

Today we begin our exploration of the Center for Progressive Christianity’s Eight Points. I’d like to begin by defining these terms, recognizing that that they may be unfamiliar to you or that it may have been awhile since you perused the tcpc.org site or the materials I provided a few months ago.

According to its website, the Center for Progressive Christianity was founded in 1994 by Jim Adams, a rector of St. Mark's Church in Washington, D.C. At that time there was no known organization, scholar, or church leader publicly using the term, "progressive Christianity." His vision was to create an organization that encouraged churches to focus their attention on persons for whom organized religion had proven "ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive," with the goal of keeping the Church from “drying up and blowing away.” His was a response to recently published statistics showing that membership in mainline churches had dramatically declined in the 1980s--the third decade in a row. Based on his experience at St. Mark's, Rev. Adams was convinced that if churches would become bolder about professing their progressive tenets, they could thrive. He and a small group of peers agreed that they needed to provide some way to help "open and progressive" churches find ways to self identify as "progressive." This was the genesis of TCPC's Eight Points defining progressive Christianity. This early founding group also thought it important to provide opportunities for churches to network, to share "progressive Christian" resources, and to gather occasionally. In 1996 TCPC launched its first website giving "affiliate"

churches an opportunity to list themselves as "a progressive church" based on their affirmation of the Eight Points.<sup>1</sup>

From the beginning, the intention of the Eight Points has been to present an inviting expression of a particular approach to the practice of Christianity. The hope was and is that the series of ideas would be appealing, especially to those who don't find a comfortable fit with traditional understandings of Christian faith. And that it would result in thoughtful conversation, while avoiding a dogmatic and literalistic understanding, including in these written articulations of the faith. The expectation was that individuals and churches would find their own unique own ways to articulate the nuances of Christianity expressed in the Eight Points and creatively live them out.<sup>2</sup>

And so, today I begin our monthly sermon series with Point 2. I am not going in strict numerical order because I am attempting to continue to follow the lectionary cycle. At some point I may need to wander outside the lectionary to touch on all Eight Points, but for today, at least, we are in sync... Given the broadness of each of the Points, a 10-15 minute sermon can only scratch the surface. You are welcome to join me downstairs for further discussion during coffee hour, and I will also try to provide you with some sources for further reading.

And so, without further ado, let me introduce you to the second defining point of progressive Christianity, pluralism:

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<sup>1</sup>“About Us: The History of TCPC 1994-2008,” [http://www.tpc.org/template/page.cfm?page\\_id=86](http://www.tpc.org/template/page.cfm?page_id=86).

<sup>2</sup> “About Us: The 8 Points,” <http://www.tpc.org/about/8points.cfm>.

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

To be a pluralist in a religious context is to affirm the ultimate worth of other world faiths. It is to acknowledge that there are many spiritual paths and many ways to conceptualize redemption. Shaped as they are by unique histories and cultures, no one established faith is superior to another. Though the concept of compassion is central to each, comparisons are not always helpful or even respectful. Better to acknowledge that the gods we worship are unique to our individual faiths and that we may in fact strive after very different things.

This may sound like a no-brainer to some of you, while to others it may be a new way of looking at religious diversity. Today it is pretty common for people to embrace the idea that there are many legitimate paths to one and the same god. Pluralists go a step further in holding that those many paths may actually lead to *different* sources and destinations and that to say otherwise means that we are mistakenly—and, without realizing it, perhaps a little arrogantly--imposing our own theological lens onto others. Some, like theologian John Hick, have coined terms for the divine like “Ultimate Reality” to avoid stepping on toes. Some theologians would not even go *that* far. Such broad pluralistic perspectives have emerged as religious and cultural diversity has become the “new normal” throughout the world. When Hindus, Buddhists and others move in next door and become our friends and co-workers, we cannot help but acknowledge their faithfulness, but also its inherent uniqueness.

Today’s scripture reading would seem to contradict such viewpoints. If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, how can there be room for other conceptualizations of divinity, let alone other

paths to *our* one God? Many of our Christian fundamentalist and evangelical sisters and brothers believe that, in all earnestness, there is not room. That these words from the Gospel of John are about as clear as it gets on that subject. If the bible were the only source of authority in our Christian faith, this might be a foregone conclusion for us as well. But as members of a denomination that proclaims that God is *still* speaking, we are invited to apply *other* sources such as reason and scholarly research to our interpretation of scripture. In this instance, we might want to look at context.

The Gospel of John was the last of the four gospels to be written, toward the end of the 1st Century, some 70 years after Jesus' death. It was written at a time when tension was building between Jews and Christians, when Christianity was beginning to be identified as a unique faith, not merely a new sect within Judaism. The people were fearful, no longer knowing if they could trust their own neighbors, family, and friends. And, perhaps partly in response to that fear, the particular Christian community to which John wrote embraced Gnosticism. They believed they possessed special spiritual wisdom that others did not. It's helpful to be able to feel special when you're being persecuted. It may even be a matter of self-preservation.

This particular passage from John is a part of a Last Supper farewell speech. It is Jesus' pep talk to his disciples as he prepares to leave them. I believe it is a pastoral chat with a group of people who are about to undergo monumental change, people who are anxious and scared, people who do not know what the future holds, but for whom *Jesus knows* grief and persecution await. "Just follow me, my life and the ways I have taught and demonstrated, and you will find truth and life," he says to them. "Just keep keepin' on... I know you will deny and abandon me, but come back. Come back and pick up my cross and walk in my footsteps. All shall be well." If we

interpret this as a strictly pastoral conversation, rather than an expression of doctrine, then religious pluralism can peacefully co-exist with this famous passage. And if we instead believe that Jesus is laying out tenets of belief here, we might want to recall how much the Gospel of John differs from the other three Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus simply taught and healed and advocated for the poor and the marginalized without proclaiming his divinity or the founding of a new religion. Jesus was a faithful Jew reframing that faith, so that the spirit, and not the letter, of the law and the prophets might be illuminated and lived out, so that God's great love for all of humanity might be realized and lived into.

Speaking of which, if we apply reason to this equation, we are also forced to reevaluate the traditional interpretation of John's statement that Jesus is the only way to God. Throughout the gospels and particularly in Jesus' many acts of ministry, we learn that, first and foremost, God is love. And yet, if Christ is the only path to salvation, then two-thirds of the world's population is left in the dark, eternally. Through no "fault" of their own, they were born into other religious traditions. Some have never even learned of Christianity's existence. How is it fair to hold them accountable? How do we—or can we—reconcile God's abundant love and grace with the exclusivist position that only we, the lucky one-third—will be saved and experience heaven?

This troubling disconnect has led some Christian theologians to other *inclusivist* conclusions, which fall somewhere in between pluralism and exclusivism. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic theologian Karl Rahner is a good example of this way of thinking. He put forth the idea that there are among us, *anonymous Christians*, who in their lives of compassion and virtue have unknowingly embraced the salvific love of God in Christ and, as a result, will be saved. Others define inclusivism more broadly in universalist terms, holding that *all people* will ultimately be saved

and reconciled to God through Christ. In some sense, then, although inclusivism is far more generous to non-Christians than is exclusivism, its message is still that Christianity is the only way to God and that the God of Christianity is the only Ultimate Reality.

Still others, who fall somewhere in between inclusivist and pluralist on the spectrum, believe that other faiths *can* in fact be effective means of salvation, but that Christianity is superior. One explanation given for this is the unique status of our salvific figure Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human. For he is one who descended to earth live and suffer and die among and like the people. And so he is one who can personally relate to the struggles of human beings as no other god can.

Pluralism therefore affirms the worth and validity of the world's faiths in ways none of these other theological formulations comes close to approaching. But it doesn't stop with affirmation. Pluralism also encourages us to actively engage with persons of other faiths. Why? Even here there are divergent viewpoints. For the 20<sup>th</sup> Century scholar of comparative religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith, there was a strategic rationale for doing so. The world was and is in crisis on so many different levels. Poverty, nuclear, terrorist, and ecological threats hang over our heads, threatening to destroy life as we know it. If we are ever to come together to save ourselves and our planet, we must learn to dialogue inter-religiously. Other pluralists, like Harvard Divinity professor emeritus Gordon Kaufman, embrace inter-religious dialogue not as a means to an end, but for its own sake. The interaction is its own reward, and we just might experience mutual conversion in the process. Surely there are gems of wisdom contained in other theologies and spiritual practices that might inform and enrich our own...and vice versa. But the only way for that to happen with authenticity is for us to approach one another as equals and without an agenda.

I'd like to close by returning to our scripture reading. Despite Jesus' proclamation that he alone is the way to God, I can't help but wonder if the passage itself doesn't leave room to consider a pluralistic outlook, without our even having to consult biblical scholarship for clues...What are those many dwelling places Jesus refers to a few sentences earlier? Who lives in *them*? If Jesus went to prepare a place specifically for the disciples and their Christian progeny, might the rest of those mansions be the domain of other hosts who are preparing eternal places for our non-Christian cousins?

Obviously we can't ever say for sure. Sometimes it's hard to agree on much more than the fact that God and God's ways are a mystery...and an eternal, unsolved mystery at that. But if Jesus is how God has most clearly revealed God's self to us as Christians, then the broadest possible gates of extravagant welcome would certainly seem to follow.

Amen.