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# Missionaries to the Dark Continents of Politics

by Richard J. Mouw

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**P**rogressive Christianity is the wave of the future. That is the basic thesis that I want to defend, and to expand upon. In doing so, however, I have no intention of defending everything that people might want to pass off as “progressive” Christian thought and action. The kind of progressive Christianity that can be thought of as conforming to God’s purposes in history must first and foremost be biblically grounded. For that reason I want to tie my comments closely to a biblical text, namely, the “new song” of Revelation 5:9,10:

Worthy art thou to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
for thou wast slain and by thy blood  
didst ransom men [and women] for God  
from every tribe and tongue and  
people and nation,  
and hast made them a kingdom  
and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on earth (RSV).

The content of this biblical hymn contains three themes especially helpful to our reflections on the proper scope of progressive Christianity.

## *Christ and Culture*

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**T**he first theme is this: the hymn that is sung in this text celebrates the cosmic authority of Jesus Christ. A truly progressive Christian will engage in creative interaction

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with our cultural situation, inspired by the hope that we can improve the conditions of human existence in our world. This requires, I suggest, that we operate with a very self-conscious grasp of the cosmic authority of the Lord whom we serve.

The immediate context of this hymn is very instructive in this regard. John has witnessed a scene in which a scroll has been presented. This scroll contains the secrets of history. If we could know the contents of this scroll we would no longer be in doubt about how things will turn out in the historical process.

The question goes forth, then: “ ‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ ” Who can teach us the meaning of the historical struggle?

A search committee has been assigned the task of finding someone who can open the scroll. But they come back without a candidate. No one in the whole cosmos, in heaven or earth or under the earth, has been found who is worthy to take the scroll and open its seals.

The regions mentioned here—heaven, the earth, and the underworld—were understood by John’s contemporaries to be the three levels of creaturely authority. The heavenly regions were the realm of angelic powers, the spiritual forces that influence human decision-making. The earthly level was the sphere inhabited by powerful human beings, the people who mold and shape our habits and values and preferences. In our day they would be people like Mr. Gorbachev and Mrs. Thatcher and Mr. de Klerk and the Sandinista cabinet, as well as the other folks who exercise very real authority over us—for example, Ann

Landers and Dan Rather and Bill Cosby and Madonna and Phil Donahue and Woody Allen. The underworld, the regions “under the earth,” is the realm of natural forces and departed spirits. This is the sphere of influence that is so important to the world of seances, witchcraft, and occult “science.”

The celestial search committee makes its report in Revelation 5. A thorough search of these regions has uncovered no one who is worthy to reveal to us the secrets of history. Angelic powers, the rulers in heavenly places, are not able to open the scroll. Nor can George Bush, David Letterman, or the editors of *Cosmopolitan*. Nor can any spirit of force in that region that is so fascinating to Shirley MacLaine and the New Age “channellers.”

So John weeps, because it appears that the secrets of history will forever remain hidden. But then a second opinion is announced. Someone has been found after all who is able to take the scroll and to open its seals. The one who can reveal the deepest mysteries of the cosmic struggle to us is Jesus, the Lamb who was slain.

Progressive Christianity must be undergirded by the conviction that we are in the service of a Lord who is the one, the only one, who has the authority to open the scroll. Furthermore, we can have the confidence that Jesus’ authority is no accident. He has access to the secrets of the cosmos because the cosmos *belongs* to him; he is the creator of all things.

Progressive Christianity, then, is inescapably creationist. It is unfortunate that the creationist label has been co-opted in recent years by Christian people who seem obsessed with biological and geological theory. Progressive Christianity needs to feature a creationism that has a strong ethical component. It is strange that people who call themselves creationists often seem to care more about what public school textbooks say about fossil records and ancient bones than they do about how those same schools treat little black and Hispanic children who are special creations of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. There is something odd about a creationism that requires us to believe that there was once a historical Eve, but seems to be completely indifferent to the

present-day oppression of Eve’s very historical daughters. Many of these daughters are even denied the right to exercise their God-given gifts fully within the Christian community!

The creationism that is embodied in a genuinely progressive Christianity will be very concerned about the well-being of the creation that has been brought into being by the hand of God. This kind of creationism will insist on the crucial importance of that noblest of creationist texts: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” (Psalm 24:1, RSV).

## *A Blood-Bought People*

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Now the second theme: this text points to the community of the Lamb as the necessary base of operations for progressive Christianity. The hymn in Revelation 5 celebrates the fact that the Lamb has shed his blood in order to bring a new kind of community into being.

The “blood of the Lamb” image is important in evangelical Christianity. It has certainly figured prominently in Adventist soteriology—and rightly so. The Bible makes it very clear that the blood sacrifice of Jesus Christ is a crucial event in the redemptive drama.

We live in a world in which the notion of a “blood-identity” is still a very captivating one. The horrors of Nazism were inextricable connected to the promise of a “pure” ethnic blood—a promise that echoes loudly today in the blasphemous rantings of the Ku Klux Klan. Our national ceremonies also make much of the importance of blood-identity. Memorial Day oratory often celebrates the blood shed by American soldiers as the “supreme sacrifice” that has purchased our security as a people.

But what the hymn of Revelation 5 teaches us is that there is only one blood sacrifice that can provide us with a proper identity: the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. By his death on the cross Jesus established a new kind of community, drawn—in the words of the celestial hymn—“from every tribe and tongue and

people and nation.” The blood of Christ has made all other claims to community and peoplehood ultimately irrelevant. Because we have been washed in the blood of the Lamb we may never again boast of a specific ethnic blood or of a particular national identity. As a blood-washed sinner, it no longer really matters that I have Dutch blood flowing in my veins, or that I am a

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“red-blooded” American male. My true identity resides in the fact that the cross has provided me with a new kind of community, in which South African mine workers and Chilean peasants and Russian factory workers and Korean housewives are now “my own kind.” Because I am now a member of that multiethnic, multiracial, multi-linguistic peoplehood that is the blood-bought church of Jesus Christ.

This new communal identity is of crucial importance for our progressive Christian efforts. To be committed to the issues that bear directly upon, or flow directly from, our identity as the people of the Lamb is simply to align oneself with what the future is all about. For Jesus “had made us a kingdom and priests to our God” and we “shall reign on earth.” As people who are getting ready for the new heaven and the new earth, we are called here and now to show forth the rule of Christ in ways that are possible for us in the midst of brokenness.

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*“The Tarrying Time”*

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**T**he third theme has to do with the mystery of God’s purposes as they are being worked out in the historical process.

It is the Lamb, and not we ourselves, who has access to the secrets that are contained in the scroll; therefore, we progressive Christians

would do well to cultivate an appropriate spirit of humility as we pursue our tasks. This is no trivial matter to raise in the Adventist community.

I have been thinking lately about a possible connection between two teachings that have been common among Adventists: the emphasis on the importance of a “young earth” and the conviction that the return of Christ is imminent. At first glance these themes might seem quite unrelated; however, I think it is a mistake not to look for a virtual connection. That there is an important link can be seen by putting the case in this way: many Adventists believe both that God created the world quickly and recently and that God will end the world quickly and soon.

The underlying theological motif here should be obvious: *when God acts, he does so quickly*. And it is important, I think, to take a critical look at this motif. It certainly is not one that is central to other theological traditions. The God of Roman Catholicism, for example, seems to be much slower than the Adventist God. In Catholic thought, the Deity seems quite fond of gradual historical development—the notion of a “development of dogma” is a case in point in this regard. Similarly, my own Reformed tradition, with its strong emphasis on the gradual unfolding of the providential plan, seems to be quite comfortable with the idea of a rather relaxed divine pace.

Progressive Christians need to think about the divine slowness, about the ways in which God is in his own mysterious but wise way *preparing* the world for Christ’s return. This corresponds to the way, in my view, that he prepared for the appearance of human beings on the created scene by working through a gradual process that allowed earlier species to flourish and then disappear before our human ancestors made their appearance.

A crucial question, then, for progressive Christians is this: How do we behave during—to revive an old Adventist phrase—“the tarrying time”?

The story is told that during the 19th century a Polish rabbinical council in Warsaw hired a young rabbi, whose sole responsibility was to look for the Messiah. He was required to check out the births of boy babies in case any of them showed messianic possibilities. He was also ex-

pected to follow up on other reports of unusual activities. After a year of this sort of activity, he went to the chief rabbi. "I want to quit," he said. "My assignment is too tedious." But the chief rabbi replied: "Look at it this way. At least it's steady work!"

That's the way it is with us too, as we watch for the Lord's appearance. Waiting for the final victory is steady work. And it could go on for a long time. But there is much that we can do while we wait. The tarrying time is a good opportunity for us to make some progress in learning about ourselves, to work at developing the virtues of patience, modesty, and kindness.

The sociologist, John Murray Cuddihy, has written extensively in recent years about the phenomenon he describes as "the ordeal of civility." He points out that people with strong religious convictions have a difficult time being civil toward those who view things differently. For example, Cuddihy is convinced that people with genuinely Christian convictions will find it difficult to cultivate civility. But he thinks it is worth the effort to work at it.

Cuddihy strongly emphasizes the fact that we are presently living in the time of God's patience. This is the theme that he looks to as the most promising resource for coping with the ordeal of civility. He sees the proper resolution of this ordeal in the adoption of a kind of "ethic for the interim" that recognizes the need for patience as we await the future glory. Properly patient Christian discipleship, Cuddihy suggests,

puts a ban on all ostentation and triumphalism for the time being, before the Parousiatic return, at which time alone triumphalism becomes appropriate and fitting.

For Christians to insist upon trying to claim our glory here and now, says Cuddihy,

is precisely vainglory—it is vulgar, empty, and in bad theological taste. "Whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matthew 23:12, KJV).

This is, I think, helpful guidance for all progressive believers who struggle with the relationship between conviction and civility. But I do have one reservation about Cuddihy's way of putting the case. I'm not sure that we conservative Protestants need to be encouraged to nurture a

humility that is merely a temporary struggle, a holding pattern that we abide as we wait for an eschatologically delayed triumphalism. My own guess is that the ultimate triumph of sanctifying grace in our lives will occur only when we have learned that a triumphalist spirit is not something to be grasped after at all. The triumph that we await is not our triumph, but the victory of the Lamb. Before him our knees will bow and our tongues will confess that he is Lord.

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Practicing a calm and humble steadiness is not merely a way of biding our time until the end time arrives. It is itself a crucial way of anticipating the final chapter of the narrative that we are living out. The present dispensation of God's patience is a pedagogical necessity for the believing community—and perhaps especially for our kind of progressive believer.

Adventist Christians are very familiar with the sentiments expressed in the poignant words of the Millerite Hiram Edson, as he described his experience on the night of the Great Disappointment:

Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before. It seemed that the loss of all earthly friends could have been no comparison. We wept till the day dawned.

This wrenching experience was, I am convinced, an important and necessary one. It provided an essential purging of the tears that flow out of a heart caught in the grip of a triumphalism that longs for the quick solution. Those tears now need to be transformed into a weeping on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, and the abused. And they need to motivate us to action in a world in which the final triumph is not yet.

As we progressive Christians participate in the public dialogue, motivated by a concern to promote righteousness, justice, and peace, we must do so with a sense that we are ourselves human beings who have been deeply wounded by our own sin and rebellion. We have no right to claim moral or political superiority. We cannot claim to have yet arrived at purity. However, we *can* point to the ways in which God's sanctifying grace has made us sensitive to the weeping of the poor and the disadvantaged, to the loneliness and rebellion of those who have not responded in obedience to God's gracious offer of salvation; we will be sensitized to the ravages that greed, superstition, false doctrine, godless ideologies, racism, sexism, nationalism, sloth, and sexual infidelity have inflicted on the human race. And we can pray that our willingness to testify to the hope—including the political and economic hope—that has come to reside in our hearts will draw others to the same cross of Jesus to which we have fled as broken sinners, crying out in desperation,

naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, come to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly,  
help me, Savior, or I die.

In Christ we have found the faith and courage to begin to explore new paths of obedience.

**T**his assignment—this call to a civil but convicted progressive Christianity—is no easy one to take up. When John Wesley observed that the whole world was his parish, he was making a very profound point. But the world in which we are called to served today certainly doesn't *feel* like a parish. Parishes are usually familiar and friendly places. That is not exactly the way in which we would choose to describe the corporations, organizations, and institutions that loom large on the horizons of our world. The arena wherein we are called to manifest a holy worldliness is more like a mission field than a parish.

And the missionary analogy is, I think, a helpful one for progressive Christians to keep in mind. It is both helpful and important to look at the

corporations and organizations and institutions of public life as mission fields. This is true not only in the sense that they are places where we must do the evangelizing that we are—I hope, strongly—inclined to engage in, but also in the sense that we must bring the concerns of the gospel of justice and righteousness and peace to bear on the patterns and structures of life in the public sector.

Again, this is not an easy task to take up. But neither was that *missionary* enterprise that our Christian forebears engaged in during the past century or so, and which we are called to continue. They looked out over great stretches of territory that were for them dark continents. They could summon up the courage to enter, often without chart or compass, into those unknown places. They did so because they knew that there were no cattle on any of a thousand hills in those territories that were not put there by the hand of the God of the Scriptures. They knew that there was no human being whom they would ever encounter in any jungle village or in any oasis in the desert or in any igloo or teepee or treetop shelter or urban slum or rescue mission soup line who was not created in the image of the God of the Bible.

Just so, their daughters and sons can enter into what are today the dark continents of politics and business and the medical and legal and financial and teaching and writing and entertainment professions. They, too, can know that there is no murky corner of any stock brokering firm, no smoke-filled room of any political party, no law school library or medical convention, no psychologist's couch or university classroom, no artist's studio or architect's workroom, no theater, concert hall, monastery, seminary, gymnasium, kitchen, restaurant, or motel room—that there is, in the memorable phrase of Abraham Kuyper, “no single square inch in the entire creation about which Jesus Christ does not cry out, ‘This is mine! This, too, belongs to me!’ ”

To hear that cry today, not as the crusading call to arms of an imperial commander, nor as the proud boast of a cosmic entrepreneur, but as a sign of love that arises out of the very depths of the divine heart—this is to hear the call to a biblically grounded progressive Christianity.