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**The Progressive Trilateral:
Mapping Out Challenges to Evangelicalism from Progressive Christianity**

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In his book, *The Heart of Christianity*, progressive Christian author Marcus Borg opens with a grim diagnosis: “Christians in North America today are deeply divided about the heart of Christianity. We live in a time of major conflict in the church” (2003, 14). Borg frames the division as a conflict between “earlier” and “emerging” Christian paradigms (2003, 14), each with its own “meta-theology” which “shapes its vision of Christianity and the Christian life” (2003, 20), including opposing views of moral issues such as biblical sexuality (2003, 15). These “earlier” and “emerging” paradigms refer respectively to traditional and progressive Christianity. Although Borg’s analysis looks at the progressive trend in the broader Christian tradition, the conflict between these paradigms also applies particularly to the conflict between progressive Christians and evangelical Christians.

This conflict is not confined to North America. Progressive Christianity is developing elsewhere, particularly in the moral validation of the LGBTQ+ movement. For example, the Church of England issued a press release on February 9, 2023, stating that the General Synod passed proposals that would allow same-sex couples the opportunity “to come to church after a civil marriage or civil partnership to give thanks, dedicate their relationship to God and receive God’s blessing.” Furthermore, studies in South Korean evangelicalism have found not only that evangelicalism in South Korea is affected by American evangelicalism (Lee 2021), but also that “inclusive-evangelical” congregations within South Korea offer a potential space for “non-heterosexual Christians” to reconcile their sexual orientation with conservative Christianity (Yi 2018). Challenges like these are symptoms of the growing influence of progressive Christianity on a global scale.

Understanding and responding to these challenges is imperative for the global defense of evangelical Christianity. Therefore this paper will analyze the structure of progressive Christianity through the lens of evangelicalism. This analysis will synthesize historian David Bebbington's four-part model of evangelicalism with sociologist Laura Edles' two core emphases of progressive Christianity. This will yield a progressive trilateral that reveals the contrasts between evangelical Christianity and progressive Christianity. This paper will then compare progressive Christianity and evangelicalism on each of the three points of the trilateral model: the source of authority, the content of morality, and the practice of mission. This comparison will demonstrate how progressive Christianity distorts, and in one case omits, key elements of evangelical Christianity. The goal is to expose the fundamental clashes between these two systems and reclaim the term "Christian" from its progressive misuse. In other words, my purpose is not to show how progressive Christianity is anti-Christian below the surface; my goal is to show that it is anti-Christian right on the surface.

Sketching the Progressive Trilateral

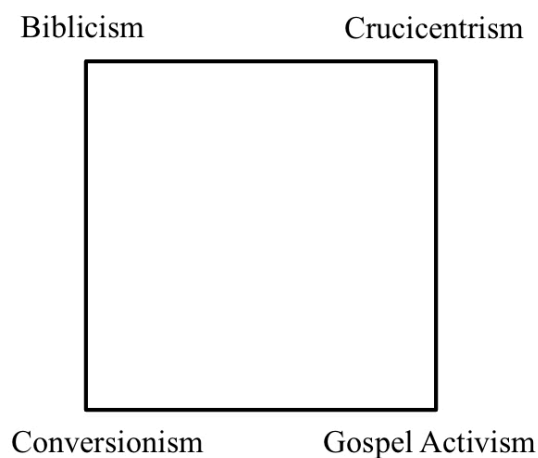
To synthesize Bebbington and Edles effectively, each of their models must be defined in turn. Although evangelicalism is a diverse movement, the evangelical historian David Bebbington provides a definition based on British evangelical movements starting in the 1730s. This has come to be known as the "Bebbington quadrilateral" or the "evangelical quadrilateral." Bebbington's definition outlines four descriptors of an evangelical movement:

conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called crucicentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (1989, 2-3).

Given this definition's wide acceptance in the literature on evangelicalism (Larsen 2007, 1), this quadrilateral will serve to define evangelicalism in the following comparison with progressive Christianity. Figure 1 offers a visual of the Bebbington quadrilateral that will facilitate the contrast with progressive Christianity below.

Figure 1

Bebbington/Evangelical Quadrilateral



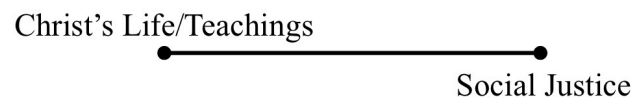
Progressive Christianity, somewhat like evangelicalism, is not a monolithic organization. It is a diverse movement with a variety of expressions, thus making definition somewhat difficult. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, Laura Edles' description of contemporary progressive Christianity will prove invaluable. Edles follows the rise of progressive Christianity, particularly in the United States, as a reaction to the Christian right that led to the proliferation of books, websites, and organizations which gave a voice to the political and spiritual frustration of progressive Christians (2013, 4). Edles then defines progressive Christianity based on two criteria: first, emphasizing the life and teachings of Jesus, and second, pursuing social justice and inclusivity. Edles goes so far as to argue, "A progressive Christianity without an emphasis on

Jesus's life and teachings and social justice is not progressive Christianity at all” (2013, 7).

Yancey and Quosigk independently corroborate this dual criteria based on their qualitative study of progressive Christians, which led them to classify progressive Christians based on two common factors: “a *flexible, Jesus-centric theology*, which stresses what we have conceptualized and termed a *humanistic ethic of social justice*” (2021, 137-138, emphasis added). These two criteria, therefore, will guide what this paper evaluates as “progressive Christianity.” Figure 2 sets these dual criteria on a line segment for the purpose of comparison below.

Figure 2

Edles' Progressive Christian Criteria



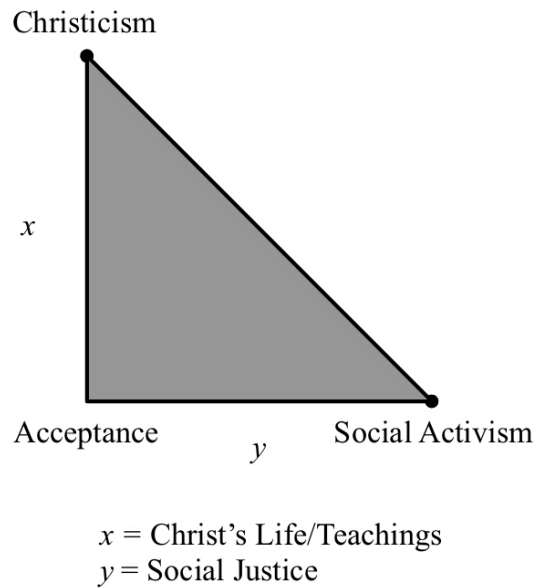
On their own, these two elements do not pose an inherent challenge to evangelicalism. As Edles goes on to note, however, the “lifeblood of contemporary progressive Christianity...is concern about the LGBT community,” which leads them to include “gay Christians” in the church and criticize homophobia within the church (2013, 7-8). While evangelicals should denounce the mistreatment of people in the LGBTQ+ movement, the progressive practice of accepting “all peoples” into Christian fellowship (2013, 6) indicates that progressive Christians would affirm the gender and sexual orientation of LGBTQ+ individuals, while evangelicals would not. This is an integral element of the social justice criteria in Edles’ framework, and thus moves further than evangelicals would be willing to go.

For the purpose of synthesizing these models, the similarities between these frameworks will be identified in terms of source of authority, content of morality, and practice of mission. First, based on Edles' dual criteria, the source of authority for progressive Christians would be Jesus' life and teachings. As will be demonstrated in the exploration of progressive Christian literature below, progressive Christians often set Jesus' life and teachings against other parts of the Bible. Therefore, to facilitate comparison with evangelicalism's source of authority (i.e. biblicism), the progressive source of authority will be labeled "Christicism." Second, Christ's example of love and the call to pursue social justice inform the content of morality for progressive Christians, which chiefly involves accepting others as they are. This is clear from Edles' discussion of how progressive Christianity includes an acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals by definition (2013, 6-8). To facilitate comparison with evangelicalism's content of morality (i.e. conversionism), the progressive content of morality will be labeled "acceptance." Third, the emphasis on acceptance drives the pursuit of social justice. This pursuit operates without the need for gospel-proclaiming activism. To facilitate comparison with evangelicalism's practice of mission (i.e. gospel activism), the progressive practice of mission will be labeled "social activism."

By applying Edles' framework to these methodological questions, it becomes clear that these two criteria tie these three methodological points together, from Christicism to acceptance to social activism. This can be represented by a trilateral, as displayed in Figure 3. The three points represent the three methodological elements in progressive Christianity, and the hypotenuse represents how Edles' dual framework ties these elements together (with the dual criteria represented by the x and y axes).

Figure 3

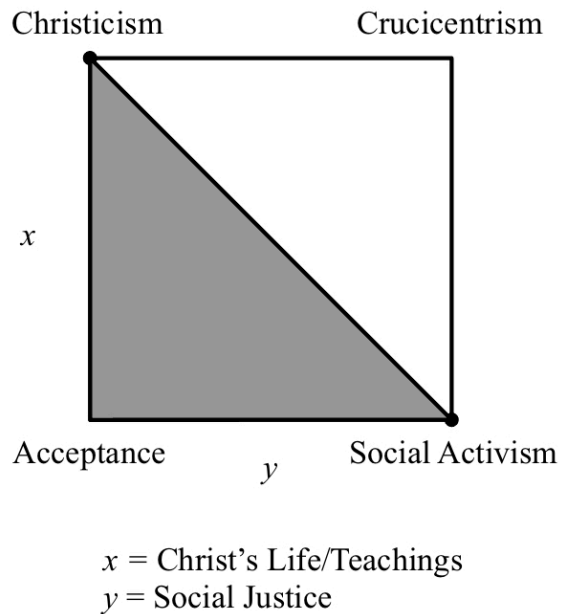
Progressive Trilateral



Each of these points have just enough common ground with evangelicalism to appear agreeable at face-value. Evangelicals would agree with the authority of Christ, the need to offer the gospel to all without distinction, and the command of God to pursue justice. The contrast between these two systems comes with the progressive distortion of each of these points. Mapping the progressive trilateral on top of the evangelical quadrilateral exposes this contrast, as displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Progressive Trilateral vs. Evangelical Quadrilateral



This reveals two key themes. First, progressive Christianity distorts three points of evangelicalism. Progressive Christianity has a different authority, morality, and mission, thus rendering progressive Christianity irreconcilable with evangelicalism. Second, the trilateral removes the need for the cross. Christ's example of loving acceptance which sounds the call for social justice provides progressive Christianity all it needs. The cross may illustrate Christ's loving life and teaching, his acceptance and solidarity with the oppressed, and the social injustice which his activism opposed, but it offers nothing unique. To be clear, this is not to say that progressive Christians do not find the cross significant. Their theological system, however, does not require the cross. In contrast, evangelicalism absolutely requires the cross as a unique

contribution. Put differently, the progressive Christian can be a progressive Christian without the cross; but the evangelical cannot be an evangelical without the cross.

What follows explores progressive Christian literature, demonstrating the explanatory power of the progressive trilateral by comparing these two movements. As these comparisons are made, the two aforementioned themes will arise. First, the progressive Christian trilateral distorts evangelical authority, morality, and mission. Second, the progressive Christian trilateral removes the need for the cross.

Authority: Biblicism or Christicism?

The first point of the progressive trilateral is “Christicism,” which sets the life and teachings of Christ as the progressive source of authority. This challenges the evangelical source of authority: biblicism. This is not to say that evangelicals reject the life and teachings of Jesus as authoritative. Rather, as will be demonstrated below, progressive Christians set Jesus against the rest of Scripture in a manner that evangelicals would reject.

Evangelical Authority: Biblicism

Evangelicals give particular attention to the Bible as their authority. Bebbington argues that, though a strong view of biblical inspiration was contested by some evangelicals in the nineteenth century, it gathered greater steam because of the work of Robert Haldane, which led to a strong view of inspiration dominating nineteenth century evangelicalism (1983, 24-25). D.A. Carson diverges from Bebbington, however, by arguing that a strong view of inspiration in Britain, namely inerrancy, did not start with Haldane, but was “a primary belief of Christians since the early church” and defended apart from Haldane’s work (2016, 22-23). Based on

Carson's analysis, evangelical biblicism defends a strong view of inspiration that includes inerrancy.

Progressive Authority: Christicism

The progressive Christian's authority, on the other hand, is not the Bible per se, but the life and teachings of Jesus. This could mean different things for progressive Christians. On the one hand, a focus on the life and teachings of Jesus may lead progressive Christians to see the parts of Scripture which discuss Jesus' life and teachings as more authoritative. On the other hand, progressive Christians may question the validity of even those Scriptures which discuss Jesus' life and teachings. In either case, progressive Christians look to Jesus as a key nexus for religious experience and moral reasoning. Either the authority of Jesus shapes their moral framework, or their moral framework shapes the authority of Jesus. In either case, Jesus is central, and he is set against the Bible as an authority.

This tension is evident in progressive Christian experience. In Rebekka King's ethnography of progressive Christians, she found that progressive Christians treat the Bible as both a source from which to derive their beliefs and an obstacle to true religious experience (2023, 16). Paradoxically, however, King also finds that the Bible is "noticeably absent in progressive Christianity" (2023, 79). How do progressive Christians interact with something that is absent? By critiquing it from afar through another lens. King finds that progressive Christians analyze Scripture using "popular exegesis" as applied by progressive authors using history, science, and "common sense" (2023, 82). One authority respected by many progressive Christians is the Jesus Seminar, a group of prominent New Testament scholars which first met in 1985 to evaluate the historical accuracy of various biblical accounts of Jesus' life and teachings

(2023, 97). In short, progressive Christians interact with the Bible and may learn from it, but they do not submit to it as an ultimate authority.

Though one might be tempted based on King's findings to see progressive Christianity merely as liberal Christianity, Delwin Brown offers a helpful corrective in distinguishing the two. Brown notes that the difference between liberal Christianity and progressive Christianity is that liberal Christianity placed reason at the center of Christian reflection rather than placing the historic material of Christianity at the center, thus making reason the source of theology rather than this historic Christian material (2008, 4-6). The authority of progressive Christians is much more centered on Jesus compared to liberal Christianity.

Despite this correction, however, Brown's view of progressive Christianity includes an explicit denial of biblical inerrancy. He goes so far as to say that "it is also impossible to claim, responsibly, that what the Bible says is without error. The Bible is not inerrant. This is so clearly evident that we are tempted to dismiss its denial out of hand" (2008, 16). Brown's account of the Bible's authority, then, is not an authority that demands someone to conform, but an authority that empowers someone to transform (2008, 20-22). In other words, regardless of the factual accuracy of the text, the Scripture's authority is found in how it forms our Christian identity (2008, 23). The character which the Scripture forms is more important than the content which it contains.

If Scripture contains errors, how can it be trusted to be a transformative authority? It can be trusted only insofar as it communicates Christ. Borg agrees that the Bible contains errors, so he posits that Christians should side with Jesus as the norm of Scripture when Scripture errs (2014, 76-77) and that they should adopt a "historical-metaphorical" or "parabolical" approach

to Scripture rather than a “literal-factual” approach (2014, 102, 106). Borg also argues that interacting with the Bible in a metaphorical, sacramental way allows a Christian to relate with God within the Christian tradition, for which the Bible forms the foundation (2003, 79). But even though the Bible forms the foundation, “Jesus is more central than the Bible. Jesus trumps the Bible; when they disagree, Jesus wins” (2003, 104).

Borg’s approach is reiterated by other progressive authors. Brian McLaren, another prominent progressive Christian author, agrees by opposing the “conventional approach” of placing all Scripture on the same level as Jesus’ life and teachings, arguing instead that Christians should follow Jesus’ example as the “zenith of God’s self-revelation” (2010, 236). Jon Paul Sydnor concurs by arguing that Jesus himself, rather than being an inerrantist, employed a variety of strategies in interpreting and applying Scripture that ranged from rejection to reformulation to synthesis, based on what accords with unconditional love or *agape*. Sydnor argues that this practice should govern how Christians read Scripture as well (2016, 745-750, 755). In sum, the aim of the progressive hermeneutic is to read the life and teachings of Jesus such that they transform us to live a loving lifestyle consistent with his example, particularly in contradistinction to parts of Scripture that appear to conflict with Jesus’ life and teachings. Instead of biblicism, progressive Christians embrace Christicism.

Evangelical Response to Progressive Authority

The evangelical response to this is that true Christicism and biblicism are indistinguishable. Responding to the above quotation from Brian McLaren, which represents the progressive Christian hermeneutic, Denny Burk outlines two arguments against McLaren’s hermeneutic. First, Jesus clearly teaches the enduring applicability of the Old Testament in

Matthew 5:17 and appeals to its authority in his teaching on marriage in Matthew 19:5. Second, Christians do not access the life and teachings of Jesus without the mediation of the apostles whom Jesus himself selected, which means rejecting the apostles' writings means rejecting Jesus' authority to select his own representatives. Put more starkly, denying Jesus' apostles constitutes a denial of Jesus himself (Burk 2010, 3). Although evangelicals should heartily agree with progressive Christians that Jesus is central to Scripture, evangelicals should reject the conclusion that such centrality sets Jesus in opposition to Scripture. Following Jesus means accepting the authority of Scripture. The evangelical view of the Bible as the source of authority matches Jesus' teaching, while the progressive view of Christicism does not. If you want Jesus, you must have the Bible. You cannot separate the two.

Morality: Conversionism or Acceptance?

The second point of the progressive trilateral is acceptance, the inclusion of other people in the Christian community, without reservation or distinction, as the progressive content of morality. This builds on the authority of Christicism by personally applying Christ's ethic of love and acceptance. It also challenges the evangelical content of morality: conversionism. As in the above comparison on authority, evangelicals do not totally reject this progressive ethic of including people of diverse backgrounds. Progressive Christianity, however, distorts how God accepts people into the Christian community.

Evangelical Morality: Conversionism

For a long time, evangelicalism has seen a connection between the authority of Scripture and the call to change. In his study of evangelical conversion from 1740 to 1850, Bebbington concludes, "Conversion, itself a defining characteristic of the evangelical movement, was

intimately connected with biblicism, another” (2000, 115). Bebbington finds further that, based on the testimony of ministers and laypeople, conversion constituted a fundamental change from a previous life of sin to a life devoted to God in response to God working through people’s encounters with the Bible (2000, 107-109). Evangelicalism, then, calls on people to respond to the call of God in the Scripture by converting to a life of obedience to him.

Even in a criticism of Bebbington, this evangelical emphasis on conversion is evident. In his interaction with Bebbington’s quadrilateral, Thomas Kidd cautiously argues that an emphasis on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was “the most distinctive, controversial, and energizing principle behind the piety of the new evangelicals” (2015, 54-55), more so than biblicism, activism, and crucicentrism (2015, 55). Although Kidd maintains that this emphasis is not confined to the Spirit’s involvement with Scripture and conversion (2015, 54), Kidd’s proposal recognizes that the indwelling Spirit’s operation in believers distinguished those believers from unbelievers (2015, 56). In short, conversion as a Spirit-empowered change from a sinful life to an obedient life is a core tenet of evangelicalism.

Therefore, evangelical morality begins with conversion, which constitutes a change in the person encountering God’s word. This change occurs in response to a tension between their sinful lifestyle and their encounter with Scripture, and the conversion resolves the tension by embracing obedience. This change is different from the transformation which progressive Christians discuss. As we will see below, while evangelicals place conversion before acceptance, progressive Christians argue that accepting who you are as loved by God precedes transformation into a more loving person.

Progressive Morality: Acceptance

For progressive Christians, an individual does not convert in response to the Scripture, but accepts themselves within the Christian framework of morality. Because progressive Christians emphasize Jesus' love-oriented life and teachings, they build a morality on that authority which accepts what the Scripture rejects. Stephen Hunt outlines how the Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement in Britain historically bolstered its theological position. First, Hunt notes that most gay Christians adopt a higher critical approach to Scripture and focuses on Jesus' teaching about love. Second, they argued that homosexuality is part of God's creation and expresses the "rich diversity of God's work" (Hunt 2002, 3). In short, the acceptance of homosexuality in progressive Christian morality depends on Christ's loving acceptance of who they are at that moment, which is exactly how God created them to be. Scriptures which condemn homosexuality, then, are read in light of Jesus' emphasis on love, and are thus rejected.

Based on this morality of acceptance, progressive Christianity takes up a moral opposition towards prejudice. John Shelby Spong, one of the grandfathers of the progressive Christian movement, argues that prejudice is a survival technique rooted in evolutionary development that ultimately "prevents us from becoming fully human" (2009, 328). According to Spong, Jesus offers the Christian alternative in his teaching and life. Two examples include the parable of the Good Samaritan and the healing of the ten lepers. First, Spong argues that Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:29-37 to demonstrate that God sets no limits on his love and compassion, so Christians should set no limits on "the love of one human being for another" (2009, 335-336). Second, Jesus heals ten lepers in Luke 17:11-19 and then tells the Samaritan leper who thanked him to "rise and go your way; your faith has made you well,"

which Spong argues are “words that imply, I believe, the essence of Jesus’ message: ‘Go and be who you are!’” (2009, 336-337). Although Spong’s main application of this principle in the immediate context is to race relations, he argues in the next chapter that Jesus demonstrates the power to overcome “barriers to celebrating [the] full humanity” of a list of victims of religious rejection, including gay and lesbian people (2009, 360). In sum, Spong argues that the love-centered life and teaching of Jesus sets the agenda for taking down barriers to accepting marginalized people, including gay and lesbian people, as fully human.

Evangelical Response to Progressive Morality

In response to acceptance as the progressive Christian’s content of morality, evangelicals can offer two counterarguments. The first counterargument flows from the source of authority. Though love is central to Jesus’ teaching, the definition of love is not self-evident (Badcock 2001, 31). There must be some authority to define love. As stated above, if the progressive Christian wishes to define love based on Jesus’ authority, they must also accept the Bible which Jesus affirmed as authoritative. As Burk argues, following Jesus’ authority means submitting to his affirmation of Scripture’s authority, which includes the condemnation of homosexuality in both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Burk 2010, 3). The progressive rejection of the Bible in favor of Jesus’ life and teachings not only leads to a faulty view of morality, but weakens the foundation necessary for morality.

Second, for evangelicals, true acceptance from God is the result of conversion. According to Bebbington, evangelicals from the beginning believed that sin separates people from God, thus rendering their works unacceptable to God. Trusting in Jesus as Savior justifies the individual and allows them to receive salvation rather than achieving it (Bebbington 1989, 6). In

other words, conversion led to acceptance by God. This does not mean that those in the LGBTQ+ community are less human or valuable. Neither is this opposed to God's love for the sinner before conversion. Bebbington notes that evangelical preachers in the nineteenth century emphasized the love of God over the fear of hell as the motivation for conversion (1989, 6). Nevertheless, that love does not mean acceptance. Sin must still be dealt with. Progressive Christianity calls for self-acceptance and the acceptance of others over and above conversion, thus ignoring the problem of personal sin which separates people from God.

Mission: Gospel Activism or Social Activism?

The third point of the progressive trilateral is social activism, the pursuit of social justice as the progressive practice of mission. Social activism builds on the morality of acceptance that flows from the authority of Christicism. This challenges the evangelical practice of mission: gospel activism. That does not mean evangelicals should avoid social concern. Progressive Christians, however, pose a challenge to evangelicalism by suggesting a practice of mission that does not require gospel proclamation.

Evangelical Mission: Gospel Activism

According to Bebbington, evangelicals initially observed that conversion flows into evangelical activism, because one's own conversion generated a desire to see others converted through the preaching of the gospel (1989, 10). This desire grew to the extent that, as Bebbington argues, the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century birthed the missionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (1989, 12). Furthermore, this gospel activism "spilled over" into social activism and various philanthropic endeavors (1989, 12). The evangelical view of mission, then, involved expending great effort to spread the gospel as far as possible.

Progressive Mission: Social Activism

Progressive Christianity, on the other hand, emphasizes social activism instead of gospel activism. Brian McLaren sets forth the logic clearly in *A New Kind of Christianity*, and following part of the progression of his thought will reveal how progressive authority and progressive morality lead to progressive mission. For authority, if the Christ who was rejected and crucified is the true image of God, then he represents God as standing in solidarity with the rejected. Authority leads to morality in that, if Christ is the true Word of God, then his approach of accepting the rejected takes precedence over other parts of Scripture, including discussions of homosexuality in Leviticus or Paul's writings. Morality leads to mission in that, if the church is to live in consistency with their liberating God, they will live as a "change-catalytic community" that fosters the inclusion of more and more people despite their distinctions (2010, 237-239). Progressive Christians, then, view themselves as joining in God's liberation project to include more and more people in his kingdom.

John de Gruchy concurs with this approach in relating progressive Christianity to what he calls "Christian humanism," arguing that the church should not become a closed community of people who think the same, but that it must provide the proper context so that "human beings relate to each other beyond the divisions of race, class, culture, gender or sexual orientation, yet in ways that respect difference" (2018, 68). In other words, for what de Gruchy calls the "Christian humanist," the church "exists for and in solidarity with others," and that such an approach is the only means of faithfulness to Jesus Christ (2018, 68).

This "Christian humanist" approach matches the progressive view of mission. Marcus Borg grounds this progressive ethos in his conception of the kingdom of God. He argues that

God's justice is the opposite not of God's mercy, but of man's injustice (2003, 155). This injustice occurs not only at the individual level, but at the systemic level, a recognition that Borg argues is "the key to understanding the Bible's passion for justice" (2003, 156). He defines systemic injustice as "sources of unnecessary human misery created by unjust political, economic, and social systems" (2003, 157). Borg posits that Jesus taught the kingdom of God as the alternative to the unjust systems of the earth (2003, 162). As a result, Borg calls on Christians, particularly in the United States, to share God's passion for justice in fighting against unjust systems in healthcare, environmental policy, economics, and foreign policy (2003, 175-178). Social activism, then, is the proper expression of the kingdom of God.

Evangelical Response to Progressive Mission

The call for social activism has generated different responses from evangelicals. Some argue for a balance between social activism and gospel activism. Ron Sider warns against embracing social activism to the neglect or abandonment of evangelism, like the "Social Gospel Christians" of the twentieth century, arguing instead for a biblical balance between the two (2015, 132). Paul Barreca, on the other hand, demonstrates that neither Jesus (2020, 74-78) nor the apostles (2020, 78-82) taught that social activism played an integral role in gospel activism. Furthermore, although Scripture does command that Christians exercise compassion, that compassion is not the same as gospel activism (2020, 87). Only the gospel truly frees people and offers them salvation (2020, 84-85). Therefore, for the evangelical, gospel activism takes priority over social activism. From the evangelical point of view, no eternal good is accomplished if someone achieves social justice for others without calling them to believe the gospel of forgiveness by faith in Christ.

The Omission of the Cross

Having demonstrated each point in the progressive trilateral and compared it to evangelicalism, we should note why crucicentrism does not have a progressive Christian parallel. In short, progressive Christianity does not require Jesus' death in its system. It just needs his life. It is in his life where his love, acceptance, and justice are demonstrated. His death merely illustrated what was already occurring in his life.

This is evident from progressive Christian accounts of the cross. For example, Borg argues that Jesus' death does not atone for sin, but rather is, "a trustworthy disclosure of the evil of domination systems, as the exposure of the defeat of the powers, as the revelation of the 'way' or 'path' of transformation, as the revelation of the depth of God's love for us, and as the proclamation of radical grace" (2003, 123). According to progressive Christianity, however, Jesus' life already demonstrated all these things. The cross does not accomplish anything new.

The absence is even more stark in McLaren's account of the narrative of Scripture. McLaren argues that the traditional narrative of perfect creation, fall, condemnation, salvation, and heaven/hell is rooted in Greek philosophy (2010, 50-54), while the true narrative of Scripture displays God's faithful goodness overcoming human rebellion (2010, 76). McLaren includes atonement in the "salvation" component of the Greek narrative, which he rejects (2010, 51). Furthermore, his view of the death of Christ is that it is a miracle among other miracles which "suggest Jesus's life-giving, health-giving creative power" (2010, 174) and that it led to the conception of the age of the New Covenant together with Jesus' "birth, life, teaching, good works..., and resurrection" (2010, 264). Spong puts it very clearly when he argues that "the cross is not a place of torture and death," but "the portrait of the love of God" that drives someone to

give themselves up, as well as “the symbol of a God presence that calls us to live, to love and to be” (2009, 381). In all of these accounts of the cross, it is clear that the cross either displays what was already evident in Christ’s life or is grouped with other aspects of his life without offering a unique contribution.

These views are not incidental, but necessary conclusions of progressive Christian theology. If one removed the cross from progressive Christianity, the rest of the structure would remain intact. If one removed the cross from evangelicalism, the whole system would collapse. For evangelicals, omitting the cross means that the promises of authoritative Scripture are moot, conversion is impossible, and gospel activism is empty. Without the cross in progressive Christianity, Christ still displays love in his life and teachings, Christians should still accept all people in the Christian community, and social activism is still the church’s calling. By removing the evangelical view of the cross and subsuming its significance in the other three points, progressive Christianity removes a vital element of evangelicalism.

Conclusion

The progressive trilateral, developed by synthesizing Bebbington’s quadrilateral and Edles’ two criteria, demonstrates the distorted authority, morality, and mission of progressive Christianity, as well as the vital omission of the cross. Whatever surface similarities evangelicalism may share with progressive Christianity, their systems fundamentally differ. Understanding these systemic differences allows evangelicals to recognize the illusory similarities and effectively defend the evangelical worldview from distortion.

Such a defense is impossible if we deal with progressive Christianity as a species of Christianity. Furthermore, such a defense requires that evangelicals reclaim words like “Christ”

and “love.” The progressive versions of these concepts must be exposed as empty. Progressive authority is not authoritative. Progressive morality is not moral. Progressive activism is inactive. Progressive love is not love. The progressive Jesus is not Jesus.

Exposing these empty elements will require placing the cross at the center of evangelism and apologetics. The cross grants evangelicalism a unique advantage over progressive Christianity, particularly on the emotionally-charged value of love. Our Lord himself said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). If we can proclaim the cross as the radiant display of Christ’s love, we can, to borrow from Paul in Col. 2:15, disarm progressive rulers and authorities and put them to open shame.

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