

HOW PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS AFFECT YOUR LIFE

**A guide for study and reflection
about
GOD, JESUS, THE BIBLE, AND HOPE**

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CONTENTS

- Page 3. The purpose of these resources**
- Page 4. Using these resources in groups
Including individual “Implications for me” worksheets**
- Page 6. Implications of Progressive Christian understandings of God**
- Page 9. Implications of Progressive Christian understandings of Jesus
Including a summary of developments in scholarship about Jesus**
- Page 13. Implications of Progressive Christian understandings of The Bible**
- Page 16. Implications of Progressive Christian understandings of Hope**



THE PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN NETWORK OF VICTORIA INC.

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THE PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN NETWORK OF VICTORIA INC.

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USING THESE RESOURCES IN GROUPS

The processes outlined below are important for achieving the aim of the series. They require approximately 1.5 hours for each session.

1. **Ensure every person has a copy of this booklet**, or at least of page 3 on “The Purpose” and the three pages on the topic for the particular session.
2. **State the topic for this session and refer to the “Purpose” page** where the three different “positions” or “understandings” of the topic are described. These will stimulate thinking about different implications for our lives.
3. **Start with time for people to talk with one or two other people about their own experience.** This earths the discussion in personal experience.
 - Topics 1 and 2, Understandings of God/Jesus: “How has my thinking about God/Jesus changed in recent years?” Also in Topic 2, use the page, “Scholarship about Jesus” to explain why these writers understand Jesus in different ways to traditional Christianity.
 - Topic 3, Understandings of the Bible: “Can you think of examples of recent public discussion of what the Bible teaches about an issue, for example, about marriage?”
 - Topic 4, Understandings of Hope: “Have you experienced times when you needed fresh hope?”
4. **Read The Nicene Creed.** This is included as a highly respected and widely used statement of a traditional understanding of Christianity. In this series it is not proposed to discuss the Creed because our topic is Progressive understandings of Christianity. However, the Creed is noted as a traditional perspective, accepted and affirmed by many Christians today.
5. **Present the notes on “Progressive #1” understandings of the topic.** This can be a combination of reading some selections aloud and allowing silence for people to read others.
6. **Draw attention to the “possible implications”** noted in the right hand column by the planning team. “What are some implications from this way of understanding this topic?”
7. **Repeat steps 5 and 6 above for “Progressive #2”** understanding of the topic. The purpose is not to agree about what is written but to see implications.
8. **Discuss “What do these possible implications mean for me?”** This is best done in small groups of 3 or 4 at most so that each person can share responses.
9. **Distribute the “Implications for me” A5 pages** (change the heading to your topic) and invite each person to write one significant personal implication of progressive Christian understandings of this topic. 4 or 5 minutes doing this can be the most valuable time in the session.
10. **Conclusion:** the individual implications sheets could be passed around to share the variety of implications – or could be retained as personal implications and people be invited to share in wider conversation.

A possible implication for me of a progressive understanding of God

Please write in only one or two categories

For my everyday life

.....
.....

For disasters and tough times

.....
.....

For compassion and justice in society

.....
.....

NAME: (optional)

A possible implication for me of a progressive understanding of Jesus

Please write in only one or two categories

For my everyday life

.....
.....

For disasters and tough times

.....
.....

For compassion and justice in society

.....
.....

NAME (optional)

GOD – A TRADITIONAL POSITION

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and
the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

*English Language Liturgical Consultation, 1987 alt.
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verbs such as "I believe", in place of the plural form ("we
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Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and the major
Protestant denominations. (The [Apostles'](#) and [Athanasian](#)
creeds are not as widely accepted).*

SOME POSSIBLE IMPLCATIONS

God is

- a supernatural being
- creator of the universe and all life
- active in the world of nature and societies, causing historical and contemporary events
- revealed in the universe and through actions and words of some individuals
- revealed definitively through Jesus
- a guide for some individuals and peoples
- revealed in the words of The Bible

For my everyday life, I might ...

- trust that a loving father will care for all my needs
-
-

For disasters and tough times, I might

- believe that whatever happens to me is God's will for me
-

For compassion and justice in society, I might

- work for the church to promote God's kingdom
-

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

Progressive position #1

Understandings of God	Some possible implications
<p>Marcus Borg, "The Heart of Christianity" "We live at a time of major conflict in the church. Millions of Christians are embracing an emerging way of seeing Christianity's heart. Millions of other Christians continue to embrace an earlier version of Christianity, often insistently defending it as "traditional" Christianity and as the only legitimate way of being Christian." (p.2) "The earlier paradigm has nourished and continues to nourish lives of deep devotion, faith, and love. ... For millions, especially in North America and Europe, the earlier paradigm has become an obstacle." (page 18)</p> <p>In the history of Christianity, there are two primary ways of thinking about God and the God-world relationship. In common with many others, I call these two concepts of God "supernatural theism" and "panentheism".</p> <p><i>Supernatural theism</i> imagines God as a personlike being. To be sure, God is an exceedingly superlative personlike being, is indeed the supreme being. A long time ago, this personlike being created the world as something separate from God. ... It follows from this image of God that the God-world relationship is seen in interventionist terms: namely, from "out there", God occasionally intervenes in this world ... especially in response to prayer.</p> <p><i>Panentheism</i> ... imagines God and the God-world relationship differently. ... rather than imagining God as a personlike being "out there", this concept imagines God as an encompassing Spirit in whom everything that is, is. The universe is not separate from God but in God.</p> <p>... So common is supernatural theism in our time that many people think its concept of God is the only meaning the word "God" can have. (pages 67-68)</p> <p>What's at stake in the question of God's character is our image of the Christian life. Is Christianity about requirements? Here's what you must do to be saved. Or is Christianity about relationship and transformation" here's the path: follow it. Both involve imperatives, but one is a threat, the other an invitation. (pages 77-78)</p>	<p>For my everyday life I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to maximise moments of stillness and attention where I can discern what I am best involved in. • • <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to understand what I am being taught by the experience • •
<p>John Shelby Spong, "A New Christianity for a New World" "... my hope is to demonstrate that this Christianity of the future is still in touch with the experience that propelled this faith-tradition into being more than two thousand years ago. ... I write only to issue an invitation to come and listen, to explore these possibilities, and to see if by travelling on a new road we can enter the reality of the God beyond theism and hear the voice of Christ speaking in the vocabulary of a post-Christian world." (pages xxi - xxii)</p> <p>In his 12 Theses for a New Reformation, Shelby Spong gives first place to understanding God: Understanding God in theistic categories as "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling somewhere external to the world and capable of invading the world with miraculous power" is no longer believable. Most God talk in liturgy and conversation has thus become meaningless.</p> <p>God is, for me, the Ground of Being seen in the being of every living thing, the source of love found in the ability to love present in every creature, and the source of life calling everyone everywhere to into the fullness of life. (page 184)</p> <p>Somehow prayer and liturgy are the places where the nontheistic God-concept most obviously collides with the religious security system erected by the worshippers of a theistic God. (page 191)</p> <p>Sickness and tragedy are not punishments, sickness and tragedy are facts of life. ... There is no theistic God directing these processes of cause and effect to whom we can appeal. (page 192)</p>	<p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See which issues the Spirit seems to call me to be involved in and seek to be most actively involved in those. • •

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF GOD

Progressive position #2

Understandings of God	Some possible implications
<p>Lloyd Geering, "From the Big Bang to God" ... there has never been a single exclusive and definitive way of understanding God.. ... God has been imagined and understood in ever-changing ways, which is why God has a history. (p.112) ... far from being the name of an objective, though unseen, spiritual being, God is in fact a humanly created word that originated in the distant past and has evolved to become an important bearer of meaning – the oneness of all reality. (page 124)</p> <p>Since the Enlightenment we humans have been learning, through the advent of the sciences, how we evolved slowly from the dust of the earth and we have been coming to appreciate the tiny space we occupy in this awe-inspiring universe. Now we are beginning to discover the grave responsibilities we must assume – not only for other forms of life but for the future of the human race itself. In the Age of God these responsibilities were believed to be matters of divine prerogative; in this age and the age to come they are becoming ours. (page 128)</p> <p>The nineteenth-century theologian and philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-72) ... said we project onto 'God' all the abilities which we humans would like to possess, such as power, knowledge, ubiquity, durability, etc. There they become the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence and eternity. ... Feuerbach contends that as soon as God is recognised to be a humanly constructed idea, it becomes meaningless to ask whether God exists or not. For that reason Feuerbach refused to call himself an atheist. ... Feuerbach believed that both 'God' and religion, when properly understood, play an important part in human self-understanding. The role of God is to gather under one symbolic term all the moral values to which we feel bound to respond, along with all the laws of nature to which we are bound to submit. (page 146)</p> <p>In <i>Faith's New Age</i>, I tried to show that while the modern world is sounding the death-knell of traditional religious forms, it is at the same time heralding new ways of what it means to be religious. Religious thought and endeavour must now fasten attention upon this world, rather than upon the other-worldly goals. ... In the new cultural age, we are becoming aware of the fact that we are all humans, irrespective of our class or race or gender or religion or age. We are developing a growing concern for human rights. We have come to see that what used to be regarded as divine or transcendent absolutes are actually simply the human judgements made by our forbears in the past. <i>"God and Me" Address.</i></p> <p>Gretta Vosper, "With or Without God" It is impossible for us to know anything about what it is we call God beyond what our personal experience might be, and we are only able to interpret that experience through experiences we have or ideas with which we are already familiar. (page 228) I'll try to drop the word god because ... I know that every time I use that word, try as you might, you're going to go back to some sort of idea of god as a being or some otherworldly person. (p.234)</p> <p>When we pray in a non-theistic setting there is no "who" to whom we are praying. (page 239)</p> <p>We must call <i>ourselves</i> into action. In truth, we do not "do justice and love kindness" because "the Lord requires" it of us but because we have evolved into empathic beings who recognize in the human condition the need for a justice which is interdependent with kindness. What more do we need to compel us to act than the evidence of pain in our world? <i>Email 26 May 2013</i></p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be clear that there is no supernatural being watching over me or who can guide my life. Instead, I am responsible with others for action in this world. • Decide not to use the word 'God' or might decide to use it to refer to our most important moral values, as in "the kingdom of God". • • <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do all I can to support people facing tough times • <p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join with others who realise we must call ourselves into action for justice and kindness • •

JESUS – A TRADITIONAL POSITION

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and
the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

Jesus

- is the only Son of God
- is true God
- became truly human
- came from heaven for our salvation
- suffered and died for us
- rose again and is with God
- will come again to judge all people

For my everyday life, I might

- Praise and worship God because I am free and forgiven through Jesus' death
-
-

For disasters and tough times, I might

- Gladly suffer trauma knowing that Jesus suffered and died for me
-

For compassion and justice in society, I might

- Want to share the message of Jesus' sacrifice with others so they too can be saved
-

SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT JESUS

When anyone describes their understanding of Jesus they make assumptions about sources of information about Jesus.

The leadership team decided to include today a brief statement about the findings of scholars that are generally assumed in the presentations that follow.

First, there have been centuries of study of the writings in the New Testament:

- The first gospel (Mark) was written after 70CE, more than 40 years after Jesus' death.
- Luke and Matthew used and adapted Mark, plus another common source, more than a decade later, in the 80s CE.
- There are no eye-witness accounts of Jesus in NT writings.
- It is not possible to write a biography or life of Jesus. The Gospels are not biographies but 'message' texts about the significance of Jesus for geographically and culturally diverse communities.
- Birth stories first appear in 9th decade of the 1st century (in the 80s).
- There is development in 'resurrection' narratives through those years.
- More understanding of life and religion during the first centuries has come from insights from the Dead Sea scrolls (981 different manuscripts mainly in Hebrew found in 1947, 1956, and 2017 dating from 3rdC BCE to 1st C CE) and Nag Hammadi codices, incl the Gospel of Thomas, in Coptic – found in Egypt in 1945 and translated much later.
- We have the text of many other 'gospels' in addition to those in the NT, for example 'The Gospel of Thomas', 'The Gospel of Mary'.

Second: Jesus and his followers were Jews and their scriptures (the Old Testament) provide essential references for understanding much about Jesus and his teachings.

Third: there has been a large growth in understanding the pervasive influence of the Roman Empire on first century followers of Jesus and other Jews.

- The Roman Empire conquered and ruled 'Palestine' in 1st C BCE.
- Titles used for the first Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, who died in 14 CE, included: Divine, Son of God, God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator, Saviour of the World. Any of these used by some Jews about Jesus had confronting implications.
- There were a number of bloody battles between Jews and Romans in the first two centuries CE, one being in 66-73CE when a Jewish revolt was brutally suppressed and the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE. The changed relations between followers of Jesus and both other Jews and Romans can be seen in the gospels of Matthew and Luke compared with Mark, particularly assigning responsibility for the death of Jesus.

Fourth: The work of the Jesus Seminar from the 1990s to the present day has been very influential for understanding life and religious writings in the first century. A large group of qualified scholars, working collegially rather than individually, cast fresh light on Jesus. In particular they placed the Jesus message in its historical, social, political and religious context. Their conclusions emphasised the significance of the parables and pithy sayings of Jesus for people in the troubled world of the first century.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF JESUS

Progressive position #1

Understandings of Jesus	Some possible implications
<p>Marcus Borg, the Heart of Christianity We find the revelation of God primarily in a person, an affirmation unique among the major religions of the world (p.80) Jesus is more central than the Bible. Jesus trumps the Bible; when they disagree, Jesus wins. (page 81) The pre-Easter Jesus is Jesus before his death; a Galilean Jew born around the year 4 BCE and executed by the Romans around the year 30 CE. The pre-Easter Jesus is dead and gone.. ... The post-Easter Jesus is what Jesus became after his death – the Jesus of Christian experience and tradition. (page 82)</p> <p>A historical-metaphorical approach matters because it helps us see the meaning of our Christological language – the exalted “titles” used to refer to Jesus’ identity and significance in the NT. (p.86) ... this is the voice of the community in the years and decades after Easter – the testimony to Jesus’ significance for their lives. (page 87)</p> <p>He was a Jewish mystic, a healer, a wisdom teacher, a social prophet, a movement initiator (pages 89-91)</p> <p>The Christian life is about a relation with God that transforms us into more compassionate beings. The God of love and justice is the God of relationship and transformation. (page 76)</p> <p>When the Christian path is seen as utterly unique, it is suspect. But when Jesus is seen as the incarnation of a path universally spoken about elsewhere, the path we see in him has great credibility. (page 119) Practice in the Christian life is about paying attention to God, the formation of a Christian identity and character, nourishment, compassion and justice, living “the way”. (page 189)</p> <p>Religions are sacraments of the sacred – not “absolute”.... The point is not to believe in Christianity as the only absolute and adequate revelation of God. ... but to live within the Christian tradition as a sacrament of the sacred, a mediator of the absolute, whom we name “god” and who for us is known decisively in Jesus. (page 215)</p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grow my knowledge of the historical Jesus as a significant exemplar in my life, adjusting for the cultural differences of my time and his time. • • • <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be a calm and healing presence in the midst of the circumstance. • •
<p>John Shelby Spong, A New Christianity for a New Age ...theism is only one definition of God and <i>no</i> definition of God is to be equated with God. The God-claim for Jesus must not be dependent on an outdated God-definition. (page 83) There was in Paul a real sense that ... Jesus was now somehow one with God, and that no one could understand this Jesus apart from the God who had been revealed in him. (page 89) As theology developed ...theism captured Jesus and wrapped him in the garments of supernaturalism. ... He was God in human form. (page 111) ... Can we find a way to assert that the Christ-experience itself is central but that the traditional Christ-explanations are secondary and dismissable? (page 115)</p> <p>.. there is something expansive and creative about the presence of boundary-breaking love that we meet in the life of Jesus. (page 139) ... What human life needs is not a divine rescue. What we need is rather a life so open, so free, so whole, and so loving that when we experience that life, we are called into the reality of love. ... I call that love God. (page 141)</p> <p>God is the Source of Life who is worshiped when we live fully. God is the Source of Love who is worshiped when we love wastefully. God is the Ground of Being who is worshiped when we have the courage to be. Jesus is a God-presence, a doorway, an open channel. ... That is why Jesus continues to stand at the heart of my religious life. That is why I continue to call him “my Lord” and to call myself a Christian. But I am a Christian who can no longer live inside the exclusive claims of my traditional theistic past. (page 145)</p>	<p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute to causes that accentuate inclusion and belonging of all peoples in a compassionate society • •

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF JESUS

Progressive position #2

Understandings of Jesus	Some possible implications
<p>Lloyd Geering, “From the Big Bang to God” ... once we strip away the mantle of supernatural divinity with which later tradition so quickly clothed Jesus, the outlines of the wholly human figure who emerges reveal him to be more of a sage than a prophet, priest or king.</p> <p>We may be surprised to find that in the most strongly authenticated sayings of Jesus, he never referred to himself at all, never claimed to be the messiah, never spoke of his coming sufferings and death and did not predict the end of the world. Further, in his parables and aphorisms, Jesus said little about God; he talked about the <i>Kingdom</i> of God ... he pointed to a new kind of human community, a new way of living together in the here and now, one based on mutual love for fellow humans, irrespective of race, class, gender and age. He went as far as to say we should love our enemies. (page 135)</p> <p>In his parables, Jesus spoke of everyday things in the lives of his audience – robbery on a lonely road, a wayward son, labourers in a vineyard, the baking of bread, the sowing of seed, a lost coin, the growth of a mustard seed, the discovery of hidden treasure, a lost sheep, a dinner party, rich farmers and money held in trust. They were not sacred or ‘religious’ topics but very worldly ones. On the basis of his parables and aphorisms it appears that Jesus rarely spoke about religion at all, at least not as that term is commonly understood today. (page 135)</p> <p>It is a truly awe-inspiring universe that has brought us forth and, at least on this planet, has come to consciousness in us, displaying the human inventiveness, creativity and entrepreneurial skills that have helped to make us the creatures we are. And this potential may lead us to as yet unimaginable heights. If our descendants survive and evolve to reach an even more exalted state of being than ours, they will have arrived at what our forbears long aimed for when in their traditions (Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim or Christian) they hoped respectively to enter Nirvana, the Promised Land, the unity of all nations, or the Kingdom of God. (page 186)</p> <p>Gretta Vosper, “With or Without God” When we consider the concept of god and work our way toward exploring it differently than we have in the past, the whole idea of Jesus being the Son of God no longer makes much sense. ... Here we see the story of a man who lived his life in a relatively enclosed geographical area and who spent his short adult years travelling from town to town sharing his ideas about what is important in life. ... When Jesus is not understood to be God, the stories of his life, the things he said, and the way that he acted do not have the power of God attached to them. They become stories, and we are free to read them as such. (pages 237-9) Remember, this is not TAWOGFAT (the authoritative word of God for all time). (page 240)</p> <p>He declared no intention of starting a new religion or even another version of Judaism – he was just emphasising certain parts of his Jewish faith as true spirituality. ... He taught a mixture of beliefs, some of which are helpful, some of which are markedly unhelpful, for example, divorce, hell, and eternal punishment. (page 242)</p> <p>Because we cannot simply lift a first-century worldview from the cryptic passages that describe not it but Jesus’ purported reaction to it, and impose it on ourselves, we can only consider the values presented in the text and determine whether they are relevant for our time. ... Recommending that we live without care for the future (Luke 12:22-29) reinforced one’s dependence upon the community and a benevolent deity. But we now recognise that it is we who are responsible for one another and the earth. (page 154)</p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honour Jesus who points me to a new kind of human community, a way of living together in the here and now • Determine what of Jesus’ teaching is relevant to us in our time • • <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognise that disasters happen and try to provide help where I can • <p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be inspired by the example and teaching of Jesus about compassion • Look for groups who take action for justice •

THE BIBLE – A TRADITIONAL POSITION

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and
the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

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verbs such as "I believe", in place of the plural form ("we
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Christian faith accepted by the Roman Catholic, Eastern
Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and the major
Protestant denominations. (The [Apostles'](#) and [Athanasian](#)
creeds are not as widely accepted).*

SOME POSSIBLE IMPLCATIONS

There are only two explicit references in this
creed to the Bible – “On the third day he rose
again according to the scriptures”, ‘the Holy Spirit
... who has spoken through the prophets”

It is widely assumed in traditional Christianity
that

- ‘spoken through the prophets’ refers to
the biblical writings
- the writings in the Old and New
Testaments are literally or
metaphorically ‘Word of God’ and that the
statements in the creed are ‘biblical’
- the Bible is a record of events and words
that reveal God

For my everyday life, I might

- believe the Bible is the word of God
and take direction for my life
-

For disasters and tough times, I might

- take courage from the reassurance of
God’s protection
-

For compassion and justice in society, I might

- promote the Bible’s instructions for
the need for compassion in society
-

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF BIBLE

Progressive position #1

Understandings of the Bible	Some possible implications
<p>Marcus Borg, “The Heart of Christianity” Christianity is centred in the Bible. Of course, it is ultimately centred in God, but it is the God of whom the Bible speaks and to whom it points. God is also known in other ways and other religions, I am convinced, but to be a Christian is to be centred in the God of the Bible. This is a mark not of Christian exclusion, but of Christian identity. The Bible is for us as Christians our sacred scripture, our sacred story. Yet the Bible has become a stumbling block for many. In the last half century, probably more Christians have left the church because of the Bible than for any other single reason. More precisely, they left because the earlier paradigm’s way of seeing the Bible ceased to make sense to them. Contemporary biblical literalism – with its emphasis on biblical infallibility, historical factuality, and moral and doctrinal absolutes – is an obstacle for millions of people. (page 43)</p> <p>The emerging paradigm has been visible for well over a century. ... This way of seeing Christianity is widely shared among theological and biblical scholars and increasingly among laity and clergy within mainline denominations. ... The Bible was not written to us or for us, but for the ancient communities that produced it. A historical approach emphasises the illuminating power of interpreting these ancient documents in their ancient historical contexts. Metaphorical: It is not very much concerned with the historical factuality of the Bible’s stories but much more with their meaning. ... Sacramental: by which I mean the Bible’s ability to mediate the sacred. (pages 13 – 14)</p> <p>... being Christian is not primarily about believing, in the modern sense of believing certain propositions to be true. Instead the emerging paradigm emphasises the relational meanings of faith and leads to a relational and transformational vision of the Christian life. (pages 59 – 60)</p> <p>The Bible is political as well as personal. It combines sharp political criticism and passionate political advocacy: radical criticism of political systems of domination and impassioned advocacy of an alternative social vision. Protesting the nightmare of injustice, its central voices proclaim God’s dream of justice, a dream for the earth. (page 126)</p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access scholarly studies of the Bible to understand where it is and is not relevant to my context. • • <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See many stories of the Bible as ways that people responded to pain or suffering in their time; and be encouraged to find an appropriate response for my time. • •
<p>John Shelby Spong, “A New Christianity for a New World” “We have been betrayed by the Bible. In the half century just ending, there is belated recognition that biblically based Christianity has espoused causes that no thinking person or caring person is any longer willing to endorse. We have had enough of the persecution of the Jews and witches; of the justification of black slavery; of the suppression of women, sex and sexuality; and of the stubborn defence of a male dominated, self-serving clergy.... We cannot, we must not shrink from engagement with the ignorance and misunderstanding that fuels such egregious misuse of scripture.” Robert W. Funk, director of the Jesus Seminar, quoted on page 79.</p> <p>The new reformation will not require Christians to abandon the Bible, but it will require that we remove from the Bible the tribal claims and the literalness that have so often been attached to Scripture. The Bible is a doorway into God, but when I enter that domain of God, I discover that all of the Bible’s word pictures and word symbols must be broken open so that the word of God can speak to us in new accents calling us to new meanings. (page 180)</p> <p>My hope is that my brothers and sisters who find Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or Buddhism as their point of entry, based upon their time and place in history, will also explore their pathway into God in a similar manner, until they too can escape the limits of their tradition at its depth and, grasping the essence of their system’s religious insights, move on to share that essence with me and all the world. (page 182)</p>	<p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See the stories of exclusion and marginalisation in the Bible as encouragement to overcome these phenomena in my time • •

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF BIBLE

Progressive position #2

Understandings of the Bible	Some possible implications
<p>Lloyd Geering, "From the Big Bang to God" Hard on the heels of the Renaissance came the dissenting voices that promoted the Protestant Reformation. This development fragmented the unity of Western Christendom and fostered the growth of nationalism – the latter offering a secular way of giving personal allegiance to a higher authority. For Protestants the focus of ultimate authority was transferred from the Papacy to the Bible. But the Bible is open to different interpretations, and this, together with the rise of nationalism, explains why there never arose a single international Protestant church parallel to the Roman Catholic Church. (page 141)</p> <p>By the beginning of the twentieth century a flood of new biblical commentaries was appearing, nearly all of them based on the new modes of study known as textual, historical and literary criticism. What had long been viewed as divinely revealed truth was now seen to be of human origin. No longer subservient to the words of Holy Scripture, scholars gained new mastery of it by understanding how it originated and why only an interactive interpretation could make it relevant to a much later age.</p> <p>By the mid-nineteenth century the fruits of critical study of the Bible, together with Darwin's scientific theory of biological evolution, led to fierce debate and bitter divisions in the Christian world. (page 142)</p> <p>Gretta Vosper, "With or Without God" Once, it was a book that was familiar to many; now few in mainline denominations actually know what it says. ... Our ignorance is not only unwise, it is dangerous. It is like signing a note your fifteen-year-old puts in front of you without reading it. (page 130)</p> <p>As long as millions of people are still calling this book "the Authoritative Word of God for All Time (TAWOGFAT), as long as others continue to refer to it as wholly "inspired" by god, as long as anyone holds it up uncritically as the text that is relevant for everyone for ever, it will continue not only to declare a message of exclusive salvation for believers and sure condemnation for non-believers, but also, as it was in the dark Ages, to deny freedoms that we have now established as right and good, many of which are not supported by its passages. It is time we who call ourselves moderate, liberal, or progressive Christians take responsibility for countering these harmful and dangerous messages. (pages 135-136)</p> <p>When the Bible is no longer seen as the authoritative word of God, it takes on a completely different aura. We are freed to see it as it is. In that light, some of it can be seen as poetry and studied, memorized, and assessed as such. Some can be seen as inspirational. Some will be seen to give support to our struggles, to live according to life-enhancing values we have named as important. ... So too will other pieces of holy scripture, from other sacred texts belonging to other faiths, be freed for such purposes. (page 149)</p> <p>Recognizing the very human construction of the Bible means that we don't have to (a) find The Meaning in its stories or histories or (b) worry if we've got the Meaning right or (c) believe it all happened the way it's written. Those kinds of questions just don't matter. (page 221)</p> <p>... once the Bible is set aside as <i>the</i> spiritual resource, you can be fed by many sources. Use whatever you're reading – William Blake or Mary Oliver, Maeve Binchy or Thich Nhat Hanh, Dean Koontz or Philippa Gregory. Seek out the deep spiritual wisdom that your perspective might find there. (pages 222-223)</p> <p>The struggle many liberally oriented Sunday school teachers have had trying to find The Meaning in many Bible stories is thus relieved. ... the question is not what is God telling us? But rather, what do you make of that? (page 224)</p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take responsibility, shared with scholars, for what we take from the Bible in light of our life-enhancing values• <p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recognise that much in the Bible relates to ancient ideas about causes of catastrophes and is not relevant to understanding events today•• <p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use the best knowledge available to me today to take action for justice••

HOPE – A TRADITIONAL POSITION

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten not made,
of one Being with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and
the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father,
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and
glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of
sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

*English Language Liturgical Consultation, 1987 alt.
Printed in *Uniting in Worship* (UCA)*

*Part adopted at the First Council of Nicea in 325 CE and,
after substantial additions and deletions, was adopted in
close to its present wording by the First Council of
Constantinople in 381 CE.*

*The Eastern Orthodox Church uses the singular forms of
verbs such as "I believe", in place of the plural form ("we
believe") used by the council.*

*It is the only authoritative ecumenical statement of the
Christian faith accepted by the Roman Catholic, Eastern
Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and the major
Protestant denominations. (The *Apostles'* and *Athanasian*
creeds are not as widely accepted).*

SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS

For my personal life I might

- Believe that Jesus suffered, died and rose for my sake
- Be sure that my salvation and hope for entry to eternal life is through my faith in Jesus
- Be assured that all my sins are forgiven through this faith and baptism into the church.
- Believe that I will live on after death in Heaven, where Jesus also is with God.
- Wish to convince others of the saving grace of Jesus.

For disasters and tough times I might

- Trust in God, the maker of everything, knowing that what is happening is God's will
- Pray to God to prevent disaster or deal with any consequences, because God can change things
- Live through suffering and personal injustice, knowing that eternal life is my ultimate hope.

For compassion and justice in society I might

- Take part in compassionate activities of the church.
- Act mercifully to others in gratitude for the salvation offered to me.
- Try to live like Jesus, my saviour.
- Be aware that while the Creed does not refer to compassion and justice, traditional Christians have valued the church as a community of compassion and as an agent for justice.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF HOPE

Progressive position #1

Understandings of hope	Some possible implications
<p>Marcus Borg, “The Heart of Christianity” The biblical understandings of salvation are focussed on this world, not the next. Though salvation is central to the Bible, heaven as life after death is not, (page 172). ... jt’s clear that (Jesus’) message was not really about how to get to heaven. It was about a way of transformation in this world and the Kingdom of God on earth. ... Jesus was not very concerned about life beyond death, either his own or that of others (page 173)</p> <p>Salvation is personal, but this hardly needs emphasis. ... What does need emphasis is that salvation in the Bible is also social. ... Salvation is about life together. Salvation is about peace and justice within community and beyond community. It is about <i>shalom</i>, a word connoting not simply peace as the absence of war, but peace as the wholeness of a community living together in peace and justice. ... The Bible is not about the saving of individuals for heaven, but about a new social and personal reality in the midst of this life. (pages 178 -179)</p> <p>I see no persuasive reason for thinking that one way of seeing the afterlife is the way it’s really going to be. Who could know? (page 182)</p>	<p>For my everyday life, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be known for seeking change in the gathered faith communities in which I participate. • •
<p>John Shelby Spong, “A New Christianity for a New World” All people seek the path of wholeness into a new humanity. That was the message of Jesus. To empower people to enter into and grasp that wholeness and to become that new humanity was his apparent purpose. (page 137)</p> <p>When, I wonder, will we learn that it is not the road we individually travel, but the destination we seek, that is crucial? (page 139)</p> <p>The God I worship will be .. available from many doorways. For me to claim otherwise is to remain a victim of theism. The God who is life, love and being itself cannot be bounded by the limits of my tradition. God is beyond Jesus, but Jesus participated in the Being of God, and Jesus is my way into God. These are the claims that will be part of the Christianity of tomorrow. I am hopeful that such a Christianity can be born and that with it an invitation can be offered to all people to step into their own humanity so deeply that they will find a doorway into God. (page 146)</p> <p>Every one of us carries a defining prejudice in our heart of hearts. It may be attached for some of us to those people whose skin color is different to our own, for others to those who worship God in ways we think strange, for still others to those whose sexual orientation is not like ours or even not like the majority. To be Jesus’ disciples we are forced to heed his call to surrender all of our killing stereotypes based on external differences and to walk beyond all of our distorting fears into a new prejudice free humanity. (page 135)</p> <p>The biblical portrait drawn of Jesus even calls and empowers his followers to walk beyond our religious differences – differences in which we have consistently and falsely invested something of the ultimacy of God. (page 136 – 7)</p> <p>The few individuals who see, respond to, and move toward a new place will be ... sources of new life that will feed individual communities of faith within dying worldwide churches and denominations. ...</p> <p>These faith-communities will emerge, I am confident, inside our existing structures. They will ultimately separate themselves from the pack. They will float freely, taking a wide variety of forms. They will attract the restless, the hungry, the alienated, he marginalized, the open, the honest, the doubters, the seekers. In time they will recognize kinship with one another, allowing them to coalesce and to build new consensus. (pages 144 – 145)</p>	<p>For disasters and tough times, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain my involvement in Christian community, not as a “requirement” but as a place from which I and others make meaning together • • <p>For compassion and justice in society, I might</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work to ensure there is significant diversity and acceptance within my faith community as a guide/sign to a broader inclusive community that we are working towards. •

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDINGS OF HOPE

Progressive position #2

Understandings of hope	Some possible implications
<p data-bbox="49 165 619 203">Lloyd Geering, "From the Big Bang to God"</p> <p data-bbox="49 203 1046 371">Now we are beginning to discover the grave responsibilities we must assume – not only for other forms of life but for the future of the human race itself. In the Age of God these responsibilities were believed to be matters of divine prerogative; in this age and the age to come they are becoming ours. (page 128)</p> <p data-bbox="49 398 975 465">Our lives and our future as a human species are wholly dependent on this amazing, self-evolving cosmos. (page 188)</p> <p data-bbox="49 492 1034 696">In sum, the future of the human race remains an open question ... we can draw hope from the Great Story of how we came to be here at all. It is a truly awe-inspiring universe that has brought us forth and, at least on this planet, has come to consciousness in us, displaying the human inventiveness, creativity and entrepreneurial skills that have helped to make us the creatures we are. And this potential may lead us to as-yet unimaginable heights. (page 186)</p> <p data-bbox="49 723 1015 869">We humans are on our own as we find ourselves living in an uncaring universe, one which is evolving by chance and necessity. Like it or not, this is the human predicament into which the evolutionary process has placed us. (page 148)</p> <p data-bbox="49 891 603 929">Gretta Vosper, "With or Without God"</p> <p data-bbox="49 929 1046 996">The most compelling facet of the old story is its security. The most compelling facet of the new story is its seeking after truth. (page 187)</p> <p data-bbox="49 1023 1027 1160">... essentials if we are going to create a church able to have a positive effect on the future: an open mind ... passion ... creativity ... intellectual rigour ... honesty ... courage ... respect ... balance – patience, perseverance, and pace. (pages 157 – 188)</p> <p data-bbox="49 1187 1046 1290">Such a church might offer a very real hands-on, world-changing hope. An open, welcoming, honest, self-critiquing, dogma free, values-based, spiritually engaging community – that's what a church can be. (page 307)</p> <p data-bbox="49 1317 1046 1532">There is just too much bad stuff that isn't anybody's fault – like tsunamis and category 4 and 5 hurricanes and earthquakes that wipe out whole populations. It's not possible for us to take responsibility for all of that and ... we have nothing to blame. So we are left with the responsibility of facing even the bad stuff with whatever strength and courage we can muster ... and holding one another through the worst of it</p> <p data-bbox="49 1559 1046 1796">We needed, during our struggles with an environment that was more often hostile than not, a vision of a future for our children and ourselves that we believed might be possible. ... Our capacity to create an image of the divine that gave us that sense of security is awesomely wonderful. It speaks of the creative strength of the human species and calls us to draw upon that same spirit and sense of wonder to continue to imagine ourselves into a sustainable future. (page 247)</p> <p data-bbox="49 1823 1046 1991">We must call <i>ourselves</i> into action. In truth, we do not "do justice and love kindness" because "the Lord requires" it of us but because we have evolved into empathic beings who recognize in the human condition the need for a justice which is interdependent with kindness. What more do we need to compel us to act than the evidence of pain in our world?</p> <p data-bbox="49 1995 288 2024"><i>Email 26 May 2013</i></p>	<p data-bbox="1070 203 1353 241">For my everyday life</p> <ul data-bbox="1121 275 1528 719" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="1121 275 1528 551">• I might conclude that here is no supernatural being watching over us or who guides what happens so we humans need to use our inventiveness and skills to develop a values-based and engaging community<li data-bbox="1121 562 1134 584">•<li data-bbox="1121 618 1134 640">•<li data-bbox="1121 674 1134 696">• <p data-bbox="1070 976 1477 1014">For disasters and tough times</p> <ul data-bbox="1121 1014 1528 1352" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="1121 1014 1528 1218">• I might recognise that a lot of bad stuff is not anybody's fault and that we must face tough times with strength and courage and hold one another<li data-bbox="1121 1252 1134 1274">•<li data-bbox="1121 1308 1134 1330">• <p data-bbox="1070 1532 1477 1599">For compassion and justice in society</p> <ul data-bbox="1121 1637 1528 2080" style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="1121 1637 1528 1771">• I might look for a church that can offer world-changing hope and have a positive effect on the future<li data-bbox="1121 1805 1528 1939">• I might live recognising we are empathic beings who recognise the need for justice and kindness<li data-bbox="1121 1973 1134 1995">•<li data-bbox="1121 2029 1134 2051">•