advisors .....	28
James Rowe Adams .....	28
Karen Armstrong .....	28
Marcus J. Borg.....	28
John B. Cobb, Jr.....	28
Barbara Lundblad .....	28
William W. Rankin.....	28
John Shelby Spong.....	28
Charles V. Willie.....	28

# Introduction

For thinking, searching and discerning Christians, these are very interesting times. The old mainline denominations continue to struggle with declining rolls, budgets and empty church buildings, and denominational leadership seems to have little idea what to do, except to “downsize,” merge or celebrate when the losses seem to be slowing. The average age for membership in most mainline churches is estimated to be over sixty-five years old. At the same time, over 90% of the U.S. population claim to believe in God and considers themselves to be “spiritual” or religious, according to more than one poll.

While the more conservative strains of the Christian church (Pentecostals, evangelicals and fundamentalists) seem to be fairing far better on the growth charts, the overall decline in church attendance continues, especially in cities and large suburban areas. However, the fastest growing segment of the population that claims some religious interest considers themselves to be “nonaffiliated.” In large part, the members of this group believe that the church is no longer relevant to their lives. Most of them point to what they believe is the loss of the intellectual and rational credibility of the church and its creeds. For them, the mythologies and the legends of the Christian tradition have lost their symbolic and transformative power.

Certainly these changes have generated a lot of questioning, deep searching and some insightful publications from a broad range of thinkers. A sampling of some of the better books include: *Dying For Change*, Leith Anderson (Bethany House, 1990); *The Once and Future Church*, Loren Mead (Alban Institute, 1991); *Death of the Church*, Mike Regele (Zondervan, 1995); and, most recently, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, John Shelby Spong (Harper, San Francisco, 1998).

While these critical thinkers have their own perspectives on the nature of the problem – and, of course, offer some very different solutions – there seems to be at least one common denominator. At some place, nearly every thinker in this arena makes the point that *Progressive and liberal Christians by and large do not know how to talk about their faith or religious experiences, or they are uncomfortable to do so.*

One of the stated goals of TCPC is to help searching Christians reclaim the symbols of our faith and to find ways to make Christianity a transformative, life-changing force in their lives and in the world. Another is to make our faith relevant to our lives. It was, in part, for this reason that this study guide was created.

The Eight Points, as they are now affectionately called, were created under the leadership of Jim Adams, founder and first president of TCPC, along with the advisory committee and board of directors, in 1996. The goal was to give some clarity to what it meant to be a *Progressive* Christian as opposed to a traditional, nonthinking, apathetic or conservative Christian. Over the years, as more and more churches have declared themselves *progressive*, we have had wonderful feedback on the processes, the discussions and some of the issues that the Eight Points raised for the participants. We have used some of that input to help create these materials.

It might be interesting to note that there is no predetermined process for becoming a member church in TCPC. In some situations, the pastoral leadership made that decision; other times, a council, board or other committee in the leadership of the local church voted on behalf of their church to become a member. In one reported case, the entire church was involved in the process. This church had a large gathering to discuss the issues and then broke into small groups. These groups met

weekly for several weeks to discuss the Eight Points, one by one. In the end, there was another all-church gathering that resulted in a vote to become a member.

What came out of most of these experiences may be no surprise. When people had a chance to talk about their faith in such an open and accepting way, they got excited. One woman stated that it was the first time she felt comfortable talking about her beliefs “in front of strangers.” Interestingly, she had been attending that church for over three years.

Forms of this study guide have been used as part of an adult education program and the response has been exciting. Once again, we are reminded that one of the maladies of the modern church has been its inability to help its members articulate their faith and understanding of the Christian religion in a post-modern era.

Hopefully, this study guide will be one small step in the right direction.

The background material and the questions were designed to stimulate conversation and to raise issues that might not otherwise come up. None of these materials are intended to make a theological, Christological or canonical argument. The last thing we would want to do is to tell anyone how he or she should believe or approach their faith. Most of these materials and study questions are drawn from real, ongoing discussions in the church, the seminaries and the universities. They were also drawn from the input we had from church groups that wrestled with the Eight Points in their own gatherings.

Best wishes for an exciting journey of faith.

*Fred Plumer*

President, The Center for Progressive Christianity

## Some Suggested Guidelines

These materials can be used in a variety of ways. A lot depends on the number of people who want to participate and the nature of the group or groups. It seems, however, that the discussion questions lend themselves best to small group dynamics where all participants have the opportunity to share their feelings and their faith issues. This can be challenging for some people if they do not know what to expect before the discussions start. As in all small group gatherings, it is important to create a list of *ground rules* before the discussions begin. Ground rules can be an important part of helping everyone be comfortable and to know what to expect. They can also help the group discussions run more smoothly and be more productive for everyone.

Ground rules lay out expectations regarding things such as:

- confidentiality (an agreement stating that whatever is said in these discussions will stay within the group);
- respect for each other and for each other's position;
- open or closed format;
- leadership for the group discussions;
- covenant of attendance (an agreement for everyone to try and attend every meeting in the series); and
- a schedule indicating times to begin and end.

We believe that every group should participate in drawing up its own ground rules; however, the following is an example of a list of ground rules that a group might create and use.

### Eight-Point Discussion Group Ground Rules

1. We are committed to giving everyone who wishes to speak an opportunity to do so.
2. Anyone may pass on a discussion question if they wish to do so.
3. We will listen attentively and respectfully.
4. We will not interrupt or ask a question before a person is done or will we monopolize the discussion.
5. We will honor other points of view.
6. We agree to disagree sometimes and we will not label theological or Christological ideas as "right" or "wrong."
7. We agree to begin and end on time.

## **The Directory of Progressive Churches**

For anyone who has ever moved to a new community and not known where to look for a progressive church, the Directory of Progressive Churches is an invaluable resource. TCPC has built an international network of open and inquisitive communities of faith. Any congregation willing to adopt a form of welcome based on the Eight Points by which TCPC defines Progressive Christianity can arrange to be listed in the directory. This study guide may help our congregation reach a decision about being listed in the directory

The Directory of Progressive Churches is available on the website maintained by TCPC at [www.tpc.org](http://www.tpc.org).

# **STUDY GUIDE FOR THE EIGHT POINTS**

by which we define

## **Progressive Christianity 2005**

An amplification of each point  
followed by questions for discussion

- 1. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...  
have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus.**

No “Point” drew more input or fostered more discussion, more debates and, on occasion, more emotions than the revision of this first “Point.” It was clear from our emails and general feedback from church groups that had worked with the original study guide that many people were uncomfortable with the word “gate” in the first published version. However, trying to find the appropriate replacement proved to be challenging. There were several “suggestions” and comments from many who felt strongly about their particular suggestion. Since this new version has been published, we continue to have input from individuals and groups in churches who have wrestled with the challenge of finding the right or “correct” words from their perspective.

Clearly, some have argued that the words “an approach” do not indicate a strong enough “commitment” or “discipleship” to be a serious faith journey. Others desired more biblical language. They would have preferred language like “found a path” or “found a way,” often citing biblical passages to support those preferences. One respondent claimed that the word was so “weak” that we must no longer be Christians.

Others have expressed an appreciation for the openness of the word “approach,” pointing out that it makes no judgment on other religious experiences. Some noted that the word “approach” implies a cautious beginning as all spiritual journeys should begin. One person wrote, “How else could we move toward God but by cautious approach as Moses approached the burning bush?”

- 1. How does the language “an approach to God” fit your spiritual needs?**
- 2. What language would you have used for your own spiritual journey?**
- 3. Do you feel as if the life and teachings of Jesus have brought you closer to an experience of God? If so, how?**

Although not everyone may notice at first, one of the most unique things about this first “Point” is not what is in it but what is left out. What is not included in this statement is the doctrinal “savior” language codified in the fourth-century creeds. For centuries, Christians have been taught that Jesus was a sacrifice of God (the Lamb of God) and, through this profound sacrifice and saving act, the world was given the opportunity to be reconciled once again with God. According to St. Paul, we humans find redemption for our “fallen” state only by accepting Jesus as our sacrificial savior.

*Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. (1Cor. 5:7)*

*<sup>23</sup>since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup>they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup>whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; <sup>26</sup>it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:23-26)*

*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. <sup>9</sup>Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. (Romans 5:8-9)*

The absence of salvation language does not preclude one from seeing Jesus Christ as one's "savior." For some, it may require reinterpreting what one means by "savior." Certainly there is a good possibility that Jesus's disciples would have felt that he was a "messiah," in the Davidic tradition, for he risked his life on behalf of his people. Today, if someone believed that the spirit of Christ, or even Jesus's way, led them out of a troubled life, an addiction or a wilderness of some kind, it certainly is understandable that they may chose to call Jesus, or a Christ Spirit, their "savior." Many of us have had such an experience with a special teacher, a friend or even a stranger in our times of despair. We may have taken the words of Jesus's teaching of God's open forgiveness seriously at some low point in our lives and spiritually experienced that forgiveness in a deep, even life-changing way. This is quite different, however, from assuming that to be a Christian one must believe that God made an intentional sacrifice of God's only begotten son as a cosmic saving act for all humanity. This is different from assuming that it is only through one's belief in the "truth" of this sacrifice that one can call oneself a Christian.

Rather than assuming that Jesus is a sacrificial savior, or "The Savior," this first statement suggests that one can be a Christian by considering oneself a follower of Jesus's teachings and using his life, as we know it, as a model. It can also be implied that for those Christians, Jesus and Jesus's teaching provide a way to experience, relate to or approach that Energy, that Force or that Presence we choose to call God.

It is not the intended function of this study guide to make a scholarly or theological argument for a shift away from ancient sacrificial language. There is a plethora of scholarship available today to support this perspective if one is interested. TCPC can provide you with a reading list; however, by deleting the traditional sacrificial/savior language, or by reinterpreting it, we open the possibilities for another explanation of Jesus's life and death. Maybe more importantly, such a shift provides an opportunity for each of us to reinterpret the meaning for our own lives.

In this shift, the doctrinal "Jesus the Lord of the world" becomes Jesus the teacher, the master or the rabbi that he was in his time. Rather than treating Jesus as the unreachable, perfect God who is so hard to relate to for most people, we can think of Jesus as the enlightened teacher who asks only to be followed. By taking his teachings seriously, we are given the opportunity to change and see and hear what we did not see before. This form of Christianity does not assume an ontological "fallen nature" of humanity, as Paul did out of his own life experience. Quite to the contrary, it assumes that by taking responsibility for our thoughts, actions and motives, and by learning and changing our actions when they have caused harm to others or to us, we humans can grow, evolve and transform.

- 1. How does the absence of salvation language help or detract from your spiritual path?**
- 2. How does the Jesus of history or his teachings affect your understanding of God?**
- 3. How might our understanding of who and what we are, as human beings, change if we remove the need for the sacrifice of Jesus as the Pascal Lamb, our redeemer?**
- 4. What is the difference between savior, hero, master, teacher or prophet for you?**

## 2. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...

**recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.**

This approach to religious and cultural differences can be called “pluralism,” but that identification can be confusing because the word has two distinct meanings. Pluralism can refer to a condition of a particular society in which diverse ethnic and religious groups maintain their traditions and autonomy or it can mean a policy of promoting such a condition for the common good. Although the Bible does not discuss pluralism in either sense of the word, many passages suggest that the writers and editors of scripture accepted the reality of the condition. For example, the verse known as the first of the Ten Commandments reads:

*I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other Gods before me. (Exodus 20:2-3)*

Each of the tribes among whom the people of Israel lived had its own god, and the LORD's people were admonished to be loyal to their own God. Over the centuries, however, the idea emerged that the LORD they worshiped was not simply the God of their tribe, but the ruler of the universe who embraced even the people who did not know the LORD by name. So it was that a prophet could call Cyrus, King of Persia, the LORD's messiah (Isaiah 45:1). At the same time, Jews thought of themselves as being in a special relationship with the universal God. They were the “chosen people.”

The early Christians displayed some ambivalence toward the religious diversity of the Roman Empire in which they found themselves. As a tiny sect within the empire, they profited to some extent by the official policy of pluralism, but they never embraced the policy as a matter of doctrine. Instead, they developed the notion that they had replaced the Jews as God's chosen ones. With the rise of Islam, the western world had yet a third group of people claiming to be the people favored by the universal God. If history has any lessons to teach, one lesson surely must be that people claiming special access to God have a tendency to justify their hatred and oppression of anyone who does not affirm their beliefs and traditions.

A few years ago, there was a popular bumper sticker that said: “God is too big for one religion.” As appropriate as this statement may seem to Progressive Christians today, this idea has not been a traditional part of Christian teaching over the centuries. Although it is often argued that there is biblical foundation for the idea that Christianity is the only way that one can have a relationship with God or experience salvation, in the New Testament, this is not as clear as the church may have suggested over the centuries. There is little evidence in the “synoptic gospels” (Matthew, Mark, Luke) that Jesus was trying to begin a new religion or was even calling for converts to what some recognize as his “brand” of Judaism. To the contrary, his relationship with the Samaritans and other gentiles seems to indicate an openness and pluralistic attitude that would have been unusual for a first-century Jew.

It is true that the author of John's gospel does place the following words in Jesus's mouth: “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). It is important to remember, however, that these words were written for a religious sect that was a persecuted minority cult, struggling for survival in the first century. Those same words, written with a specific purpose, would have had a very different feel for the first-century Christian than they do in

contemporary times. However, since the fourth century and the advent of “Christendom,” these words and other quotations from the book of John have been used by the church and the state as a source of power and control through their exclusive nature. Christianity and “correct belief” were the only way that one could find salvation. The church became the exclusive broker for tickets to heaven.

Today, with our awareness of black holes, post quantum physics, multiple dimensions and multiple and expanding universes, it is impossible to believe that any one religion could have the whole picture or the correct understanding of God, let alone have an exclusive path to that God. To suggest anything else would be, at best, arrogant. More importantly, many Christians today find that learning about other religions and even encompassing some practices from these traditions has enhanced their understanding of their own religion, augmented to their personal religious experiences and deepened their faith.

Important as it is for Christians to be clear and positive about what they stand for, the time has come for followers of Jesus to embrace pluralism as a necessary condition for a peaceful and just society.

We may find a certain comfort in believing that “our” way is the only way. This is a natural part of any cultic religious experience. Far greater faith is required, however, to seek and trust that which you accept as infinite, beyond your comprehension and subject to change. Today, this just may be the challenge of an educated and thinking Christian – to retain a faith “in face of the mystery.” (Gordon D. Kaufman, Ph.D.)

- 1. What does the word “faith” mean to you?**
- 2. How does the awareness, knowledge and appreciation of other approaches help us better understand Jesus and his teachings as a way to approach God’s realm?**
- 3. What are some of the common grounds that we have with people of different faith experiences?**
- 4. What does the term “child of one God” mean to you? What are the implications?**

### 3. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...

**understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus's name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples.**

While bread and wine are the central symbols of Christian worship today, the imagery predates even early Christianity. The people of Israel told stories about God feeding them in times of distress — manna for the tribes wandering in the wilderness and an inexhaustible jar of meal for Elijah. After Abraham had won a great battle, the mysterious “Melchizedek king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God most high” (Genesis 14:18). This legendary use of bread and wine in cementing a relationship between two ethnic groups is one example of a ritual meal pointing to God's concern for diverse peoples. Another appears among the prophecies of Isaiah:

*On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wine strained clear. (Isaiah 25:6)*

Note that in this vision of the banquet, all the nations, tribes and clans of the earth are God's guests. No one is to be excluded.

The vision of God's banquet in Isaiah may have inspired the story that is most often told in the gospels: Jesus feeding the multitudes, either four or five thousand at a time. In these stories, Jesus lays down no conditions for participation and establishes no barriers to the meal. At his last supper with his disciples, Jesus invited all twelve to share in the bread and wine, although not one of them had yet developed any faith in him. Of the twelve, one betrayed him, one denied him and the rest ran away. Following the example of Jesus, we think that all people present should be offered bread and wine whenever the church celebrates the Lord's Supper. As they share the ritual meal, they participate in the vision of a just world where all people live at peace.

The “banquet” that always begins with the bread and wine has been a symbol of inclusiveness and reconciliation throughout the Jewish and Christian traditions. How ironic it seems that the church for centuries has used communion as the symbol and tool for divisiveness, often creating complicated rules, laws and policies about who can receive the communion elements and who cannot. Yet many of our favorite stories of Jesus's life are about his open table, his table of fellowship and the wonderfully strange and unique people with whom we find him “breaking bread” and dining.

It is probably no coincidence that many scholars today believe the stories about Jesus's open table are considered some of the most authentic historical passages in the gospels, in part because they are so unique for the times. Marcus J. Borg wrote in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, “One of his (Jesus's) most characteristic activities was an open and inclusive table.” (p. 55) Later, he notes that, “The inclusive vision incarnated in Jesus's table fellowship is reflected in the shape of the Jesus movement itself.” (p. 56)

John Dominic Crossan writes that Jesus's open table fellowship is a core teaching component and symbol of his life. He notes that Jesus's practice of “open commensality (rules of tabling and eating) is the symbol and embodiment of radical egalitarianism, of an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them.” (*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, 1994, p. 27)

Most modern scholars believe that this unique table fellowship was the precursor of what became the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. Borg writes, "... ultimately, the meals of Jesus are the ancestor of the Christian Eucharist." (p. 56)

Progressive Christians then assume that we are following the instructions and the model of Jesus when we practice open communion. We are acting out of a long tradition and a fundamental expression of God's love, the heart of the original Jesus movement. Of course, the real challenge is to continue to live our daily lives with that same attitude of openness, or, in Dr. Crossan's words, with radical egalitarianism, after we leave the safety of our sanctuaries.

- 1. Imagine the people who Jesus invited to his table. Who do you think they were? What were their religious persuasions? Who might those people be today if Jesus were having a banquet?**
- 2. How can we best express an open table that includes all people in our respective churches?**
- 3. What guidelines or restrictions, if any, do you think there should be regarding those included at your communion table?**
- 4. Who, if anyone, do you believe should be excluded, or who do you wish would be excluded from the Lord's Supper in your church?**

#### **4. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...**

**invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to,**

- **believers and agnostics,**
- **conventional Christians and questioning skeptics,**
- **women and men,**
- **those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,**
- **those of all races and cultures,**
- **those of all classes and abilities, and**
- **those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope,**

**without imposing on them the necessity of becoming like us.**

The text for this Point might seem obvious or even redundant after our discussion on the last Point. However, the fourth Point is designed to encourage us to look a little closer at the divisions that tend to separate God's children and neighbors from each other. Most of us would probably find it in our hearts "to allow" those who we might consider "heathens," "sinners" and "misfits" to come to the communion table. We might not only find it acceptable to invite them to join us at the "open" table, but we might also invite them to participate in activities of the church. We might do these things and more while we wait for "them" to change.

The fourth Point requires another step for us. Here we are inviting all sorts of different people to join us as "full partners" in the common life of our churches without imposing on them that they become like us or even try and act like us. In a sense, we are being called to "affirm those who might be different from ourselves, just the way they are."

Many Christians today are amused by stories about nineteenth-century missionaries who insisted that their converts around the Pacific Rim dress in the European fashion and sing western tunes accompanied by portable organs. Yet some of those same Christians, who claim to welcome all people, expect their new members eventually to look and think like they do. They assume that doubters and skeptics will become believers; that gays and lesbians will become straight or, at the least, celibate; that everyone will appear to be cheerful; and that people in the church will adopt the same manners and develop similar tastes.

Progressive Christians take a different approach. From our reading of the gospels, we have come to the conclusion that the followers of Jesus are to welcome all people without imposing on them the necessity of changing their attitudes, their culture, their understanding of the faith or their sexual orientation. To take this position a step further, we would also say that the established members of a church should always be alert to the possibility that they are the ones who must do the changing. They always must be ready to adapt themselves to the people they hope to welcome.

Most church groups that have wrestled with this point have assumed in the beginning that the real bone of contention would be the issue of welcoming the homosexual. Certainly, there is good reason for this. Numerous religious journals and national periodicals have focused a great deal of attention on the homosexual issue – some calling it the most important issue of the decade. Nearly

every major denomination has been embroiled in some divisive action over this issue in the last few decades; most of them are unresolved. According to reports that we have had from church groups that have discussed this issue, however, it has not been the subject of homosexuality that has generated the most discussion. (If you would like to educate yourself on this important issue, TCPC can provide a bibliography of books, tapes and articles upon request.)

The truth is that nearly every congregation has had homosexuals attending their services on a regular basis throughout the centuries. In most cases, homosexuals remained silent about their orientation and have simply blended in. However, according to several national studies, race, ethnic persuasion, class and age still divide our churches into rather homogeneous and exclusive groups. There are a variety of reasons for this manifestation, some of them quite complex. The most common one is the physical location of the church and the demographics of the area. Also, some churches have intentionally focused their ministry on an ethnic minority group because of language or cultural differences or to provide a safe place for those who might not be welcomed in other churches.

Aside from the obvious, these studies indicate that there are often more subtle forces and biases at work that keep our churches more homogenous and often unintentionally more exclusive than we claim that we want. Sometimes it is the style of worship, the type of music or the length of the sermon. Other times, it may be the nature of the welcome a church extends. Sometimes it is just a poorly thought out assimilation process. It may be that the greatest influence on the homogeneity is the subtle or not-so-subtle force that attempts to mold the stranger into our mold. It is one thing to welcome a visitor into our place of worship; it is quite another to create a place that welcomes the stranger into "full partnership" where we are willing to share ideas, decision making and risks and adapt to the needs and tastes of others in our common life. Yet this seems to be what the Jesus of the gospels is encouraging us to do if we want to discover and experience the "Realm of God."

- 1. Can you think of a type of person who might make you uncomfortable if one sat next to you during a church service?**
- 2. What would you be willing to change in your church if it meant making more people feel welcomed or comfortable? Music? Order of worship? Style or time of worship? Number of services?**
- 3. What would you be unwilling to change?**
- 4. How long do you think people should attend your church before they can hold positions of responsibility?**

**5. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...**

**know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe.**

Many New Testament scholars have argued that we can learn more about the Jesus of the scriptures from the things that he does rather than from the words that he speaks. The Jesus we meet in the gospels is a man of action: he heals, he forgives, he demonstrates compassion, he takes a stand against injustices, he shares, he weeps and he loves unconditionally. He then tells his disciples and interested followers to go and do likewise. Maybe that is why the writers of all three synoptic gospels wrote that Jesus believed that the most important commandment is to “love God with all of your heart, soul and mind and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

According to the writer of Luke’s gospel, Jesus then tells a story that suggests that “our neighbor” is anyone who might need our help. Nowhere in these important passages do we find Jesus suggesting that, before we extend ourselves on behalf of another or before we love our neighbor, we should first expound a theology or a belief system. Nor does it appear that there was ever a “litmus test” that Jesus used before he befriended someone or helped him or her. Progressive Christians believe that our actions of love are more important than the expression of our beliefs.

According to the synoptic Gospels, when someone asked Jesus, “How do I find the Kingdom of God” or what we might call the Realm of God today, Jesus almost always suggested that they take some action. Interestingly, according to synoptic Gospels, he never suggested that the questioner must first acquire some “right” or correct belief. Thus the “rich man” was told to follow the code and, if that was not enough, then he would have to give up his wealth. The lawyer was instructed to love his neighbor as he loved himself. The priests were told to give up their hypocrisy. The reality is that it is much easier to debate theology, Christology or creeds, or to memorize scripture, than it is to follow the teachings of the Compassionate one. For most of us, this would require a significant change in our behavior.

Because Progressive Christians do not demand that new members change to mirror the existing core beliefs of the membership of a church, some people have accused them of having no moral standards. Their accusers, however, may be confusing cultural norms with morality. By putting behavior ahead of belief in a hierarchy of values, Progressive Christians are insisting that followers of Jesus are bound to treat their fellow human beings with kindness and respect. The first disciples of Jesus were convinced that the standard of behavior he expected of his followers was love for their neighbors. Genuine love is acting in a manner that enhances another’s well being, even at a cost to oneself. The changes that are required in people who want to follow Jesus would include giving up greed, coercion, exploitation and oppression as behavioral norms both in the church and in society.

- 1. What problems might arise in a church community that has no dogmatic beliefs?**
- 2. How do we deal with our differences in a healthy and positive way?**
- 3. What are some of the ways we can demonstrate our understanding of the “great commandment” when it comes to loving our neighbor?**
- 4. Create a list of Christian values that you think are reflections of your faith today.**

5. Do you believe that you behave as a follower of Jesus most of the time, some of the time, or now and then?

**6. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...**

**find more grace in the search for meaning than in absolute certainty, and in the questions than in the answers.**

Theologian Gordon Kaufman of Harvard University argues in his book, *In Face of Mystery*, that people of faith must give up (repent) our claims to knowledge and certainty. He writes “If we try to overcome and control the mystery within which we live – through, for example our supposed religious knowledge and practices – we sin against God, for with this stance we are in fact trying to make ourselves the ultimate disposers of our lives and destiny.” (p. 57)

We live in turbulent times, and historians and sociologists have demonstrated that turbulent times often foster fervent religious expressions. We humans naturally hunger for absolutes. We crave the final answers. We want to believe that someday we will understand everything. We search for the ultimate explanation. Certainty feels comforting in uncomfortable times. Yet most of us know that there are few certainties in life beyond the knowledge of our death. So where is our “faith” in all of this? For one thing, the word *faith* assumes an unknown. The word assumes that there is a mystery. We can choose to ignore the mysteries that confront us or we can create our own realities.

Two sociologists, I.I. Mitroff and W. Bennis, wrote a book in 1989 called *The Unreality Industry*. They suggest that the “fundamental dialectic of our times is between reality and unreality, especially now that we have power to influence and create both.” The reason we are creating “substitute realities,” they argue, is that the world has become so complex that “no one person or institution can fully understand or control it.”

*If humans cannot control the realities with which they are faced, then they will invent unrealities over which they can maintain the illusion of control.*

The question is, they write, do we have the courage to face directly and honestly the complex realities we are capable of creating and discovering, or will we turn away from reality and invest our energy increasingly in the denial of reality?

In the Christian tradition, all too often the word *faith* has been used to explain away something that no longer makes sense. For example, “If the earth is only six thousand years old, how could there have been dinosaurs?” Answer: “We must have faith.” One challenge that modern Christians have is that the word *faith* is often confused with the word *belief*. Probably no one explains the difference better than Zen philosopher, the late Alan Watts:

*Belief ... is the insistence that the truth is what one would ‘lie’ or (will or) wish to be ... Faith is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go ... faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.*

It may give comfort to some to assume that with “correct” reading of their Bible they can find the ultimate answers, but modern scholarship has demonstrated that our beloved scriptures are culturally and socially bound to an era. We now “know” that the earth is not flat and that it is wrong to own another human being, for example, even though our scripture might suggest something different. However, the scriptures have provided a powerful tool for humanity throughout their long history when they have been used to provide the ultimate questions. It can be easily argued that the

human struggle with those questions, especially those about our treatment of others, has had an incredibly positive influence on the human condition throughout history.

According to the gospels, Jesus rarely gave a straight answer to a straight question. Instead, he responded with another question or told a puzzling story. At the risk of disappointing his questioners, Jesus put them in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life's most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity. Matthew's collection of Jesus's aphorisms, known as the Sermon on the Mount, shows how Jesus confronted his disciples with contradictions. He told them that nothing in the law could be changed, not the tiniest letter or the stroke of a letter. Nevertheless, he also taught them to question some of the most basic principles of the law, such as the rules concerning murder, adultery, retribution, alms giving and prayer. Jesus would not provide absolute answers because answers, by providing false confidence and security, become barriers to an awareness of God. Answers become substitutes for God. The task Jesus bequeathed to the church was providing a context in which those who would follow him can find the courage to pursue their questions.

- 1. What makes the search for meaning and purpose in today's world an important undertaking?**
- 2. In what ways does "absolute certainty" keep us separated from God and our neighbors?**
- 3. Do you believe it takes more faith to live in ambiguity or to believe in a dogmatic faith? Why?**
- 4. How might the words of the two scholars Mitroff and Bennis ("If humans cannot control the realities with which they are faced, then they will invent unrealities over which they can maintain the illusion of control") apply to religions of our day?**

## 7. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...

**form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do: striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.**

A tension exists between the responsibility we owe to our own families and to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers (Matthew 25:31-45). According to the gospels, Jesus had nothing positive to say about natural families. He repudiated his own mother and sisters and brothers in favor of his new family (Mark 3:32-35). Then he extended this concept of family to those most in need – the sick, the hungry, the stranger and the prisoner. People have a natural instinct to look after their blood relatives. This “kin altruism,” as it is called, appears to be genetically driven. Jesus challenged his followers to widen their circle of concern to take in all human beings.

Jesus experienced God in a profoundly intimate way as the “Parent of all of creation.” As a result of this extraordinary relationship, it seems that Jesus, like others who have had such experiences, had a clear vision about the interconnectedness of all life. As part of that reality, Jesus recognized every human being as a child of one God. For him, one's identity began and ended by simply being God's child. Any other identifying factor was secondary to this truth and likely a distraction (e.g., family, wealth, status and position). As a child of God, every human deserves dignity and justice regardless of their status in this world. Anything less would be an affront to God or a sin against God. Because of this interconnectedness of all life, suffering or injustice to any of God's children means ultimately suffering or injustice for all. This unique understanding of reality led Jesus to what John Dominic Crossan calls a “radical egalitarianism.”

The Buddhist tradition teaches that when one can have the same compassion in one's heart for all sentient beings that a mother has for her child, then one has achieved enlightenment. Marcus Borg points out in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, that the word for compassion in both Hebrew and Aramaic comes out of the same root word as “womb.” He suggests that this would imply that the intention was to “feel with” the same kind of care and love that a mother experiences for her child. It seems clear that this common understanding of compassion is no coincidence. For those special individuals who have experienced such a complete sense of connectedness to the “Other,” that depth of love for others would be a natural byproduct. The question is: How can we have such a profound experience of that connectedness that might break open such compassion in our hearts?

One way to have that experience is to practice compassion in sacred communities where we gather to “practice” living out Jesus's teachings of compassion. We all would be better served if we learned that our practice of compassion was an opportunity and not an obligation. When we begin to live our lives as a child of God – when we practice living, breathing, modeling and teaching compassion in a community that does that out of a love for life, God and each other – something changes in us. Sometimes when we begin to live a life of compassion, we too may have a profound experience with the interconnectedness of life. We may even begin to feel with the compassion of a mother for her child.

The disciple of Jesus then would be someone who perceived and identified himself or herself as a child of God related to others with that perspective. The church, as a spiritual community, is then a place where followers of Jesus seek to live out this relational model with God and each other. It is

both a place and an attitude that can foster ways to appreciate and share one another's gifts and talents in a common effort to serve the world. Historically, those in the church have been called to find communally the perspective and courage to confront the injustices that always surround us, to seek healing and wholeness in the world and to provide hope where there may have been none.

One of the challenges of Progressive Christians is to recognize and acknowledge the complexity and contradictions in the highest of ideals, such as peace and justice. Can peace and justice be achieved at the same time? Totalitarian governments, for example, can enforce a "peace" but almost always at the expense of human rights and justice for many. Libertarian governments might enhance justice and rights for individuals but the price could be social chaos. It is too easy to get caught up in a particular cause with self-righteous indignation and lose sight of the unknown consequences of one's actions.

We must therefore struggle with the meaning of "justice" or what we mean by "just" in the context of our understanding of life. Karen Lebacqz, a well-known Christian ethicist, wrote that the concept of "justice" is complex and difficult to pin down, but that "human justice can never be separated from God's actions." She writes in the same book that although justice may be an ideal that is difficult to define or categorize, our understanding of "justice must begin with the realities of injustice." (*Justice in an Unjust World*, 1987) These issues are made no less complex with the reality that correcting a past injustice can often cause an injustice for innocent people.

Progressive Christians are willing to engage the tensions of these ideals because we admit to the limitations of our perspectives and have faith in the mysteries of God's creation. We dare to engage the ambiguities with compassion because we suspect that God's truth is somewhere in the midst of them.

- 1. What does the term "community" mean to you? When does a group become a community?**
- 2. How do we equip one another and restore hope in an intentional faith community? How is this different from other organizations?**
- 3. How did Jesus seem to define "justice" by his words and actions? What did those things have in common?**
- 4. What are the different ways that one might define the words "justice" and "injustice"? How can enforced peace infringe on the justice of others?**
- 5. What do you believe the church's responsibility should be in confronting injustice in the world or in your community? Why?**

**8. By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who ...**

**recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly and entails selfless love, conscientious resistance to evil and renunciation of privilege.**

Whenever people widen their circle of concern, they will find demands on their resources and risks to their status. Followers of Jesus cannot expect to be any more successful or popular than Jesus was. Like the first of Jesus's disciples, we must learn to give up the hope of being favored or special.

In one story (Mark 10:35-45), two of Jesus's disciples, James and John, come to ask a favor. "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." Most people also look to find some place where they can be special. Having a special place helps to overcome the fear of being nobody and the fear of having no power. Christian groups claiming special access to God have overcome their fear of being nobody and of being powerless but they frequently have produced a negative reaction in those from whom they wanted to separate themselves – even though the gospel story had warned them that they would evoke hostility.

As soon as the other ten disciples heard about the request made by James and John, "they began to be angry." After Jesus heard the request of James and John, and after he saw the anger in the others, he changed the course of the conversation. He did not tell James and John that they were wrong or bad for wanting to have a special status. According to Mark, Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all." Jesus understood the fear that drove his disciples to want special status. Jesus also understood that redirected fear can become a form of spiritual energy that can be transformed into loving concern for other people. There is a special bond that occurs when we put ourselves at risk on behalf of another.

Genuine concern for other people includes resisting any forces that would drain them of energy, deny them sustenance, rob them of dignity or destroy their hope. Progressive Christians believe that the resistance to evil in society, rather than the enhancement of our social position, has always been both an obligation and an opportunity for those who follow Jesus. It is an obligation because it is a way to test our commitment to the path; it is an opportunity because, when one puts themselves at risk on behalf of another simply because of one's compassion, it can be one of the most direct paths to an experience of the Realm of God or that absolute sense of connectedness.

There is an important caveat here: Jesus gave us a wonderful story about the Good Samaritan who literally put his life at risk to save his arch enemy, the Jew. The Samaritan merchant suddenly found himself in a difficult situation. He knew that if he did not act, this man would die. He also knew that there were most likely robbers in the area and that the safest thing would be to get out of that area. However, he did the humane or even the holy thing and stopped and helped the wounded Jew. He took him where he could get help and paid for it at some significant expense. Then he apparently continued on his way to Jericho to do his work. He did not wait for rewards or praise nor did he go back out into the desert and look for more victims to "save."

Some people have misinterpreted the teachings of Jesus to presume that we are supposed to fix all of the injustices, all of the wrongs, using all of our energy and resources to save the world at the expense of our health, our families and our financial resources. The universe will always provide plenty of opportunities to make a stand, to help another, to put ourselves at risk when it can make a difference and when it counts and even to literally put our life on the line. However, we must remind

ourselves that the teaching is to love another as we love ourselves. We cannot love others more than we love ourselves and loving others can never be a substitute for love of self.

- 1. What does the word “disciple” mean to you today? In what ways do you think it could be “costly”?**
- 2. How far would you be willing to go? What changes would you be willing to make? What risks would you be willing to take?**
- 3. How might we transform our negative fears into positive energy? How could we help others to do the same?**
- 4. What privilege are you willing to recognize and renounce for the betterment of all?**
- 5. What do we mean by “evil” today? In what ways do you think you can resist evil in our world? In your life?**

## **Conclusion**

The final discussion will be enhanced if participants have an opportunity individually to write down their answers to the questions before telling each other their thoughts.

- 1. What impact have these discussions had on your understanding of Christianity and of your own faith?**
- 2. Looking back over your conversations, do you think that your congregation could call itself “progressive” according to the Eight-Point definition you have discussed?**
- 3. What do you see as the next steps for your congregation? Bringing more people into the conversation by sponsoring another round of discussions based on the Eight Points? Asking the leaders of your congregation to list your church in the Directory of Progressive Churches? What else?**

# The Center for Progressive Christianity

## Honorary Advisors

### **James Rowe Adams**

Founder of The Center of Progressive Christianity in 1994. Before his retirement from the parish, he had served for nearly thirty years as rector of St. Mark's Church on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The flourishing congregation was once referred to as "a citadel of enlightened Christianity" by *The Washington Post*. He is the author of *From Literal to Literary – The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* and *So You Can't Stand Evangelism? A Thinking Person's Guide to Church Growth*.

### **Karen Armstrong**

A former Roman Catholic nun who teaches at Leo Baeck College for the Study of Judaism in London. Her recent works include *A History of God, The Battle for God* and *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*.

### **Marcus J. Borg**

Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture, Oregon State University. Among the many books he has written are *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, *The God We Never Knew*, and *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus*.

### **John B. Cobb, Jr.**

Professor Emeritus at Claremont School of Theology, founder of the Center for Process Studies and cofounder of Progressive Christians United. His recent books include *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, *Becoming a Thinking Christian* and *Reclaiming the Church*.

### **Barbara Lundblad**

Associate Professor of Preaching, Union Theological Seminary, New York. An ordained Lutheran pastor, she served a church in New York City for seventeen years before joining the faculty at Union. Her newest book is *Transforming the Stone*.

### **William W. Rankin**

President, The Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance (GAIA). Before joining GAIA, he was the vice president of the United Religions Initiative. Earlier, he served as a theological school president and as the rector of a parish. He was a founding member of the TCPC advisory committee and is the author of *Cracking the Monolith*.

### **John Shelby Spong**

Retired Bishop of the Episcopal Church's Diocese of Newark. He now devotes his time to writing and lecturing. Tapes of his lectures are available from Christianity for the Third Millennium. His most recent books are *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, *Here I Stand: My Struggle for a Christianity of Integrity, Love, and Equality* and *A New Christianity for a New World*.

### **Charles V. Willie**

Former Professor of Education and Urban Studies, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and now an education policy consultant to school systems and governments. He was an early member of the TCPC advisory committee. His written work includes the book *Theories of Human Social Action*.

Reviews of books written by TCPC Honorary Advisors and speaking schedules for some of them are available on the website at [www.tcpc.org](http://www.tcpc.org).



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Gig Harbor, WA 98335

Phone: 253-303-0022

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