



Reimagining Christianity: The Origins and Legacy of “Progressive” Theology

Major Topics

CHART: Theological Conservatism and Liberalism – The Fundamental Differences

1. Heretical Antecedents: Early Pseudo-Christian Heresies

- In the Beginning...
- Heresies and Schisms in Early Christianity
- Orthodoxy v. Orthopraxy: Does Doctrine Really Matter?
- Fourteen Fundamental Heresies
- Prominent Heresies

2. Origins of Theological Liberalism

- (1) Reformation wars
- (2) Scientific revolution
- (3) Enlightenment rationalism
- (4) Humanism
- (5) Calvinism
- (6) Modern philosophies
- (7) Biblical criticism
- (8) Christianity as ethical humanitarianism

3. American Theological Liberalism

- The Colonial Era
- The Ascendance of Liberalism
- Unitarianism
- Universalism
- Transcendentalism
- Late 19th Century Liberalism and the Social Gospel

4. Progressive Xianity

- Theological liberalism
- Liberation Theology
- Sexualized Xianity
- Racialized Xianity

5. “Progressive Xianity” and the United Methodist Church.



Theological Conservatism and Liberalism

Traditional/Conservative Theology

Basis of Authority:

General revelation as mediated through God's creation and the moral truths inherent in natural law, and special revelation as mediated through the Bible (as properly interpreted).

John Chrysostom: "A Christian is one who agrees with Holy Scripture, and he who does not agree with it has deviated from the one true faith."

Conservatives accept the core doctrines of the historic Christian faith as summarized in the early creeds.

Philosophy of the Bible:

Divinely-inspired.

Historically reliable.

Doctrinally authoritative.

Morally authoritative.

The Bible has been accurately preserved and transmitted through the centuries.

If the Bible seems to contradict our current understanding of history or science, either...

(1) our biblical hermeneutic is wrong; or

(2) current historical or scientific theories are incorrect.

Doctrine of the Trinity:

God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are three co-equal and co-eternal Persons who share a single divine nature.

Christology:

Jesus Christ is God incarnate and the spiritual Savior of humanity who died an atoning death on the cross for the sins of humanity and was raised from the dead.

The Human Condition:

Due to the effects of the Fall, human beings are naturally sinful, alienated from God, and in need of salvific grace.

Human Destiny:

Human beings will live in a conscious state of existence for all eternity either in Heaven or Hell.

Basic Christianity:

The true essence of Christianity is the salvific mission of Jesus Christ who reconciles us to God and who is the sole Mediator between God and mankind.

Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy are indivisible, symbiotic and synergistic.

Liberal/Progressive Theology

Basis of Authority:

Rationalism – Knowledge gained through the natural sciences, the social sciences, and human experience.

William Ellery Channing: "I am surer that my rational nature is from God than that any book is an expression of his will."

Liberals question or reject core biblical doctrines including God's active involvement in human affairs, the divine inspiration of the Bible, the Fall, the reality of miracles, the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, the deity of Christ, the Atonement, and the physical/bodily Resurrection of Christ.

Philosophy of the Bible:

An ancient religious text of mostly human origins.

A mix of history, myth and legend.

There are no doctrinal absolutes; beliefs are subjective and relative.

Morality is relative; the Bible contains some profound wisdom but also many outdated moral and social values.

The biblical text has been corrupted in the transmission process through the centuries.

If the Bible contradicts current theories in the natural and social sciences, the Bible is out-dated and wrong.

Doctrine of the Trinity:

There is one God. Jesus Christ was certainly a unique man who in some sense became the adopted "Son of God," but the doctrine of the Trinity is an irrational superstition.

Christology:

Jesus Christ, although merely a man, was a gifted rabbi, social prophet and spiritual leader who lived an exemplary life and taught some profound moral and ethical truths.

The Human Condition:

Human beings are basically good. Evil is the product of biological abnormalities and/or unjust social and political systems.

Human Destiny:

Human beings will live in a conscious state of existence for all eternity in Heaven (universalism), or perhaps some will exist for a time (or for all eternity) in Hell, or perhaps otherwise cease to exist (annihilationism).

Basic Christianity:

The essence of Christianity is ethical humanitarianism based on the moral teachings of Jesus as summarized in the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount.

What truly matters is orthopraxy, not orthodoxy.

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THE ANTECEDENTS: EARLY PSEUDO-CHRISTIAN HERESIES

In the Beginning...

- Jesus on heretics and legalistic hypocrites.
 - Matt. 7:15-23.
 - Matt. 23:29-33.
- Satan as a master counterfeiter, deceiver, and perverter of truth.
- Heresies in the early church.
 - ▶ Judaizers.
 - Phil. 3:2.
 - Acts 15.
 - ▶ Sectarians.
 - I Cor. 1:10.
- Paul on “false brothers” and ministry rivals.
 - ▶ Gal. 1:6-7.
 - ▶ Col. 2:8.
 - ▶ I Cor. 1:20-25; 3:18-19.
 - ▶ I Tim. 4:1-2.
 - ▶ II Tim. 2:23.
 - ▶ II Tim. 4:3-4.
 - ▶ I Tim. 1:3-4.
 - ▶ I Tim. 6:20.
 - ▶ Titus 3:10-11.
 - ▶ Acts 20:28*ff.*
- Peter:
 - ▶ II Peter 2:1-3.
 - ▶ II Peter 3:16.
- John:
 - ▶ I John 4:1.
 - ▶ II John 7.
 - ▶ In I John 2:18*ff.*
- Jude *3ff.*

Heresies and Schisms in Early Christianity

The Facts on Factionalism.

- In the first 300 years of its existence, Christianity had as much to fear from internal problems as external persecution.
- From the outset, heresies and schisms threatened to pervert Christianity and disrupt its unity.
 - The sources: Rivalries, factionalism and partisanship.
- The Christian movement was considerably more fragmented than is often assumed.
- Factors in factionalism:
 - (1) Doctrinal differences.
 - (2) Conflicts over church polity.
 - (3) Practical issues.
 - (4) Personal issues.

Early Heresies.

- Paul’s ministry was constantly threatened by jealous rivals who sought to discredit him.
- John’s warnings against “antichrists.”
- Hegesippus (c. 150) on false teachers who corrupt the truth.
- The connection between persecution and heresy.
 - W.H. Crocker: Persecution bred martyrs, martyrs bred fanaticism, and fanaticism bred heresy.”

Christian Diversity.

- The New Testament skews our historical perspective on the nature and growth of the early Christian movement.
 - We know virtually nothing about churches except those founded by Paul and the other apostles in some of prominent cities of the Roman Empire.
- The early church operated on a cellular (and organic) model.
 - The Christian faith was a universal faith, adaptable to local cultural practices.

Christian Unity.

- The diversity in early Christianity should not be overstated.
- Within the apostolic churches, there was a theological consensus based on...
 - (1) Old Testament theology;
 - (2) The writings of the apostles and their associates; and
 - (3) The concept of an authoritative *kanon* – a “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) as later summarized in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed.
- The New Testament presented a solid core of essential, fundamental doctrines based on:
 - (1) The consensus story of Jesus Christ as preserved in the Four Gospels.
 - (2) The apostolic influence.
 - (3) The guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul’s summary of the essentials of the faith (I Cor. 15:1-7; 17):
 - (1) The atonement (based on Christ’s incarnation);
 - (2) The resurrection (based divine miracles); and
 - (3) The reliability and authority of inspired Scripture (based on divine revelation).

- Peter’s summary of the gospel (I Pet. 3:18-19, 21-22):
 - (1) The atonement;
 - (2) Salvation, redemption, and reconciliation to God;
 - (3) The resurrection; and
 - (4) The Deity (or Lordship) of Jesus Christ over all creation.
- From the 2nd century on, there were systematic attempts to express core Christian doctrines through catechisms and creeds.
- Irenaeus (c. 160): “The tradition [of the apostles]” and “the rule of truth.”
 - The “catholic (universal) church.”
 - (1) Monotheism – one God;
 - (2) The Father, the creator of the universe;
 - (3) The deity of Christ;
 - (4) The incarnation of Christ;
 - (5) The salvific atonement of Christ;
 - (6) The Holy Spirit as a part of the Triune Godhead;
 - (7) The divine inspiration of scripture;
 - (8) The virgin birth;
 - (9) The suffering and death of Christ (see #5 above);
 - (10) The resurrection and ascension of Christ;
 - (11) The second coming of Christ; and
 - (12) The general resurrection of the dead.

Orthodoxy v. Orthopraxy: Does Doctrine Really Matter?

- The skeptical position.
- Jesus on lovingkindness.
 - Matt. 25:31-40.
 - Matt. 23:23.
- Orthodoxy divorced from love become sterile religiosity.
- Christian faith is a wholistic worldview that encompasses both doctrines and practices.
 - James: We cannot separate what we believe from how we live (Jas. 2:14ff).
- Note: Orthodoxy apparently matters to God.
 - Over a period of some 1500 years – from Moses through the apostolic age – God revealed specific doctrinal and moral truths regarding his character and nature – along with basic truths related to human nature – that are essential for understanding his will and purpose for mankind.
 - These revealed truths are all expressions of God’s love for mankind.
- The New Testament is clear that there are specific things that must be believed about Jesus Christ for a person to be a Christian.
 - I Cor. 15:1ff.
 - I Tim. 4:16 – “Watch your life *and doctrine* closely. Persevere in them, because if you do you will save both yourself and [others].”
- C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*: “We are told that Christ [died] for us, that his death has washed [away] our sins, and that by dying he disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is Christianity. That is what has to be believed.”
- There are fundamental problems in claiming to be a Christian while rejecting basic core beliefs of the Christian faith.

- Doctrinal truth-claims:
 - Acts 16:31.
 - Acts 10:43.
 - Phil. 2:5-11.
 - John 14:6.
 - I Cor. 15.
 - Note: It doesn't matter what advanced degrees the heretic has, or what university or seminary he teaches at, or what pulpit he preaches from.

The Assault on Orthodoxy

The Nature of Heresy.

- Heresy (Greek: *hairesis*): Any doctrine that is...
 - Factually or historically incorrect;
 - Contradicts, distorts or exaggerates a fundamental Christian doctrine;
 - Misinterprets or misapplies a principle by disregarding the historical, social or textual context;
 - Sanctions or advocates immorality.
- The standard: the biblical canon [*kanon* – the “rule of faith”].

Fourteen Fundamental Heresies

1. Legalism.

- Equating Christian spirituality with strict adherence to set, rigid (and man-made) rules, laws, cultural practices, and behavior.
- Ex: Judaizers.

2. Ontological dualism.

- The Platonic dichotomy between the physical/material, which is base or corrupt, and the metaphysical/spiritual, which is good.

3. Trinitarian Fallacies.

Christological Fallacies:

- (1) Adoptionism recognizes the humanity of Jesus but not his divinity.
- (2) Docetism acknowledges the divinity of Jesus but not his humanity.
- (3) Arianism denies that Jesus Christ was co-eternal and co-equal with God the Father.

4. Illuminism.

- An extreme form of epistemological mysticism.
- Those who are truly spiritual receive guidance primarily (or exclusively) through personal revelations via the internal witness of the Holy Spirit.
- Ex: Christian mysticism.

5. Antinomianism.

- True Christians live by faith and the internal guidance of the Holy Spirit and are not bound by external (man-made) laws.
- Ex: The Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:15-16).

6. Subjective Hermeneutics.

- A purely subjective (selective and cavalier) approach to interpreting Scripture.
- Ex: Some allegorical interpretations of Scripture.

7. Alternative Soteriologies.

- Any doctrine of salvation that teaches something other than divine grace, faith in Christ, repentance of sins, and a righteous life.
- Ex: The Roman Catholic emphasis on salvation through works.

8. Philosophical Naturalism.

- An anti-supernatural bias.
- The presupposition that miracles and divine intervention are not possible.
- Ex: Enlightenment deism.

9. Millenarianism.

- A fixation on the *parousia* (the Second Coming of Christ) to the extent that one ceases to function normally in the present life.
- Millenarianians are certain that they are living in “the last days” and that Jesus’ return is imminent.
- Ex: Millerites and Seventh Day Adventists in the 19th century.

10. Syncretism.

- The attempt to artificially integrate beliefs and/or practices that are innately contradictory and incompatible.
- The “COEXIST” religious pluralists.
- Ex: New Age “spirituality”.

11. Speculative Cosmology.

- Esoteric, fanciful cosmologies, the product of human imagination.
- Problems with speculative cosmology: It is not based on revealed truth, and it generates controversy and division.
- The apostle Paul’s warning:
 - Titus 3:9.
 - I Tim. 1:3-4.
- Ex: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism).

12. Spiritual Elitism.

- The assumption that one’s own insights, beliefs, experiences and practices (or those of one’s group) are superior to all others.

13. Spiritual Monism.

- Ontological mysticism: The belief that humanity is innately divine.
- The belief that humanity, in its natural state, is “spiritual,” pure, and in no need of salvation.
- The belief that the human spirit is part of the divine substance, and the destiny of each individual is to be reabsorbed into God.
- EX: Eastern metaphysics and New Age “spirituality”.

14. Superstitionism.

- The integration of superstition into Christian faith.
- EX: Certain aspects of Roman Catholicism.

Prominent Early Heresies

Ebionites.

- An adoptionist view of Christ.

Nicolaitans.

- Ref. Rev. 2:15.

Docetism.

- Ref. I John 4:1-3.

Cerinthianism.

- Cerinthus (c. 100).

Gnosticism.

- Like the modern New Age movement, Gnosticism was a diverse, syncretistic movement that incorporated dualism, illuminism, spiritual elitism, and an elaborate speculative cosmology.
- An alternative soteriology to orthodox Christianity.
- The doctrine of *gnōsis*: secret esoteric spiritual knowledge accessed via mystical intuition.
 - Gnostics (or *pneumatics*) were an elite corps of enlightened mystics in whom a divine spark that had been implanted within their souls.
 - ▶ Gnostics claimed that true *gnōsis* exceeded the understanding of all others, including most Christians.
 - ▶ Rather than perceiving reality empirically (through the senses and experience) or rationally (through evidence logical deduction), they claimed a superior form of awareness, knowledge, and insight through *gnōsis* – mystical intuition.
- Gnostic theology:
 - ▶ Most Gnostics rejected basic Judeo/Christian monotheism.
 - ▶ Many Gnostics recognized Bythus as the supreme God.
 - ▶ Most believed that YHWH was merely a *demiurge*.
 - ▶ Gnosticism conceived of God as primarily immanent rather than transcendent.
 - Therefore, the key to spirituality is to look within oneself and follow one’s inner promptings rather than external sources such as Scripture or church tradition.
- Gnostic cosmology:
 - ▶ Ontological dualism: Materiality and physicality are evil – only the spiritual elements of life are good.
 - ▶ God (Bythus?) was not the creator of the physical/material world.
 - ▶ Gnostic creation myth.
- Christology:
 - ▶ Jesus as the ultimate guru of spiritual enlightenment.
 - ▶ Gnostics denied the incarnation of Christ – he was either a phantom (Docetism), or he temporarily inhabited a human form here on earth (Cerinthianism).
 - ▶ Gnostics doubted the literal, bodily resurrection of Christ.
 - The resurrection was mystical and allegorical.
 - Those who testified to seeing Jesus after the crucifixion were either deluded or were referring to a mystical experience, a trance, or a dream.

- Soteriology:
 - ▶ Gnostics rejected the orthodox doctrines of original sin, repentance, and redemption.
 - ▶ Like many New Agers today, Gnostics believed in the premise, “I am God.”
 - ▶ For *pneumatics* who possess a spark of the divine, salvation comes through asceticism, enlightenment, and self-knowledge.
 - ▶ Upon death, one’s soul was released from the prison of the body and reunited with God.
- The Bible:
 - ▶ Gnostics rejected the Old Testament.
- Paul and the Gnostics:
 - ▶ The Epistle to the Colossians warns against an embryonic form of Gnosticism.
 - Col. 1:13-20; 2:8-23.
 - ▶ I Timothy 6:20 – Be on guard against “what is falsely called knowledge [*gnōsis*].”
- John and the Gnostics:
 - ▶ John 1:1-18.
 - ▶ I John 1:1-3.
 - ▶ II John 7.
- Ontological dualism:
 - ▶ Since everything associated with the material world is base and corrupt – including the physical body – most Gnostics emphasized asceticism.
 - ▶ Ironically, others were hedonistic antinomians.
- Ecclesiology:
 - ▶ Gnostics rejected the authority of the mainstream orthodox (or “catholic”) church and the tradition of apostolic succession.
 - ▶ They rejected the orthodox creeds and confessions of faith.
- Social implications:
 - ▶ Mainstream Christianity emphasized social consciousness and humanitarian efforts.
 - ▶ Gnostics were escapists who regarded the world as innately corrupt and unredeemable.
- The Gnostic class system:
 - ▶ Gnostics imagined themselves to be the spiritual elite in society.
 - ▶ Most of humanity was composed of “**carnal**” souls.
 - ▶ Between the *pneumatics* and the “carnal” were the “psychics” (or “soulish”).

[NOTE: Most Gnostics were predestinarians.]
- The Gnostic Gospels:
 - ▶ The discovery at Nag Hammadi (1945).
 - ▶ The *Gospel of Thomas*.
 - ▶ The *Gospel of Philip*.
 - ▶ The *Gospel of Mary [Magdalene]*.
 - ▶ The *Gospel of Truth* (written by Valentinus).
 - ▶ The *Gospel of Judas*.
 - ▶ Despite the light they shed on alternative Christologies, the Gnostic Gospels have little if any historical authenticity and credibility.

Marcionism.

- Marcion (fl. 130s).
- The Marcion canon of Scripture.
- The Muratorian Canon (c. 180 AD).

Valentinus (fl. 140-60).

- *The Gospel of Truth*.

Tatian and the Encratites.

- Tatian (d. 180?).
- The *Diatessaron*.
- *Address to the Greeks*.

Montanism (c. 150-525).

- Montanus (fl. 160s), and “the New Prophecy.”
- The “prophetesses” Priscilla and Maximilla.
- Tertullian.

Novatians (c. 250-520).

- Novatianus.

Paul of Samosata (fl. 260s).**Manichaeism.**

- Mani (or Manichaeus, c.216-276).
- The new “Religion of Light.”
- The embodiment of the *Paraclete*.

Neoplatonism.

- Plotinus (c. 205-270), Porphyry (232-303), and Boethius (c. 480-524).
- A Westernized form of Eastern mysticism.
- A form of pantheistic monism:
 - ▶ Reality is to be found primarily in the spiritual world, accessible by contemplation.
 - ▶ The material world is merely an illusion and the realm of “**Forms**” – imperfect emanations of the One.
 - ▶ The ultimate goal is the ecstatic union of the individual soul with “the One” (the World Soul” – *henosis*) – the Source of all things.
 - The One is *dunamis* – the “Force” of the universe.
 - ▶ All nature and all humankind emanates from the One.
 - ▶ The One is self-existent, eternal, indivisible and totally transcendent.
 - ▶ The One is the essence of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.
 - ▶ Although beyond comprehension, the One can be known intuitively by the soul as a presence transcending cognitive knowledge.
- “Salvation” comes *via* mystical illumination through asceticism and transcendental meditation.
 - ▶ The goal of human existence is to transcend the physical/material so as to purify one’s soul through disciplined spiritual practices.
 - ▶ Porphyry: “Our end is to attain the contemplation of Being... He who knows God has God present to him.”