

An Emerging Form of Christianity Today

A Time of Change and Conflict in American Christianity. Of change and resistance to change – virtually “a tale of two Christianities.” The division is both theological and political. The great divide is between “the Christian right” and “progressive Christianity,” with many Christians “in the middle.” **The Reason: An Emerging Form of Christianity in Our Time.** Various called “emerging” or “progressive,” it has taken root in recent decades among many clergy and laity in mainline denominations.

I. Different from the “Common Christianity” of a Generation or Two Ago. “Common Christianity”: what most Christians took for granted not so long ago – the beliefs that most Protestants and Catholics shared in common. Still shared by millions.

***A useful and important question for Christians: what is the gospel? What is the heart of the Christian message?** In a sentence or a few phrases, what would you say?

If you grew up in a church, how would you have answered that question at the end of childhood – at age twelve or so?

*My answer at age twelve: *Jesus died for our sins so that we can be forgiven and go to heaven if we believe in him.* Note what it emphasizes:

- (1) The afterlife. Heaven-and-hell Christianity. Central to this form of Christianity.
- (2) Sin and forgiveness as the central dynamic of the Christian life.
- (3) The purpose of Jesus within this framework: he died for our sins and in our place (known as “*substitutionary* atonement, “*substitutionary* sacrifice”)
- (4) Believing – and often believing that Jesus and Christianity are “the only way”
Not all Christians believed this fifty years ago, but many (most?) did. But increasingly over the past several decades, it has become unpersuasive to millions who have left the church and many within churches

*The Spirit of God has worked and does work through “common Christianity.” But there’s a lot of “static” in it. For millions, it has become an obstacle, a stumbling block.
Thus: A crucial task today: adult theological re-education at the congregational level.

II. “Common Christianity” is Neither Ancient Nor Traditional Christianity

*Sometimes the “common Christianity” of a generation or two ago is called “conservative” or “traditional” Christianity, **but these terms are inaccurate.** There is much about the earlier form that is neither “conservative” nor “traditional” but innovative and recent. **Examples:**

*Biblical inerrancy (emphasized by many Protestants) is first mentioned in the 17th century. (Papal infallibility was officially proclaimed only in 1870).

*Biblical literalism is modern. Prior to the modern period, the metaphorical meaning of the Bible (its *more-than-literal* meaning) mattered most.

*The death of Jesus as a **substitutionary** sacrifice for sin is less than a thousand years old (first explicitly articulated by Anselm in 1097).

*Moreover, *the emerging paradigm* involves **a recovery of tradition** so that it has significant continuity with pre-modern Christianity. One might even call it “*neo-traditional.*”

*A short-hand way of naming the difference: **belief-centered Christianity** versus **transformation-centered Christianity**. The common Christianity of not so long ago emphasized “believing” as foundational; emerging Christianity emphasizes “transformation” through a deepening relationship with God as known in Jesus.

III. Major Features of Emerging Christianity: The “Shape of the Whole”

1. About This Life More than the Next Life – about *transformation in this life* rather than about an afterlife. No denial of an afterlife, but little emphasis on it.

*In the Bible, transformation in this life – of ourselves and of the world – is central

2. Intentional Rather than Conventional – both as motive and emphasis.

***Motive:** until recently, there was a conventional expectation that everybody would be part of a church. Thus many were Christian because of this cultural expectation. That convention began to disappear in most parts of America about forty years ago

*Increasingly, churches will be made up of *intentional* Christians

***Emphasis:** *Intentionality* leads to an emphasis on recovering spiritual practices, for practices are central to *intentional Christianity*. *The purpose is transformation.*

3. Progressive Theologically.

(1) It interprets the Bible and theological language with a historical and metaphorical approach. *Historical* – not in the sense of “how much of this happened,” but *ancient text in ancient context*. Example: Isaiah 40 in historical context of Jewish exile in Babylon. *Metaphorical:* the **more-than-literal meaning** of language.

*“Common Christianity” most often took for granted, in harder or softer forms, a literalist and absolutist interpretation. If the Bible says something happened, it happened; if the Bible says something is wrong, it’s wrong

Not only is a historical-metaphorical approach more illuminating, but all the problems associated with biblical literalism disappear.

(2) It sees no fundamental conflict between Christianity and science, and considerable complementarity. They are not rivals – except when science becomes “scientism”

(3) It affirms religious pluralism – not just out of tolerance, but conviction – namely, the conviction that the God of the whole universe has been known not just in one religion but in the enduring religions of the world. Each is a specific cultural response to the sacred.

4. Progressive Socially and Politically:

*Socially, it moves toward inclusiveness. In the last forty years: ordination of women and, more recently, the full status of gays and lesbians within the church

*It is politically progressive – because of a recovery of the political passion of the Bible. The Bible is also religious and spiritual, of course. But it emphasizes, from beginning to end, God’s passion for a different kind of world.

5. “Believing” as “Beloving” God and Jesus (the meaning of “believing” before it began around 1600 to mean believing statements/doctrines)

**Being Christian message is about beloving God and beloving what God loves.*

**The Christian gospel is about transformation – of ourselves and the world.*