

GLORIFY

Reclaiming the Heart of Progressive Christianity



EMILY C. HEATH



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PART ONE



FINDING OUR PURPOSE

I

THE NEXT BIG THING

THROWING THE BABY JESUS OUT WITH THE BATHWATER

“So, now that we have LGBTQ equality in the mainline church, what are we going to do? What’s the next big thing?”

I get asked that question from time to time. The tide seems to have turned in many ways when it comes to the inclusion of people of all genders and sexualities in both our churches and our country. Doors to ordination are opening, marriages are being blessed, and the church is growing more comfortable with talking openly about sexuality and gender.

And so the question is already being asked by some: What shall we work on next? What big issue does the church need to face?

I have a few thoughts. First, I don’t think the church is anywhere near the end of discussions about full inclusion for LGBTQ people. Yes, we are far better off than we were ten years ago, and even further from where we were before that, but we aren’t close to being completely inclusive yet. (By the way, we’re not quite done with debates over the role of women or confronting our complicity in racism, either.)

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But, for purposes of discussion, let's just say it is time for the mainline church to start looking for the "next big thing" that will unite us in purpose and divide us in debate. What will it be?

As I said, I have some ideas. Caring for the environment is on the top of the list. Responding to growing numbers of refugees and to other humanitarian crises is too. So is interfaith understanding. And I don't think it will be too long until the church seriously begins to discuss economic inequalities. There are a lot of possibilities.

I was thinking about that recently. I was sitting with other clergy from my denomination, talking about my views on why it's important for progressive ministers to be able to talk about our faith, and about what Christ means to us. I was talking about discipleship, and why it matters for our progressive church, and about how we've lost so much of our theological heritage, and our language of faith. That's when the question came, part curious, part suspect:

"But what about social justice? Doesn't that matter to you?"

The person who asked that question didn't know me. They didn't know that for more than twenty now years I have been openly gay. They didn't know about the times when anonymous, antigay hate letters showed up in my church's mailbox during my last call, or about how I'd grown up in a place where being gay could literally get you blown up, or about how my wife, Heidi, and I had needed to file separate federal tax returns even after we were married.

They also didn't know about the times my faith had compelled me to take action. I could have told them about how a group of us had stood in the New York State Capitol building for the better part of a week as right-wing Christians rallying against equal marriage had yelled at us that we were going to hell. I've gone a few rounds in the social justice arena.

But the person who questioned me? They aren't alone. So many times when I talk about why the church needs to reclaim discipleship, starting with asking ourselves, "Who do I believe that Jesus is to me?" even my progressive

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Christian friends look at me sideways. Those of us who ask these questions in progressive faith settings often find ourselves being told that we are too dogmatic, too conservative, or too focused on what doesn't matter.

The problem is, I think it does matter. I think it matters more than we know.

I often worry that the progressive side of the mainline church has begun to define ourselves not by our affirmations, but by our repudiations. When compared with our more conservative siblings in the faith we are so quick to say, "We aren't like that." We proclaim "not all Christians" with ease. But when it comes to talking about what we *do* believe, we often find we lack the words.

I sometimes worry that we progressive Christians put the cart before the horse when it comes to social justice. It's not that I believe we are advocating for the wrong things; it's that I believe we sometimes advocate for the wrong reasons, acting first and then wedging theological meaning in later as an afterthought.

I am glad, for instance, that churches stand up against antigay measures. I wish more would. But I want us to talk about why our Christian convictions are compelling us to do so.

I give thanks for every church member who stands and protests against the death penalty, but I want us to be able to talk about what the crucified Christ taught us about the value of human life.

I respect every Christian who holds a placard in front of the White House and speaks about climate change, but I wish I heard more about how God created the world and called it good, and why that's why we can't be silent.

Even when I walk into a voting booth, I take my faith with me. When I cast my votes, I do so in accordance with what the gospel has taught me. I cannot separate the two. And I give thanks for that.

But before I got to this place, I first had to become a disciple. I had to read the gospel for myself and want to follow the Christ I read about

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there. Only then could I go about the work of living my faith in the public arena, both in the larger church and in the world.

And so when people ask me what the “next big thing” in the church will be, I tell them this: discipleship.

There are a lot of reasons why the church doesn’t wield the influence we once had in the public sphere, but I think the main one is this: we have forgotten our foundation. We have forgotten what it means to be disciples. And people can see through us.

Few people are interested in joining just another public advocacy group, and those who are can find far more effective ones. The progressive church is not the “Democratic Party at Prayer,” to borrow a phrase, and if we continue to lose our theological literacy and our ability to talk about our faith, that’s all we will end up being. Without a bedrock of belief, the whole enterprise of church-based social justice will crumble.

Add to that my biggest fear, which is that the “next big thing” for the progressive church is attempting to “save” ourselves. For some reason the majority of our denominational conversations these days seem to be about how to preserve our institutions and legacies, even if we try to disguise that fact by claiming we are trying something radical and new. The fact of the matter is, until we somehow refocus on the heart of our faith, we are doing the ecclesiastical equivalent of simply rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

But that doesn’t have to happen anymore.

It’s time for progressive Christians to claim discipleship. It’s time to get radical, not about our politics or our policies, but about our faith. It’s time to stop throwing the baby Jesus out with the bathwater, and start putting the horse before the cart. It’s time to remember what, and whom, we worship, and to develop the language of faith.

And it’s time to see our social justice work as a natural product of our discipleship, not something that competes with it for the church’s time.

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Only then, when we have gone back to the source and found what ultimately binds us together with God and with one another, can we go out and find the next, next big thing. Whenever that happens, we will be better for it. In fact, we just may find that when it comes to changing the world for the better, the Gospel of Why We Are Different from Other Christians can't hold a candle to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

CHOOSING LIFE OR DEATH

When I wrote the words you just read, they were meant to serve only as a blog post. They resonated with many, and then ended up being reprinted in an issue of the United Church of Christ's *Still Speaking* magazine. I was then asked to expand on them in workshops and sermons.

Before long it became clear that there was a deep hunger in my own denomination, as well as in many of the other denominations that make up what we once called the "mainline church." In the latter half of the twentieth century many of those mainline churches, like the UCC, Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Episcopal Church, Disciples, American Baptists, many United Methodists, and others became the base of the progressive Christian movement.

That is something of which we are, rightfully, very proud of in our denominations. We've helped to lend powerful voices of faith to a variety of movements: civil rights, peace, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, anti-death penalty work, poverty alleviation, and more. We have faithfully done our best to mediate between gospel and culture.

And yet, as denominations we are dying. I say that without panic because I believe the church is far greater than the sum of our denominations. The reality is, if the church is truly the body of Christ, then it cannot die.

But the fact remains that the former mainline church is at a crisis point. If we continue our current rate of decline, our denominations will be extinct within many of our lifetimes. In fact, the Pew Research Center found in 2014 that only 14.7 percent of American adults are a part of a

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mainline Protestant denomination, down 3.4 percent in only seven years.¹

The numbers get worse when you look generationally. Only 11 percent of millennial young adults identify as mainline Protestants, compared to 26 percent of their grandparents' generation. My own denomination, the United Church of Christ, has gone from more than two million members in 1957 (the year two denominations merged to form the current one) to less than one million today. And each of the other mainline denominations can tell a similar story.

At the same time, more conservative traditions are seeing growth, or at least declining at a much slower rate. Evangelical Christians saw only a 0.9 percent decline in the same seven-year period mentioned above. For Orthodox Christians and Mormons that rate was only 0.1 percent.

But what is most interesting is what traditions (and nontraditions) are growing. Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism all saw modest gains in the United States. And atheists and agnostics grew at a rate of 1.5 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively. But the greatest movement? That came from a group that we are just now starting to hear more about: the “nones,” who are those with no particular faith or religious tradition. They grew 3.7 percent, or more than we lost.

Mainline Christians have a hand in that. We have the worst “retention rate” when it comes to our young people; 45 percent, less than half, of our youth continue to claim our tradition into young adulthood. That number dips to 37 percent, or just over a third, when you look at millennials. More and more of our youth are graduating from high school, stepping out into the world, and becoming “nones.”

At the same time, more young people as a whole are being raised outside of organized religion completely. Parents who have been disillusioned by the church are seeing less value in raising their children in the faith. Others, driven by an increasingly difficult balance between work and family life, take Sunday as their one “day off” when they are able to stay home or spend the day with their kids.

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Add to that the scheduling issues. Fifty years ago there were no Little League games on Sunday mornings, and the stores stayed closed. But while we like to complain about Sunday soccer practice, the reality is that those practices would have never been moved to Sunday mornings had the church not already lost so many of its faithful. Sunday soccer did not kill church attendance. Sunday soccer sprang up when people stopped finding something more worthwhile in our houses of faith, and instead looked to something new.

Like I said, I share this news without panic. I deeply love my denomination, as well as the other denominations that make up the mainline traditions. I sit on the board of directors of the UCC, and I would not be who I am without my education at a United Methodist college and a Presbyterian seminary. I would be sad to see any of these denominations cease to exist.

But I would not necessarily lose any hope because of it.

As I said, denominations are not synonymous with the church. They help us to make meaning of our traditions, and to tie us together in fellowship and ministry in more formal ways, but in the end they are replaceable. By the time I retire, somewhere in late 2040s, God willing, I suspect that the denominational landscape in the United States will look radically different than it does today.

Again, this is not bad news. Compulsory Christianity is done. No longer will your neighbors come to church on Sunday morning simply because it is expected of them. Our congregations will not be filled by those whose internalized religious guilt or sense of familial obligation drives them into the pews (except maybe on Christmas Eve or Easter Sunday).

This means that the people who come through your doors and stay are there not because they have to be, but because they want to be. And that is very good news. I would rather have a congregation of one hundred people committed to walking on a journey of faith together than a packed sanctuary of five hundred people who won't think about God

again until next Sunday morning. The church of the willing will always be able to go deeper than the church of obligatory attendees.

But when the willing come to our doors (or, if they are already there, decide to stay) we have to do some deep reflection on ourselves, on who we are, and on who we will be in the world. Our timing is good. The late Phyllis Tickle argued that every five hundred years the church goes through some sort of large-scale reformation. As we approach the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 theses, we are due for the next.

ARE WE READY FOR RESURRECTION?

For the mainline tradition that has become the progressive Christian movement we have a choice: we can be left behind as a footnote while other traditions and nontraditions grow. Or we can choose resurrection.

The body of Christ knows all about resurrection. It was the Resurrection of Christ that gave birth to this whole movement. And so resurrection should be our natural inclination. But I truly believe it is a choice that progressive Christians are going to have to actively choose. It is one that will require adaptation, redefinition, and more than a little "letting go." And it is one that, above all, will require us to remember who we are, and to whom we belong.

There is a story in the book of Deuteronomy about Moses calling the people to him. They had fled oppression, walked through the Red Sea, wandered for forty years in the wilderness, and worshiped a golden idol they had built for themselves. And yet they were still alive, and they stood ready to enter the promised land.

Before they did, though, Moses asked them to enter into a covenant with God. Moses tells the crowd, "If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, . . . by walking in God's ways, and observing God's commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear,

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but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish” (Deut. 30:16–17).

He tells them, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut. 30:19).

And so, no matter what the resurrection will look like for progressive Christians, it starts with this: the renewal of our covenant with God, and the turning first to God in all things. Life and death are set before us. For our descendants, for ourselves, and for all of those on whose shoulders we rest, may we choose well.