

# Social Awareness. Living Truth.

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## Worldview: Examining Progressive Christianity in the Evangelical Church

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2018 the North American evangelical world was shocked when Josh Harris, author of the phenomenally successful *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*<sup>1</sup>, renounced his book apologizing for any damage it had done and had its publication discontinued. In 2019 he announced that he no longer considered himself a Christian. This along with the announcements of the loss of faith of other prominent Christian influencers such as Hillsong pastor Marty Sampson and podcasters Rhett & Link, have garnered much attention with many asking why there seems to be such a spate of defections from Christianity.

In addition to outright loss of faith stories, there has been a movement within Christian circles away from traditional doctrinal stances and toward new views. In 2016, Brian McLaren, a pastor who has long been associated with the “emergent church” movement, wrote *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World’s Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* in which he declares that the traditional view of Christ’s death on the cross as a sacrifice for sins reflected an outdated view of a “supreme being of violent and dominating power”<sup>2</sup> that we need to discard. Nadia Bolz-Weber, founding pastor of the queer inclusive church “House for All Sinners and Saints,” wrote in *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, that if it was God’s will for sex to be reserved for heterosexual married couples then “God planned poorly.”<sup>3</sup>

This is more than simply a shift in evangelicalism in terms of worship styles or of evangelical churches becoming “seeker friendly.” This is a redefining of doctrines that have characterized Christianity for millennia whilst retaining the label “Christian.” It is often described in terms of a shift from a “conservative” position to a “liberal” one, with liberals setting aside things like the bodily resurrection of Christ and the infallibility of scripture while the conservatives double down on such beliefs, issuing documents such as the *Nashville Statement*<sup>4</sup> on human sexuality and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*.<sup>5</sup>

Questioning doctrine is nothing new—doctrines have been examined, refined and challenged throughout history. The Protestant reformation is an example of examining prevailing doctrines and rejecting those that did not appear to line up with Scripture, such as papal authority, purgatory and indulgences. What we are seeing within the Progressive Christianity movement is not so much a rejection of problematic doctrines but a redefining of them—it involves a profound shift in thinking about what it means to be a Christian, offering answers that are radically different than what traditional Christian teaching has offered and, as such, merits close attention. This is not a challenge that is coming from outside the church but one that comes from within.

This paper will give a brief overview of what has led us to a place where beliefs that have been held for centuries as constituting the Christian faith are being widely discarded, what specific doctrines are being targeted and how they are being changed. We need to consider whether the Progressive Christianity (here forward referred to as PC) case has merit—after all, if the

Reformation helped Christians to shed false doctrines, is what is happening now so bad? Is it time for another reformation? We will touch on the negative implications of major revisions in Christian doctrine and will conclude with recommendations on how Christians today, as individuals, families and churches can equip ourselves and our children to remain firm in the faith and to effectively share the good news with those who see Christianity as oppressive.

## 1. BACKGROUND

In order to understand where we are, we need to understand where we’ve been. We cannot effectively respond to the challenges that PC poses unless we know the challenges to which it is responding. It may be convenient for us to think of PC as a nefarious outside influence or as simply the result of a few “bad apples” but as we will see, PC did not spring up from out of nowhere but grew alongside the concerns of many people of goodwill within the church. These concerns centre around the hurts and deficiencies they themselves witnessed and experienced, many as faithful members of congregations for many years.

Firstly, we must remind ourselves that nothing the Church experiences today, whether with PC or anything else, is new. As the wisdom writer tells us, “there is nothing new under the sun.” What is being done now, has been done before. When it comes to matters of doctrine and belief and behaviour, recall Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares. The servants of the farmer are dismayed to see that tares, a weed that looks very much like wheat in its early stages, have been strewn amongst the wheat. The master says that an enemy has done it and that the servants are not to pull them up and so risk damaging the crop but to wait until the harvest when the cut vegetation will be separated. Jesus was well aware that the kingdom of God would be comprised both of those who truly follow Him and those who only appear to. Until His return in judgment, this phenomenon of Christian counterfeits is to be expected.

In Acts 15, we read about the Judaizers who insisted Gentile converts to Christ must first convert to Judaism, be circumcised and keep the Mosaic law. This situation prompted the first of many Christian councils gathered to clarify orthodox teaching and practice. The Jerusalem council of about 50 AD, was followed by the council of Nicaea in 325, called in response to the teaching that Christ was the Father’s first creation and not the eternal second person of the trinity (Arianism). Early Christian apologists wrote in responses to heresies such as Docetism—which described Christ’s body as some sort of phantasm, rendering his suffering on the cross as mere illusion - and Pelagianism, in which Adam’s sin did not affect human nature, leaving humans perfectly capable of living upright lives without divine help.

In more recent history, we have seen the growth of the Mormon church (which teaches that Christ is the “first-born spirit child of God” and that God has a physical body); the Jehovah’s Witnesses (which teaches that God is one and not triune and that Jesus

1. A manual published in 1997 that argued for courtship rather than casual dating for young people with strict standards for physical contact.

2. McLaren, Brian D. *The Great Spiritual Migration*, p. 93.

For a biblical critique see Patty Houser, <https://www.equip.org/article/misguided-migration/>

3. Bolz-Weber, Nadia, *Shameless: A Sexual Reformation*, p 3.

For a biblical critique see Douglas Groothuis visit: <https://www.equip.org/article/shamelessly-wrong-book-review-of-shameless-a-sexual-reformation-nadia-bolz-weber/>

4. An evangelical Christian statement of faith relating to human sexuality and gender roles authored by the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) in Nashville, Tennessee: <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement/>

5. A statement formulated by more than 200 evangelical leaders at a conference convened by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy and held in Chicago in October 1978: <https://www.moodybible.org/beliefs/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy/articles-of-affirmation-and-denial/>

was simply a human who was not physically resurrected from the dead); and of the “prosperity gospel” which teaches that God’s desire is that all his followers be healthy and wealthy and that if you do not enjoy these things it is because you do not have enough faith.

There was no time period when the church was “pure” and free from heresy or wolves in sheep’s clothing and so we ought not to be surprised to discover such things today, even in our own churches. But just as this state of affairs is, in a sense, normal, we are not to be complacent. We are told to “guard what was committed to your trust” (1 Timothy 6:20), to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3), and to “let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). While ultimate judgment belongs to Christ, we are to be vigilant. If we are at all interested in strengthening faith and in being able to clearly articulate our beliefs and attendant lifestyles, both to those within the church and those on the outside, then we cannot simply ignore what doubters, skeptics and questioners are saying.

This is critical because PC is a movement that has come from within; from people who currently or who formerly called themselves Christians but who came to have concerns and doubts about the faith as they experienced it that, for many, were not adequately addressed.

The traditional teaching on sexuality, for example, is a critical area of divergence for PC. We may like to think that the acceptance of same-sex marriages or loosening of expectations around sexuality outside marriage simply come from people who don’t want to be told what to do—people who are rebellious and want to justify their sin. While that may be the case for some, the truth is much more nuanced than that.

The sexual revolution brought about widespread acceptance of sexual activity outside marriage. One response by evangelicals was the “purity movement” of the 90’s in which youth were encouraged to take vows of abstinence, dating was discouraged in favor of “courtship,” touching within dating and courtship was discouraged and virginity until the wedding night was highly favoured. The reward for such behaviour was to be a great marriage and a mind-blowing sex life. The intention of encouraging Christian youth to uphold a traditional sexual ethic was good but the efforts in many cases did much damage by equating great sex with rule keeping, emphasizing the dangers of sexual activity, making the loss of virginity and the presence of sexual thoughts almost the unforgiveable sin, and making marriage out to be the ultimate problem-free prize. Many a young person growing up in purity culture later complained about anxiety regarding sexuality that carried over into marriage or were cruelly disappointed when the promised spouse never materialized. Or found they had no one to talk to about their same-sex urges and were left with the hopeless idea that they were doomed to life without love. When the message is constantly “don’t think this,” “don’t feel this” and definitely “don’t do that” or you are “damaged goods,” or that all same-sex attractions can be “prayed away,” sexuality becomes a battlefield with many casualties. Such hurts helped push some away from Christianity altogether and helped push some toward a view that moved sexual activity apart from marriage out of the category of “sin.” The modern view is that sexual orientation is a critical part of our identity and that sexual expression is necessary for health. If God made us, then He made people to be same-sex attracted and so biblical injunctions condemning homosexual activity have either been misunderstood or are flat out wrong.

The ability to do so is made possible within PC by the view of scripture it promotes. This view is astutely illustrated by Nadia

Bolz-Weber, author of New York Times bestseller “Shameless: A Sexual Reformation” in a scene of a parishioner burning the pages that denounce homosexuality from her Bible (often called “clobber passages” in PC vocabulary). She then tears out the Gospels, clutching them to her heart, before throwing the rest of the Bible into the fire. Bolz-Weber writes, “The gospels are the canon within the canon. The Bible, as Martin Luther said, is the cradle that holds Christ. The point of gravity is the story of Jesus, the Gospel. The closer a text of the Bible is to that story or to the heart of that story’s message, the more authority it has. The farther away it is, the less its authority.”

The root of so many issues comes down to God’s Word – either it is God’s own authoritative Word or isn’t. The original temptation was “did God really say?” and efforts to downgrade that Word have been going on ever since. For a long time, Europe took for granted, for the most part, that the Bible was God’s authoritative Word and people thought and acted accordingly. Scripture was mediated to the people through the local priests since most people were illiterate. The pope was the supreme authority in spiritual affairs and the king in secular. Aristotle was the authority in scientific matters.

Mankind more and more, studied nature, learning its secrets in the belief that an orderly God created an orderly universe, which runs on laws that could be discovered by the human mind. It was God’s handiwork and that to know it was to know Him better. Their studies led them to discover that Aristotle got a good deal wrong—their authoritative source lost his status. Economic development and the emergence of the middle class led people to consider new ways of organizing society—the Magna Carta was a reflection of the belief that the king was not all powerful but subject to the law with limits on his authority just like anyone else. And the church ought to be separate from the state. By and by, attitudes toward authority shifted with increasing scope for man to be his own master rather than submitting to others.

Within the sciences, learning the laws of nature led many to think there was not much of a role for God in the everyday workings of nature and the world and everything in it could be studied, dissected and understood through uniform methods without reference to God at all. Real, solid, objective truth could only be discovered through science—everything else, including God and morality, was subjective.

If the Bible merely spoke of abstract things, it would not draw much attention. But the Bible has the habit of anchoring its ideas in concrete history. If God or at least His Word is to be discredited, that history must be debunked. Charles Lyell, the father of geology, was express in his desire to “free the science from Moses,” meaning, to render explanations of history and why the world looks the way it does that had nothing to do with what the book of Genesis said. He was tremendously influential and he, along with Charles Darwin, convinced many that the Bible might be fine for morals, but its history was akin to fairy tales. Any book that is mostly composed of historical narrative will not fare well with such a reputation; consequently, there were increased efforts to modify and even reject historical Christian doctrines such as supernatural creation, the virgin birth, miracles, and the resurrection. The authority of scripture was severely damaged for many.

But there has always been pushback against the supremacy of science because it seemed to strip the world of beauty, emotion, individuality and spirituality, things that matter deeply to people. Science appeared to make the world cold and mechanistic, reducible to its parts with every part explained. In the art world the “Romantic” school of thought was the response to such a bleak view - in an effort to convey their view that world was more

than the sum of its parts, they infused their works with light that seemed to emanate from within.<sup>6</sup>

And the ability of science to deliver a world of peace and prosperity was shattered in the muddy trenches of western Europe during World War I as the numbers of dead and wounded increased year after year, laying waste a generation of Europe's brightest young men.

The structures of society seemed to have failed—religion, the scientific establishment, politics. The situation was ripe for new attitudes and beliefs about society and how to structure it and even the nature of humanity. Karl Marx proposed that humanity's nature is to be free, creative and productive and that humans are alienated from that nature through enslavement to exploitative capitalistic structures. Communism, with its ideals of humans working in a community of equality, was perceived by his followers as the best way to organize society. Fundamentally, our problems are not within us, such as what Christianity teaches about the struggle with a sin nature, but rather they come from external forces. In this vein, critical theory asserts that current institutions and structures are merely used to seize and maintain power over others (see Critical Theory below). The solution is to critique those structures and viewpoints, modify them or even tear them down in order to free people from oppression and achieve an ideal society of prosperous equals.

The suggestion that societal issues originate from an internal struggle with sin is becoming increasingly taboo. The Bible-believing church today finds itself in the midst of a culture that does not regard the Bible as authoritative and is therefore regarded with suspicion if not outright hostility. Scientific claims bear less and less weight—they are assumed to be the products of “old white men” advanced to perpetuate the supremacy of the closed ranks of those in power. So, to proclaim that marriage was instituted by God or that homosexual activity or transgenderism has any negative physical effects is, to modern ears, offensive, advocating outdated, hurtful norms that deserve our hostility. To even say such a thing is to do harm (i.e. “words = violence”) and so any effort to live out your beliefs whether to write them in a social media post or reflect them in business practices or to speak about them in conversation with a colleague can quite possibly result in public shaming via the media, protests or even warrant legal action.

Progressive Christians deal with these issues by believing that scripture is not God's Word but is the word of human beings struggling and sometimes failing to understand God. Biblical Scholar Peter Enns writes, “The Bible is an ancient book and we shouldn't be surprised to see it act like one. So, seeing God portrayed as a violent, tribal warrior is not how God is but how He was understood to be by the ancient Israelites communing with God in their time and place.”<sup>7</sup>

The Bible is considered a product of its times and as humans progress, our knowledge of God progresses. What once may have served our purposes, may now be outdated, and can be refined or discarded. Sex outside marriage and homosexual activity may once have been “fornication” and “sodomy” but now we know that sexual activity is good so long as it is consensual and expresses concern for our partner's well-being.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

### Progressive Christianity

Progressive Christianity is not a denomination nor do churches use those words in their titles any more than the word “emergent” appeared on church billboards, although the word “progressive” might appear in the “About Us” section of a church's website. The “emergent” church began appearing in the early 2000's as an expression of dissatisfaction with traditional, organized Christianity that appeared to many to be inflexible, judgmental, too involved in politics, too enamoured with buildings and hierarchy and out of touch with modern culture. Brian McLaren's book “A New Kind of Christian” (2001) brought this dissatisfaction into the wider consciousness. Proponents sought to “do church” better, with a more decentralized structure, more use of the arts, and with a focus on social activism, missional activity and works.

### Social activism

Social activism, sometimes referred to within a Christian context as “social gospel, focuses on the relief of suffering and has been criticized as offering physical salvation without regard for spiritual salvation. When social activism is prioritized above being in right relationship with God, it can produce a “works” based gospel versus a “salvation” based gospel. Most recently, social activism in certain PC churches is being shaped and informed by critical theory.

### Critical Theory (CT)

Critical Theory seeks to discern the ways in which human beings are oppressed or enslaved and to liberate them from oppressive forces. There is evidence that many progressive Christian churches (and some traditional Christian churches as well) are using ideas espoused by critical theorists to inform their response to racism. Critical theory focuses on the ideologies adopted by those in power to enforce their own wills and seeks to critique those ideologies in order to break their hold on society so they may be replaced with views that are more equitable. For example, critical race theory asserts that discrimination continues because principles of white supremacy are embedded within the American legal system regardless of laws prohibiting segregation.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, many feminists argue that western society itself is the product of wealthy, white, heterosexual men and so discriminates against women by its very structure.<sup>10</sup> Since Christianity has been the majority religion for western nations, Christianity is viewed by many as a privileged viewpoint that has discriminated against vulnerable minorities. It is not that CT has nothing valuable to say—it is certainly true that injustice can be embedded within systems since systems are created by humans. However, CT can be juxtaposed to biblical teaching in that it conceives of human problems solely in terms of systems and suggests that changing systems will lead to salvation. Yet is this the case? If white, heterosexual males are at the top of the current social hierarchy and they oppress people of color and women, does it then follow that removing them from the top of the heap will necessarily result in a more just society?

This is in contrast to the biblical view of humanity which says that our fundamental problem is not found in systems or with particular groups of people but that it is found within every individual. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, survivor of the Soviet gulags,

6. <https://www.britannica.com/art/Romanticism>

7. Enns, Peter. *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read it*, 231.

8. Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Shameless*. Convergent Books, 2019, p. 3., 11

9. <https://www.thoughtco.com/critical-race-theory-4685094>

10. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-feminism-p2-3026083>

noted that “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts,”<sup>11</sup> which is in line with the biblical teaching that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Our problem is not that some humans oppress others based on where they are in a hierarchy of power, but that all of us are in rebellion against God and this results in humans of all stations oppressing other humans. The solution to our problem is for us to be reconciled to God and given his life-giving spirit so that we may be enabled to live lives that please Him. Out of our new communion with God we may then work to address evil and injustice in whatever form it takes whether in actions, attitudes, systems or institutions. This does not mean Christians must solely be involved in preaching the gospel and making disciples and not be involved in social justice issues. These efforts go hand in hand; they are two sides to the same coin. Jesus Himself preached the gospel and healed the sick. But Christians must not lose sight of our most fundamental problem—it is not lack of education or poverty or disease—it is sin and efforts to bring justice that neglect the spiritual dimension can result in situations where one has gained the whole world but lost his soul.

### Deconstruction

PC seeks to deconstruct doctrine. Deconstruction is an important concept in the movement. When a doctrine results in outcomes that are at odds with the “love of Jesus” or at least what the love of Jesus is believed to encompass, the doctrine itself must be examined to the point of taking it apart and rebuilding it so it is more inclusive.

For instance, Brian McLaren argues in “The Great Spiritual Migration,” that the Old Testament “angry God” demanding sacrifices was simply the Hebrew perception of God during that period of ancient history. Later Christians adopted that view and developed the doctrine of the atonement. Such beliefs may have served a useful purpose at an earlier time but, argues McLaren, subsequent enlightenment by Christ, who revealed a God of love, free of judgment have allowed us to “progress” beyond such crudities. McLaren put forward a new Christian ethos to move away from doctrines that perpetrate an “us and them” attitude in which we (the ones having the one true knowledge of God) are favoured over them (the ones without such knowledge) and in which Christians seem free to enforce our wills, even brutally on them (those who are seen as “outside” or “other”). As an example, McLaren cites the conquering of America under the auspices of the Church who sanctioned efforts to subvert and dominate heathen savages for the sake of Christ via the “doctrine of discovery,” which asserted that any land not inhabited by Christians was up for grabs, justifying the takeover of land in the Americas and elsewhere, regardless of who was already inhabiting it. McLaren fails to note that just because someone justifies some action based on scripture, doesn’t mean that justification is correct; that an exclusive salvation is, in scripture, a motivation to evangelism, not conquering; and that eliminating the atonement eliminates any possibility for justice since all is simply forgiven.

PCs also allege that the traditional sexual ethics fosters an “us and them” mentality. For example, in the book “Shameless,” PC Nadia Bolz-Weber recounts a conversation she had with a transgender woman at the church she pastored:

‘Hey Meghan...my old Christian sex-ed book...taught me that God’s plan is for everyone to be a heterosexual, cis-gender Christian who never has sex with anyone until they marry their one true love and make babies.’ We both laughed... ‘I mean, I do think there are genuinely those kinds of people out there...’ Meghan held up her hand and touched her thumb to the rest of her purple nail-polished fingers. ‘Sure, there are. And this is how small that circle is.’... Meghan doesn’t fit in that circle. I don’t fit in that circle. Also not included in the circle are divorced people, people in unhappy marriages, people who have sex before marriage, people who masturbate, asexuals, gay people, bisexuals, people who are not Christian, people who are gender non-binary...If that’s “God’s plan,” then God planned poorly.<sup>12</sup>

Bolz-Weber’s book is full of stories of those hurt within the context of Christian community and its teachings on sexuality. That Christians have garnered a negative reputation for their treatment of LGBTQ people is certainly true in many instances but as Douglas Groothuis writes in his critique of her book “the solution to this problem of insensitivity and cruelty is not to compound the sin by accepting and applauding sexual activity outside of the biblical framework. Doing this means to compromise biblical truth and to withhold the healing balm of repentance and submission to Jesus for forgiveness (Matt. 4:11; John 3:16–18; 10:10).”<sup>13</sup>

To the progressive Christian, since the problem is people wrongly taking a human document and imbuing it with divine authority, the solution is to **deconstruct** our understanding of the Bible. We must release the idea that it is God’s Word and embrace it as a work of man. We must then study to detect outmoded ideas about God and the doctrines based on them, tear them down where they are deemed oppressive and reconstruct more accurate versions in their place.

So, for instance, the cross is no longer the place where Christ sacrificed His life to appease a violent God, angry about our sin; rather it is the place where an innocent man gave us the highest example of forgiveness and grace which we are to emulate as a means of bringing about God’s kingdom. And godly sexuality, rather than being a prize surrounded by a web of restrictions too hard for most to keep, becomes a joy accessible to all people of goodwill.

All of this will be highly objectionable to those who adhere to traditional views such as the infallibility of scripture, the doctrine of the atonement and sexuality as expressed in heterosexual marriage. However, though advocates of PC may be misled, we should not dismiss their criticisms.

### Religion and Politics

Another critique by many in the PC movement deals with the entwining of religion and politics. Religious expression is more overt in America than in Canada and for many the perception is that to be Christian is to be Republican which poses problems for Christians who do not wish to be identified with certain Republican figures or whose policy views align more with those of the Democratic Party or of no party at all. The 2016 USA election is a case in point. Many Christians had no desire to be associated with Donald Trump and his election to office was deeply concerning to many Christians. There is also a perception that “evangelicals” are a political block that can be used to

11. Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr I. The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956.

12. Bolz-Weber, Nadia. Shameless. Convergent Books, 2019, p. 3.

13. <https://www.equip.org/article/shamelessly-wrong-book-review-of-shameless-a-sexual-reformation-nadia-bolz-weber/>

advance political agendas. To be “evangelical” means that you must vote in a certain way, which is off-putting to many. However, the PC movement itself is quite politically oriented especially with regard to matters of sexuality. The right sort of Christian, the one who is “on the right side of history” may in PC circles, be someone who votes and is active on issues that typically fall on the left-side of the political spectrum.

### **Exvangelical**

The entwining of religion and politics in this way has led many to question and reject the Christianity that is “on tap.” Some such people embrace the term exvangelical by which they intend to separate themselves from the evangelical community. Some exvangelicals still claim to be Christians in some sense, while others have rejected Christianity altogether.

### **Social Gospel**

Social gospel tends to find the primary message of Christianity within works of justice – healing the sick, helping the poor, advocating for the oppressed.

### **Tolerance**

Tolerance has traditionally been understood as the ability to “get along” with those with whom you disagree; the ability to disagree, even vehemently, with another person but to take no action to silence, threaten or intimidate them. It’s expressed by the statement associated with Voltaire: “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” More recently tolerance has come to mean people must agree with other’s views. To disagree is to be intolerant, even hateful and worthy of suppression. Expressions of critique or dissent are regarded as acts of violence that can be responded to with violence whether verbal or physical. With regards to Christianity, it is thought to be intolerant for someone to say things like “Jesus is the only way of salvation” or to critique the tenets of another religion. Orthodox Christianity has taught that there is in fact only one way to God and that apart from Christ, all are lost. Salvation is offered to all but it is not allowed on just any terms. God dictates the terms and scripture speaks clearly about a distinction between people. For instance, Jesus said “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21) and the book of Revelation tells us “anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev 20:15). The charge of “intolerance” is leveled at those who advocate this teaching. Christians are called to be kind and compassionate to all but cannot give up this exclusive stance by saying that all are saved. Rather, this exclusivity ought to motivate us to evangelize – to be the bearers of the good news that sin is real but can be forgiven. The proper response to the charge of “intolerance” is to point out that the one making the charge is being intolerant in implying the other is wrong and ought to change his or her views. PC is often expressed in harsh and aggressive terms that can be classified as intolerant by the historic definition of the term.

### **Doubt**

Doubt is encouraged as long as the doubts are directed toward traditional teachings such as the authority of scripture or the sacrificial death of Christ. This is a weaponization of doubting common within PC culture. While we can acknowledge that all of us have periods of doubt regarding what we believe, doubts must be handled carefully. Our aim is to build up faith which

might require extensive discussion about difficult topics such as the justice of God but it is not to encourage people to doubt the faith.

### **Hurts as excuse**

Very often, PC critiques come down to “I was hurt by the church therefore I’m justified in leaving the faith.” While we need to acknowledge the damage caused by painful experiences within the community, we are ultimately called to follow Christ and are judged by our response to Him, not to our local congregation.

Celebrity culture, relentless perfectionism and the lack of opportunity to express and wrestle with doubts about doctrine within evangelicalism are also complaints of progressives.

### **Topics Up For Redefinition**

The main topics up for redefinition are: *Bible*, *Cross*, *Gospel*, and *Jesus*:

#### **Bible**

As addressed earlier, the *Bible* is a human work subject to revision according to the knowledge of the times.

#### **Cross**

The *cross* is an example of human piety, love and forgiveness. It is certainly not a place of judgment for sin –

I just can’t believe in a God who isn’t even as forgiving and caring as me. I can’t believe in a God who isn’t even as moral as me. I can’t believe in a God who could torture his own son to death as some kind of payment. I could never do that to my child, and I just can’t believe in a God who could.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Gospel**

The *gospel* is not about God reconciling sinners to Himself. Humans are born good and the gospel was about God’s will being done on earth as in heaven for all people. It was about God’s faithful solidarity with all humanity in our suffering, oppression, and evil. It was about God’s compassion and call to be reconciled with God and with one another before death, on earth.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, salvation is available to all in the sense that you don’t have to be a Christian to be saved. You can be a good Muslim, Jew, Hindu or atheist.

#### **Jesus**

*Jesus* is simply a fine moral example for us to follow. He did not sacrifice His life for our sins; rather He was so committed to a love that shook the status quo of the reigning religious authorities that He paid the ultimate price. He showed us it is God’s will that we reject the oppressive structures and practices of our day, renounce our tribalism and extend love and grace to all, just as God Himself does.

### **Why It Matters**

For the progressive, a common view about God is that reaching Him is like following a path to a mountain peak—there are many paths you could follow, and they may be quite different from one another but if you persevere, eventually you will get to the top no matter which path you chose. But many would argue that this

14. Childers, Alisa. *Another Gospel?* p. 83.

15. McLaren, Brian. *A New Kind of Christianity*, quoted in *Another Gospel?* p. 92



is not a proper analogy. If God has an objective existence, then He cannot be everything. He must have a defined nature and character that is independent of whatever our own wishes or beliefs are. I may desire to climb Yamnuska and get on a trail that "looks good" or "resonates with me" but if that path does not lead to that particular peak, I am hooped.

Addressing the claims of PC matters because they present a God, a Christ and a way of salvation that is an appealing trail to the mountain top but does not in fact lead there. Because they reject the Bible as the authoritative word of God and take it as man's best understanding of God at the time, they remove any foundation on which to construct a certain understanding of who God is and what He expects of us. If God indeed sent His Son to die for our sins and requires us to repent and trust Him for eternal life, then telling people Jesus died to set an example that being loving to one another is enough to merit eternal life, is simply wrong and anyone who follows that teaching will perish. As Jesus said, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord' and do not do the things I say?" (Luke 6:46). "Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not...done many wonders in your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me!'" (Matthew 7:22-23). We may all use the same terms: God, Jesus, gospel, divine, scripture, salvation, sin. But if we mean different things by them, truth becomes obscured, and people are led astray.

PC offers a different Jesus. A good, kind, loving example to follow, yes. But a Jesus that is merely human, merely an example, merely a sympathizer. This is not a Jesus who has conquered death or provided a sacrifice for sin or who will deal with evil in any real way. As such, this is not the kind of Jesus or God that can provide justice or even everlasting life. In PC, doctrine is redefined so that the very nature of salvation is changed. In fact, salvation is not really even needed. We are encouraged to live as agents of love, mercy, and forgiveness but since God simply forgives sin, it is never actually dealt with and so its natural and spiritual consequences (chaos, disorder, destruction, injustice and death) are left to continue wreaking havoc on humanity. In this paradigm, there is no real difference between good and evil, hence no justice, no judgement, and no hell. But if there is no hell, neither is there heaven. If God simply forgives sin but does nothing to actually remove it, then there is no difference between life in heaven and life in hell – humans will just keep on living in the next life the way they do here. There is no promise of God making things right, of freedom from sin and death. It is just endless existence on the wheel of suffering which is life. If PC is right, then they have more in common with Hindus than with Christians and our only hope is in ourselves. But given human history, what hope is that?

But if PC has gotten it wrong, and there really is a God to whom we are accountable and there really are eternal consequences for sin, but that God has provided a way, not just to escape its consequences but to be freed from it and to receive life in abundance, partially now and fully in the next life, we must respond because the health of the body of Christ, and the opportunity to experience life, real life, depends on it.

When it comes to evaluating churches, colleges, seminaries, and organizations for our potential involvement, it is no longer enough to do a quick perusal of a "statement of faith" page on a website. Alisa Childers recounts in her book *Another Gospel?* asking her pastor if he believed in the divine inspiration of

scripture and he gave a resounding "yes." What she later found out after questioning him was that he could only say yes because he defined "divine inspiration" as meaning an emotional response that prompts creative activity rather than as the work of the Holy Spirit, moving people to write what God wants them to write.

If we are going to send our children to Christian institutions for training in the ministry or are going to give money to such institutions, we must ensure we are not inadvertently contributing to ones that perpetrate falsehoods.

It also matters because those who sit under the teachings of PC are quite often only a short step away from outright atheism. If the distinctives of the faith are eliminated and the emphasis falls on community life and social activism, then there is no real need for faith in God at all. We can think of PC as part of a slippery slope to unbelief. Bart Campolo, son of famed evangelist Tony Campolo, traces his own loss of faith: "I passed through every stage of heresy. It starts out with sovereignty goes, then biblical authority goes, then I'm a universalist, now I'm marrying gay people. Pretty soon I don't actually believe Jesus actually rose from the dead in a bodily way."<sup>16</sup> He credits his loss of faith, not to being taught these doctrines but to a steady stream of unanswered prayers that eroded his belief that God is out there and cares and intervenes. How much more might someone professing belief in the God of Christianity, sitting under a pastor who teaches from a fallible Bible that all are saved and love is love, be inclined to eventually jettison faith altogether?

"When you get to this ragged edge of Christianity when people say 'God' they sort of mean 'the universe' and when they say 'Jesus' they sort of mean 'redemption' – they're so progressive they don't actually count on any supernatural stuff to happen, they've dialed it down in the same way I did...'Bart says he's "skipped over" the "progressive re-vamping" of Christianity and gone straight to the logical conclusion that God doesn't exist. He reckons that Progressive Christians should stop pretending God exists in the form of "the universe" or other wishy-washy language."<sup>17</sup>

Jesus himself, warned his followers of "wolves in sheep's clothing" (Matt 7:15ff). Such a warning is necessary because such "false prophets" look so much like the real thing. In the case of PC, they may use all the language that a true believer uses but the ultimate message is very different. Paul himself tells the church at Ephesus that he did not fail to preach to them "the whole counsel of God" and to warn them that upon his departure:

"savage wolves will come among you not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears." (Acts 20:29-31)

It also matters because historic Christian faith and practice is hard, and this is an important spiritual discipline in the process of sanctification. In a Calvin & Hobbes cartoon Calvin complains of having to shovel the driveway, wondering why his dad doesn't just buy a snow-blower. His dad tells him shoveling builds character and Calvin mutters 'Why is it every time I build character, he saves \$300 bucks?' We smile at Calvin's honesty, but we recognize the truth therein—engaging in difficult activity does have the potential to grow character, to help us mature. James writes, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing

16. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/bart-campolo-says-progressive-christians-turn-into-atheists-maybe-hes-right/3759.article>

17. <https://www.premierchristianity.com/home/bart-campolo-says-progressive-christians-turn-into-atheists-maybe-hes-right/3759.article>

that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.” (James 1:2-4) For instance, the Christian sexual ethic of celibacy outside marriage is made in order to honour God’s desires and purposes for sexual expression. Restraining and channeling our sexual desires for the purpose of pleasing our Creator and Saviour is an act of worship—the “living sacrifice” that Paul refers to in Romans 12:1—that is “holy and acceptable to God,” that helps us learn to put God first and to find identity and comfort in Him.

This ethic challenges our culture’s view that refraining from sexual activity is to be unhealthy and repressive whereas sleeping with one’s boyfriend or girlfriend or engaging in a one-night stand is the norm. It also tells us that same-sex attractions are normal and that expressing them is the path to authenticity.

But is that really true? To the Christian, true authenticity is found in relationship with God—in knowing and obeying him. If God created sexuality to be expressed within a man-woman marriage, then engaging in sexual expression outside heterosexual marriage is a sure path to inauthenticity because it means we decide what is right and wrong instead of submitting to God—which was our very first sin back in the Garden of Eden.

A person wanting to honour God but also grappling with her sexual urges needs help in honouring God’s standards—she is not served by being given a “more loving and realistic” sexual ethic that says marriage isn’t necessary and same sex relations are alright, no matter how attractive that option might seem to someone weary with trying to manage her sex drive.<sup>18</sup> Instead of offering relief by compromising truth we ought to surround one another with loving communities so that everyone, married or single, same-sex attracted or opposite-sex attracted, can experience the love and fellowship that is so vital to human flourishing.

### 3. HISTORIC CHRISTIAN BELIEF: KEY CONCEPTS

If PC has compromised on fundamental Christian doctrines, it is important to grasp what those doctrines are so that deviations can be clearly observed.

#### Bible

Christianity is anchored in the Old and New Testaments, the first Testament being the record of God’s dealings with humanity, particularly with respect to His chosen people, the Jews, the descendants of Abraham, and His covenant with them, inaugurated at Mt Sinai and expressed in the Mosaic Law.

The second, or New, Testament is the record of God’s incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, in fulfillment (Luke 24:27) of His promise to send someone to “crush the head” of the serpent (Genesis 3:15), provide atonement for sins (Hebrews 9:26) and inaugurate the kingdom of God (Luke 1:33; 4:16-19) that is open to all.

Together, the Testaments comprise the Bible, what Christians refer to as “God’s Word.” Traditional doctrine teaches that both Testaments are “divinely inspired, infallible, entirely trustworthy and the only final authority in all matters of faith and conduct.”<sup>19</sup> The scriptures are to be interpreted in an exegetical way, using the historical-grammatical method to find out what a given text

meant to its original audience and then seeking to apply it in modern contexts. This contrasts with progressive methods which focus on personal meaning.

Scriptural authority is binding for all generations—while we are free to study to come to ever clearer understandings of the text, scripture is taken to be “perspicuous”: a text that, in general, is clear and free of obscurity. While there are some parts that may be difficult to understand, the scripture as a whole is understood to be self-explanatory, and its message able to be grasped by the general public. Christianity is not a faith only for elites or for those with advanced degrees. Christians have gone to great lengths throughout history, to copy and disseminate the scriptures, understanding the importance of getting God’s Word into the minds of ordinary people in their own language so that they can know and obey the things of God (Psalm 119:11; Colossians 3:16). Thus, our study cannot lead us to overturn doctrine that has been handed down for centuries. For instance, we are free to explore the meaning of Christ’s death on the cross but we are not free to deny that He did die on the cross. We are free to explore how God may have created the Earth but we are not free to deny that He was involved at all. We are free to explore how God may have inspired the scriptures, but we are not free to deny that they are inspired or that they have authority over us.

In affirming the authority of scripture, we are setting limits over what we may believe as true. Rather than “leaning on our own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5) we are acknowledging that God has a greater authority than us and that He alone has the ability and the right to determine what the meaning of human life is and how human life should be lived. God does not dictate the minutia of life to us – He has given us the intelligence, creativity and ingenuity to explore ourselves and the world, and has given us wide parameters in which to use our gifts: “let them have dominion...over all the earth... ‘be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it” (Genesis 1:26, 28).

However, He has also clearly set bounds for us, including a limitation on us for deciding good and evil, true and false, and what love is and what it isn’t. As the Creator of the universe and the sustainer of the physical and moral order, God encapsulates goodness. Apart from Him we are and have nothing and are to submit to His authority in all matters.

#### Cross

Christ’s death on the cross carries rich meaning: it is an atoning sacrifice, a breaking of the power of sin, a triumph over Satan, and an object for God’s wrath against sin. His death served as a sacrifice for sin – “now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26) and as a “propitiation” – a means of gaining God’s favour by doing what pleases Him – “[He has] given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 5:2). The cross does not mean God is a blood-thirsty tyrant – it shows His deep love for sinners, yes, but it also shows His hatred of sin and of those who persist in it. God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9), but scripture also warns that “whoever does not believe the Son will not see life but the wrath of God abides on Him” (John 3:36) and “in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 2:5) and “having now been justified by His blood we

18. Childers, Alisa. *Another Gospel?* p. 52.

19. “Articles of Faith and Practice.” *Emcc.ca*, [https://www.emcc.ca/files/emccadmin/Resource%20Documents/PositionPapers/articles\\_of\\_faith\\_and\\_practice.pdf](https://www.emcc.ca/files/emccadmin/Resource%20Documents/PositionPapers/articles_of_faith_and_practice.pdf). Accessed 18 Jan. 2022.



shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:9). The love of God does not eliminate His wrath.

## **Gospel**

John the Baptist and later Jesus came proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). The good news is that God is coming to establish His rule, and all can participate. We have all "gone astray" (Romans 3:10-12) but are given the opportunity to turn from our wicked ways (Mark 2:17), to be adopted into God's family (Ephesians 1:3-6) and to do works that please Him (John 15:2). God gives us eternal life (John 3:16), salvation from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:10), the hope of resurrection (Romans 6:5) and life in the world to come (Revelation 21:1-8).

## **Jesus**

Jesus is the image of God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15). He is God in the flesh, the one who "pitched his tent among us" (John 1:14), able to forgive sins (Matthew 9:6) and who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). He was raised from the dead (Matthew 28:6), ascended to heaven (Ephesians 4:10) and will return to earth to set up His kingdom and to judge the living and the dead (2 Timothy 4:1).

## **4. WHAT CAN WE DO?**

How are we to respond in light of the challenge posed by PC? Our goal is to protect fellow believers from its false teachings which can be done by recognizing and rooting out PC teachings when we encounter them in our church contexts, by equipping our fellow believers with the truth so they can be on guard against PC and indeed any other heresy, and by engaging in discussion with fellow believers who have embraced PC teachings.

Firstly, a caveat. We must remember that PC is, in a way, no different than heretical challenges faced in the past. We are not facing a problem of overwhelming magnitude with no previous experience to draw on—we do not need to panic or worry that the problem is too big.

Further, teaching is important but, in the end, each one's faith is between him and God. We can do all we can to instruct our children and our congregants in the faith and of course the Holy Spirit is always at work. But we can only do so much – faith is not the automatic result of a teaching program. Sometimes people discard the faith, either temporarily or permanently, and that is an outcome we need to be ready for. If someone we love does walk away from the faith, we can and should certainly reflect inwardly as individuals and as churches to see if there was a problem in what we did. However, we are all free moral agents in the universe, afflicted with rebellious natures so we shouldn't be shocked when some of us express that rebellion nor should we whisper behind our hands about how "so-and-so failed their kids" as though disciplining were akin to putting money in a vending machine.

## **Pray**

We may instruct others in the faith but it is the Holy Spirit who works within, convicting of "sin, righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Our efforts to instruct in the faith need to be bathed in petitions that God might awaken faith and enlighten dark minds and enable understanding and thwart the deceptions of the enemy.

## **Get Our Own Houses in Order**

We may do well to check our own understanding. Do we know

what we believe and why? What is our own stance on the authority of scripture or on godly sexuality? Some PC Christians are eager to convert conservatives to their way of thinking—an easy way to accomplish that objective is to take advantage of someone's lack of knowledge about a given topic. We may need to brush up or even correct some of our own understandings and might find it helpful to take up an apologetics resource to address our own areas of weak understanding.

## **Be intentional about discipleship**

Prioritize spiritual growth over any other type of growth or ambition—sports, hobbies, academics have their place but should not supplant spiritual learning. But keep in mind attending the Sunday service, participating in programs and volunteering is not sufficient. In the first centuries after Christ, people interested in converting to Christ underwent a period of "catechesis." It was not uncommon for people to be instructed in the faith for at least a year before being baptized and received into the local congregation. Further, you could not even be present for communion if you were not baptized. Catechesis is still practiced within the Catholic and Lutheran churches but has largely been abandoned in evangelicalism. We offer programs such as "Alpha" and one-to-one discipleship, but these are not required. One can confess Christ, be baptized and take communion in most evangelical churches without having had any instruction at all. In our zeal to remove barriers, have we made discipleship too easy?

The role of parents in spiritual formation, clearly taught in scripture, has also been downplayed, in favour of allowing the "professionals" to instruct our children. A church may need to consider how they are equipping parents to disciple their children. It might also need to examine its Sunday School and youth group lessons – do they teach fundamentals or do they focus on stories and personal character and fun? A senior citizen at an EMCC church remarked, "they told us we needed to build a gym so we could keep our youth. We built the gym and lost our youth anyway."

Not only is it necessary to instruct believers in the fundamentals of their own faith but it is necessary to equip them with tools to interact with and critique other worldviews. In other words, brush up on your and your congregation's Christian apologetics. One may be well versed in one's own tradition but that knowledge may collapse if confronted with more attractive options that have no compunctions about critiquing that faith. How many are the stories of young people faithfully attending church who abandon their faith when encountering secular society in university. What can we do? As parents? As a church? (see the Resources section for tools)

Progressive Christianity's position is that some historic doctrines are harmful and need to be deconstructed and then reconstructed. In that case and in light of our pluralistic society which offers a cornucopia of beliefs, we need to be clear on what exactly it is we Christians believe – we cannot assume that our children "just know" who Jesus is or what the plan of redemption is.

## **How Do We Disciple?**

### **Teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith:**

- What do we believe and why?
- Clearly define your terms: divine, sin, judgment, love, hell, God, Jesus, salvation.
- Do not shy away from or sugar-coat difficult topics such as

hell and suffering – PC deals with these by changing them to be more palatable.

- Show how the gospel is good – it is not just about saying no, or self-denial. It gives:
  - meaning and comfort – what is the purpose of life?
  - a solid moral framework – what is right and wrong? Good and evil?
  - an explanation for existence and design – how did we get here? How does the world work? Where are we going? What happens when we die?

#### **Provide a safe space for doubt and questions:**

- Make it clear that questions and doubts are welcome and not a sign of a lack of faith or of sin or some other shortcoming.
- Share stories of your own periods of doubt or of things you still have a hard time accepting or understanding.<sup>20</sup>
- Encourage faith – as with almost all the Psalms that express doubt, worry or fear, end on a note of faith and trust.

**Learn to recognize “signs” that point to compromised Christian doctrine** so that you can address them appropriately. That might mean discarding a particular curriculum or having a supper-table discussion about an idea a child mentions. Some signs may include:

- Jesus “plus” – any teaching that advocates Jesus plus activism or Jesus plus special knowledge (anything that claims to have “new truth” about Jesus or that the truth about Jesus has been hidden or misunderstood all along but has now been discovered).
- Jesus “minus” – any teaching that discards historic doctrine i.e. “hell,” “judgment,” “punishment,” “original sin” i.e. our sin nature etc.
- Overly positive evaluations of other religions or belief systems. Yes, we are all made in God’s image and can come to pieces of the truth but Islam or atheism or Buddhism etc. are, overall, false faiths.

#### **Be the first to introduce alternatives:**

- Talk to children and youth about denominations within Protestantism; Catholicism; Orthodoxy, etc.
- Visit these denominations to help your children understand that there are many ways to worship Christ – within the parameters of historic Christianity, there is no one true/right way to do church.
- Talk to your children about other religions and worldviews:
  - Visit temples, synagogues, secular “churches” etc. to see how other people practice their beliefs – seeing the good in other traditions encourages generosity of spirit toward others while helping children to see that people who have other beliefs are not “scary” or to be avoided; but also use these visits to discuss where other

religions deviate from truth – no matter how sincere or nice someone is or how beautiful their traditions, if they do not come to God through Christ, they do not come to God at all.

- Learn to critique worldviews – since God is ultimate reality, we are God-oriented. When we reject God, we seek something else to be our god which naturally leads us to improperly view ourselves and the world. This then leads us to holding inconsistent beliefs that are unable to adequately explain the reality we experience and which leads to destructive ways of thinking and behaving (see “Finding Truth” in the Resources section).

- Talk to your children about sexuality:
  - Teach a biblical framework for sexuality and how it is good rather than simply emphasizing its moral, spiritual or physical dangers outside a marriage context – give a sexual ethos that inspires rather than scares. For example, studies that show that children raised by their married biological parents have the best health outcomes compared with other family structures. Or how a committed exclusive relationship is the best setting for the bonding hormones that are released in women during the sex act as opposed to having those hormones released when the sex act is casual.
  - Teach a biblical framework for gender and how it is good – that God created both men and women in His image and that both reflect Him in different ways; that the sexual union of a husband and wife is a picture of God’s own unity; that our physical bodies are integral parts of us – they are not simply containers that we can do whatever we wish with.
  - Distinguish between same-sex attraction and homosexual acts; we live in a fallen world and sometimes our appetites are disordered but we are responsible for our actions. We do not want to give the impression that simply experiencing same-sex attraction means we have sinned.
  - Comment on stereotypes i.e. “guys like sports” or “girls like pink” and how each gender encompasses a range of expression (e.g. guys who are sensitive and girls who climb trees). In other words, the issue is not a problem with being in the wrong body, rather it’s with false societal stereotypes.
- Be wise about selecting Christian education options especially with regards to sexuality – do not assume that a standard statement of faith means the institution adheres to historic doctrine – for instance, “We believe the Bible is God’s Word” is not as clear as “We believe the Old and New Testaments are the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God that is authoritative over all believers in all times”; “We believe in the sanctity of marriage” is not as clear as “We believe God ordained marriage as a life-long union between a biological male and a biological female.”

20. <https://indyweek.com/news/raleigh-s-john-pavlovitz-went-fired-megachurch-pastor-rising-star-religious-left/>

This was a megachurch pastor’s experience: “But it was also, he learned, stifling. The pressure to conform, to agree with derisive comments about Democrats or the “gay agenda,” to prioritize boosting attendance over addressing genuine lapses in faith, was intense, he says. Instead of being a balm for congregants’ dark nights of the soul, church felt like an event where participants presented highly edited versions of themselves. And that old sense of in-groups and out-groups was still there, an invisible line between a certain kind of Christian and everyone else.” <https://indyweek.com/news/raleigh-s-john-pavlovitz-went-fired-megachurch-pastor-rising-star-religious-left/>

- Talk with student development staff – “What is your stance on LGBTQ individuals as a Christian university?; “Do students have to sign any sort of lifestyle agreement? What does it include?”

**Allow your children to have non-Christian friends and participate in activities outside church** so as to avoid the “Christian bubble” in which young people have no first-hand experience of interacting with peers who believe differently than them – with proper supervision of course; cultivate non-Christian friends of your own – have them over for dinner and model conversation about spiritual matters to your children. Mediate movies and/or music from the secular world by having open conversations about the beliefs being reflected in our culture, and how they differ or overlap from the message or the story arc of the Bible.

**Teach that everyone has faith, even atheists.** It is not a matter of choosing whether to have faith or not but determining what faith you will practice. When we realize everyone is in the same boat, it is easier to evaluate the options because you are not on the defensive. Other people have to explain themselves too!

### **How Do We Respond To Those With PC Leanings?**

We should not be surprised to find fellow Christians, friends and even church staff who are leaning toward or have adopted PC teachings. What can we do to engage with them?

**1. Pray** - As Paul writes to the Ephesians, pray “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give [both you and your friend] the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened”; ask the Holy Spirit to prepare you both for conversation. And ask the Holy Spirit to give you discernment about when and how to

engage with someone and to give you courage to speak when an opportunity presents itself. You might be engaging with someone who is hostile to you – pray for wisdom and grace. There will be times when a strong stance needs to be taken—pray for courage.

**2. Maintain relationship** - If you have a friend who has PC beliefs or leanings, don’t make your interactions mainly about your theological differences. Keep enjoying each others company and doing things together. We all want to be known and loved and to know that our friends like us even when we disagree about important topics.

**3. Listen** - It’s easy to think we need to rush in with “the truth” at the first sign our acquaintance has a belief we think is not accurate. But being quick to argue or criticize is a sure way to turn people off and sour relationships. Be sure you accurately understand what someone is saying by asking lots of questions and listening carefully to the answers.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Progressive Christianity is a movement from within, a heresy like any other. It may have some valid criticism about evangelical excesses, but at its core, it is a heresy that must be rejected. We can never compromise on historical doctrines such as the inspiration of scripture, the divinity and incarnation of Christ or His atoning work on the cross and we must guard against any way of being a Christian that encourages such compromise. The faith once handed down is a gift with which the body of Christians has been entrusted. It is incumbent on all of us to guard it carefully, “being watchful to this end with all perseverance” (Ephesians 6:18) for, as Paul said, “I declare to you the gospel... by which also you are saved... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” (1 Corinthians 15: 1-3)

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Amy Beange serves Rocky Mountain College in Calgary as an adjunct professor, facilitating online courses in New Testament studies and history. She holds a M.A. degree from Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba and lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario.

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

*The SALT Committee (Social Awareness Living Truth) is grateful to the author for providing us with their academic and personal exploration of this topic. We encourage all readers to prayerfully consider how to integrate this culturally relevant information into their Biblical worldview and ministry context.*