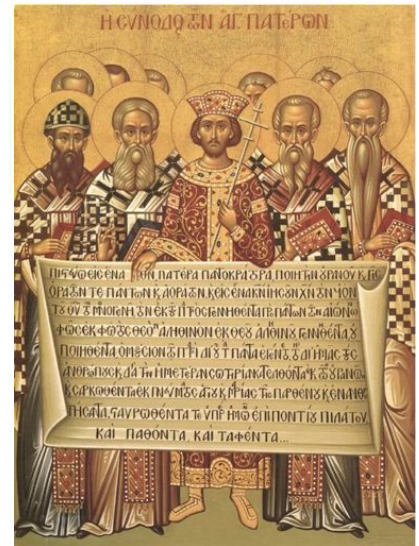


# DEFINING PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY: AN OPEN-ENDED “CREED” FOR A PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN

BY JOHN W. BENNISON, REL.D

Right: Icon depicting the Emperor Constantine, accompanied by the bishops of the First Council of Nicaea (325), holding the Niceno–Constantinopolitan Creed of 381.



## PREFACE

Recently the secular press was all in a buzz around the Vatican. It appeared Francis had implied the remote possibility that there might be an ever so slight change in the long-standing and seemingly rock-solid teachings of the Church that might one-day recognize the blessings of same-sex unions; as well as permission for divorced Catholics to once again receive communion. The institutional Church, of course, has long claimed the exclusive authority to dispense or deny divine blessings and what it asserts to be the sacrament of salvation to whomever it deems worthy.

But even before the Synod of 200 bishops before whom the Pope had intimated such possibilities had scurried to walk it all back, I'd muttered to myself, "Who cares?" Even as the Church was hanging tough, only a stone's throw from St. Peter's Square, Ignazio Marino, the Mayor of Rome, was registering sixteen same sex couples who'd been married abroad.

I thought to myself, poor Francis. He is a well-meaning twentieth century leader of a medieval Church. The only problem is we're living in the twenty first century.

At the end of the last century (in 1998), Jack Spong wrote his national best seller, "Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile." It was a continuation of his efforts to "rescue" the Bible from the fundamentalists. But in my mind, his do-or-die title for the survival of the Church raised an important point and distinction. The institutional Church may indeed die under the weight of its own antiquated intransigence; not as the result of the message it was originally inspired to proclaim, but rather the refutation of that message by the very shepherds of the flock whose job it is to defend it.

In a word, it seemed to me that a religious tradition founded upon the proclamation and affirmation that new and abundant life will always arise from the death of the old, should not waste its time wringing its hands over the remnants of a dead past. Move on.

At its core, that's what a *progressive* movement is all about.

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While the institutional Church's habitual posture is so often one of intractability – like the Rock upon which Peter presumably stands clutching the keys to the Kingdom in his tight fist – the individual believer and their life is always a matter of ever-evolving change. So it's not so much a matter whether the Church will change or die, but whether one's individual faith journey will stagnate, regress or progress.

So it is that one can speak of one's faith that surpasses one's beliefs, and indeed call it a grand adventure, instead of the rote recitation of arcane notions. So it is that one can try to imagine the lives of those earliest, pre-Christian believers who first came to be known as followers of the Way of an *itinerant* preacher. And so it is that some of us acknowledge our own separate paths; and at the same time seek to share a common path, reflective of that way of life.

## COMMENTARY

I have often said so-called “progressive Christianity” is a notion forever in search of its own elusive definition; and that’s as good a way of explaining it as we may be able to find.

The use of the term “progressive” may appear to be relatively new to this religious tradition, in terms of its explicit use to describe a general approach to the study and practice of Christianity. But it’s different from its more generic or secular use of the term – as in politics or openness to expanding and shifting social values – that often connotes someone with liberal leanings trying to avoid being branded with the ‘L’ word.

We live in a post-modern world that considers the age of Enlightenment (that began four centuries earlier) to be a *post-facto* reality. As such, “progressive” thinking in an age of Reason has pushed the boundaries of nearly every facet of life, except one: those ‘traditional’ or ‘orthodox’ beliefs, based on certain creeds, doctrines and dogma that still dominate what it presumably means to be “Christian.”

It hardly needs to be said that it is also why so many one-time believers have outgrown their one-time faith. Calling them merely “lapsed” is misleading. So much has *elapsed* in the world we have all come to know and take for granted, that the once-dominant Church -- -- despite all its denominational varieties -- has fast become a post-modern relic.

This is especially evident whenever the secular press wades into the shallowest waters of what is culturally assumed to be the singular belief system of anyone, and everyone, who would profess to call themselves a Christian. Earlier this year a fairly knowledgeable writer for a fairly sophisticated magazine wrote an article around the high holy day of Easter; making the perfunctory observation, “of course all real Christians believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.” Hogwash! It drives me nuts.

I have *progressed* so far beyond what I take to be such a wooden and stultified approach to the rich origins of the earliest gospel traditions that such routine sophomoric assumptions rob us of the gospel story’s mythic powers. In its place, this kind of lazy quip offers the kind of slight-of-hand magic that merely peddles the allure and *illusion of* certainty to the un-inquisitive; meant to simply relieve us of our mortal fears, if we can only shut our eyes, tap our toes together three times, and just “believe.” In the post-modern world in which we live, there is a term bandied about in the daily news cycle when such a notion is carried to the extreme. It’s called violent radical religious extremism.

At the same time, a critical examination of the historical development of the canonical and non-canonical Christian scriptures – let alone two thousand years of church history – will quickly demonstrate a religious tradition that has *always* been in a constant state of flux, evolution, or – if you like -- “progression.” It was only when it stopped and got stuck that we traded in the tent for a temple, and snuffed the life out of a movement that is progressive by its very nature.

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So it is that certain so-called Christian faith communities have progressed to a point where certain elements of this tradition are no long credible and viable. In the house church model to which I have donated my leadership for the past eight years, called [Pathways](#) (and its online corollary of commentaries, [Words & Ways](#)), we have not only freed ourselves from the encumbrances of buildings and budgets; but any ecclesiastical hierarchy that tells us what we should believe, or not believe, as well. Among these is any literal interpretation of scripture, and any superhuman and salvific attributes accorded some co-eternal and divine Christ figure.

Such heresies, of course, dismantle a lot of what for a long time has been presumed to be at the core of Christian beliefs. But it also helps us move beyond some of those limiting, problematic and dead-end quandaries that have abounded unanswered, for example: The appeasement swap known as the “blood atonement.” Why evil? Why unanswered prayer? Delay of the Parousia? Explain miracles (an oxymoron). What about providential will and design? Unencumbered from such things, we can turn to those pursuits that may still have life in them; to be found in new and revelatory encounters.

One of these is the attempt to re-imagine what those earliest pre-Christian faith communities might have been like, when they were still invigorated by the lingering after-presence of a deceased Galilean spirit-sage. That is, before the early church got organized, accorded Jesus divine attributes, and conferred upon itself all the subsequent hierarchical claims of authority that set about distinguishing what was acceptable to believe, from what was not.

Another was the re-emphasis on our attempts to return as near as we can possibly surmise it to the human Jesus, his teachings and way of life; using the only filtered and composite characterizations we have, found in earliest available texts of this religious movement.

In addition, this leads to yet another advance for the *progressive*, that is the reclamation of the emphasis the historical Jesus clearly seemed to espouse; about practice (what you do) over whatever belief system (creed) you espouse. His seeming affinity for the prodigal, the Samaritan neighbor, the unclean and outcast was not based on any distinguishable beliefs, but rather the conciliatory and compassionate relationship between human beings, borne of action.

Yet even such a departure from those old creedal formulas that one can no longer swallow, let alone, stomach, necessarily leaves one with a new belief ‘system’ about all of that. For, even the nihilist who claims to believe *nothing* unavoidably says they believe something! So, if one were to try to say what a “progressive Christian” believes -- and doesn't believe anymore -- what would that be? What kind of creed would constitute an honest statement of belief?

ProgressiveChristianity.org offers its “8 Points of Progressive Christianity.” Various authors have written about what is popularly referred to as the “wisdom” of the progressive’s approach.

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Felten and Proctor-Murphy’s little primer, Living the Questions, or Robin Meyer’s Saving Jesus from the Church and The Underground Church, are a good examples. Others have dug even deeper, like David Galston’s Embracing the Human Jesus: A Wisdom Path for Contemporary Spirituality.

At the conclusion of Galston’s work, he escorts the reader to what may seem to be a fork in the road, asking the question, “Is it still Christianity?” Answering that question may constitute what I would suggest is the lynchpin to this progressive movement.

Admittedly, progressive Christianity may dismantle a lot of what has preceded it; leaving us knee-deep in the rubble of those shattered, precious icons of a dead belief system. The key question going forward is what, if anything, will replace the old Christological formulations? That is the new frontier for this movement.

But at this juncture, here for the reader is one progressive’s 4-part, open-ended “creed.”

## **I. The Bible is a bunch of myths.**

The Bible is a compilation of great mythic tales that speak to the universal human condition. When understood and interpreted metaphorically, not literally, these very human stories have the power to convey great truths about our highest values and ideals: maturity (wisdom), charity, compassion, forgiveness, second chances (and third, fourth, fifth ...), and trust (faith) over fear.

Myths do not have to be factually true to be true, or untrue. The mythic tale of parting of the Red Sea tells the irrepressible message of liberation and homecoming over bondage, exile and banishment. The resurrection of Jesus' message tells the story of the irrepressible proclamation that his words and ways that were "cast down" will always be irrepressibly raised up again. That, and when one is as good as dead, the deadness of the past need no longer hold one in bondage. These are affirmed as true myths.

On the other hand, there are also false and alluring myths, which we seem perpetually tempted to believe. For example, the myth of redemptive violence (the notion that the perpetuation of violence can put an end to violence), is a false myth. It is a false myth that we retell over and over, despite the obvious fact the message the story tries to tell us is not true.

## **II. "God" is an imperfect, human word and notion.**

God language that only refers to divine personhood (theism, with the standard attributes of omniscience and omnipotence) can be cumbersome, problematic, constrictive and just not very helpful. It leaves us debating "his" or "her" existence, and then arguing or explaining why such a god isn't doing a better job. Some of us who might still refer to ourselves as "progressive Christians" may also be *a*-theists (non-theists), who have moved beyond these self-limiting questions; but are yet unwilling to say there's nothing more to it all than we can presently know or comprehend. (Agnostics are those who don't know, and furthermore don't care; who have retired from the whole enterprise altogether.)

The secular may be so infused with the sacred, so as to make the two indistinguishable (the divine is not only *in* all things, but *comprises* all things); but to also acknowledge the mystery of what remains unknown, and the willingness to leave open the unpredictable. Our search for meaning may yet be encountered by the gift of a greater sense of meaning, beyond our own ability to conjure up such things.

## **III. Jesus was just a guy.**

Jesus was a human being, no more, nor less, who lived and died like the rest of us; with the only possible difference being he seems to have been far, far more remarkable than most of us. He seems to have clearly inspired his earliest followers by his stories, his teachings and way of life to the extent that other's lives were subsequently changed in the most meaningful and transformative kinds of ways. Furthermore, such transformation was not only personal for the individual. Its consequence was corporate and collective for the common good. This belief is expressed in Jesus' most authentic sayings, depicting the "reign of God" over and over again. As such, it remains the primary invitation and challenge for those of us who would feign to follow in his way.

Jesus was no more "co-eternal" than anyone else or anything else. The elements of the universe from which we have all come -- and to which we all return -- are both empirically self-evident and a mystery. Clearly, like Jesus, we are comprised of the dust of the earth. And there is that vast unknown we cannot presume to know.

#### IV. Heaven on earth is as good as it gets.

Jesus was not immortal, and as such, he does not provide for us a pass when it comes to our own mortal demise. Acknowledging this, death is understood not as the anti-thesis of life, but a part of the life cycle of what it means to be fully human. Hell on earth is of our own making, and too often our reality. Heaven on earth is as good as it gets, and that's more than OK.

As such, we are freed from the fear of death; not by false hope, but the fuller affirmation of all that life can mean for us. The ultimate expression of this affirmation (belief) is found in such wisdom (mature faith) as “losing one's self to find one's self,” and “there is no greater love (i.e., charity and compassion) than when we lay down our life for the sake of another.”

#### CONCLUSION:

#### IF JESUS IS MY LORD, WILL I STAKE MY LIFE ON IT?

Removing the religious connotation to the title, the question for this believer is whether I'm willing to make *this particular* Jesus, and all he stood for, the lord and master of my life; not just in what I say I believe, but what I do?

You'll recall the story of the emperor Constantine who – after his conversion to Christianity, and eager to unify his earthly kingdom in 323 CE – locked up all the quarreling and intractable bishops in a room in the little town coastal of Nicea, in Asia Minor. He told them they couldn't leave until they came up with what would commonly be referred to as a confession of faith; but was, in actuality, merely a list of things right-thinking (i.e. orthodox) Christians should believe. The Nicene Creed recited by many Christians today has remained virtually unchanged in a world that has changed drastically in the last 1,600 years.

In contrast, a progressive Christian's “creed” – while it may constitute a statement of beliefs – remains an open-ended canon, requiring action. It is that forward-leaning inertia the David Galston refers to as the *momentum* of a message first begun by a human Jesus; but continuing in new and different application, appropriate to the very different age in which we live today.

As such, there is no such thing as required adherence and obedience to such an open-ended, ever-evolving and *progressive* “creed.” No religious institution would ever want to make it such a requirement, or they'd soon find themselves out of business when their questionable authority was challenged for waffling. While religious zealots who cling to the illusion of sectarian certainty may become apoplectic over it, no one would ever be burned at the stake for refusing allegiance to such a creed.

The only thing at stake is what one can still believe, and no longer believe, to keep one moving authentically, meaningfully and honestly along *the Way*.

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