



## Q&R corner

**Q&R corner** provides responses to questions that readers may have about CCMBC and its work collaborating with provincial MB conferences in areas of spiritual health and theology, leadership development, mission, and organizational health in order to achieve the overall mission: "To cultivate a community and culture of healthy disciple-making churches and ministries, faithfully joining Jesus in his mission." If you would like to contribute a question, please send it to [questions@mbchurches.ca](mailto:questions@mbchurches.ca)

Please note that we will not be using your name in the *MB Herald Digest* in order to respect those who prefer anonymity. There may not be space to respond to every question—and sometimes we might not really have the ability or authority to respond to some questions (for example, those that relate more directly to one of our provincial MB conferences or to a local church leadership). We apologize in advance if we are unable to publish a response to your specific question.



I've been encountering more and more talk about progressive Christianity as well as deconstruction stories. What seems to be common in both cases is a low view of the Bible and its authority and trustworthiness. Can you speak to the causes behind this diminished view of the Christian scriptures and also to how we can wisely and winsomely respond to those who either express these views or are contemplating them?

D.

Thanks, D., for this very important question that certainly has and will continue to have a huge impact on our MB church family in Canada and beyond.

For the past 160 plus years of MB history, we have been employing what could be termed a traditional but still Christocentric hermeneutical method (a way of studying and understanding the Bible) that assumed the following:

- The entire Bible has a consistent theological perspective. The God of the Old Testament and the New Testament is the same one true God.
- The Bible is not simply a collection of human wisdom (cf. 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Pet 1:21) but is superintended, guided, and breathed out by the Holy Spirit in concert with human authors/editors (cf. 2 Tim 3:16).
- The Bible from Genesis 1 to Revelation 22 is God's story revealing to us God's Kingdom plans for the world. Because of the brokenness of the world, humans need reconciliation with God, others, creation, and themselves—but it all starts with reconciliation with God that is only possible through Jesus. This Kingdom plan offers humans a new identity (viz., redeemed child of God, citizen

of the Kingdom, member of the body of Christ), a new life posture and orientation (viz., a worshipper of King Jesus), a new discipleship path that recenters everything toward the Kingdom (Matt 6:33), and a new community (viz., the church) embodying God's character and mission.

- While the biblical story moves forward to Jesus and ultimately to Jesus's final return, all parts of the story work together to guide Christian disciples today.
- While the process of how we received what we call our Bible with its 66 books is complicated, the Holy Spirit used these writings to speak faithfully to the original audience and continues to use them in an ongoing way to reveal to us truth about God, our human condition, and God's good plans for salvation, healing, and restoration.

This means that our hermeneutical method assumes that the entire Bible communicates reliable truth to us about God, the Kingdom, discipleship, and God's future plans for the world. The Bible has a divine author who superintended and safeguarded the process so that it could be "the infallible Word of God and the authoritative guide for faith and practice" (MB Confession; Article 2). "Word of God" means that God can be heard clearly through its pages. The Bible's "authority" means that we believe it communicates God's word to humans more clearly than any other source and all other sources of revelation should be checked for their consistency with it (cf. 1 John 4:1). Because of our confidence in the Bible having a divine source, we believe that this story is told in a way faithful to God's character and purposes, and therefore "useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

Inside and outside our MB family, many Christians who have grown up with these understandings of Scripture, the nature of God, the meaning of the gospel, and the centrality of the church are deconstructing all of these (which means they are questioning and rejecting these convictions) and embracing a new approach that redefines everything that we thought was foundational to Christian belief. This new approach does not represent a minor disagreement about a few disputable matters, but a radical and wholesale change that, if followed, would require the rewriting of almost every article in our present MB Confession of Faith. While not everyone agrees on what this collection of new convictions should be called, it is commonly referred to by its proponents as "Progressive Christianity" (although some have called it "Christian humanism" or even "therapeutic church"). Well-known scholars like Walter Wink, Walter Brueggemann, Brad Jersak, and Peter Enns (although he prefers the expression

"adaptive Christianity"), and more popular writers like Rob Bell and Richard Rohr are vocal proponents of progressive Christianity. (I don't think they would be offended by my identifying them as such.)

While it is not a unified movement with a statement of faith on some website, here are the most commonly held convictions:

#### *Scripture:*

- For progressive Christianity, the Bible is a historical collection of the theological and ethical understandings of well-meaning but weak and fallible humans like us. Some biblical ideas are insightful and timeless, but many are misguided and need to be critiqued and even rejected (e.g., God wanting Israel to kill the Canaanites; God wanting Israel to divorce their foreign wives; God needing animal sacrifices to achieve forgiveness, God having wrath against people, etc.).
- For progressive Christianity, the Bible is a progression of ideas about God and God's purposes—and we are not limited to the Bible because just as God spoke to them and gave them wisdom in their context, God can give us new wisdom in ours. This new wisdom could be diametrically opposed to what the Bible says, but this is consistent with how God works (cf. Acts 15).
- For progressive Christianity, what is most important about the Bible is that it tells us the Jesus story—and no matter all the troubling things that we find in the rest of the Bible and even within the New Testament—we can salvage enduring and life-changing values from the Jesus story (viz., love, compassion, inclusion of the marginalized, reduction of harm) and make them the centre of our theology and ethics. What matters is not complex and puzzling ideas about God's holiness and wrath, the nature of the atonement, or the reality of final judgment, but the very practical opportunity to live out the model of Jesus' love in the world. "Right beliefs" should not be the priority but rather living out God's love to the world (cf. Matt 25:31-46).

#### *The nature and character of God:*

- For progressive Christianity, Jesus is really all you need to know about God (John 14:9; Col 1:15). Since Jesus is all about unconditional love, compassion, inclusion, and desire to reduce harm, then we can be confident that this is what God is like. Therefore when biblical writers portray God in ways that prioritize holiness, wrath, legalism, retribution, exclusion, or judgment, these must be misunderstandings of God.



### ***How to follow Jesus and make ethical decisions:***

- For progressive Christianity, the biggest barrier between people and God is nothing other than people misunderstanding God's loving character and purposes. People have an ignorance problem. They misunderstand the loving and inclusive nature of God. They don't need to be "converted" to Christianity but to be welcomed and loved by those claiming to be followers of Jesus. They need to be saved from false and harmful views of God (viz., God is judging them, they have a sin problem, etc.).
- For progressive Christianity, those who do decide to identify as disciples of Jesus should live out unconditional love, compassion, inclusion, and the reduction of harm. Every ethical challenge is examined through this lens.

### ***A new hermeneutic for reading the Bible:***

Progressive Christianity has a strong aversion to guilt, shame, stigmatization, and exclusion. Since the Bible (or rather Christians wielding the Bible) has allegedly produced much harm (viz., guilt, shame, exclusion, etc.), the argument is that we need a new way of reading the Bible that will avoid these kinds of harm.

A progressive hermeneutic assumes that many theological/ethical teachings in the Bible are simply inaccurate and wrong so we must prioritize what we know and can have confidence in. We can trust the model and message of Jesus so this is the centre of what we should be hearing in the Bible. If some other biblical text conflicts with this message of love, compassion, inclusion of the marginalized, and the reduction of harm—then it is misguided and of human origin.

Some who embrace a progressive hermeneutic appeal not simply to the New Testament Jesus and his model of living, but to the "Living Word Jesus" who can guide Christians toward ethical decisions even if they conflict with what is contained in Scripture. In this approach when we face difficult questions about abortion, divorce, LGBTQ+ inclusion, MAiD, and so on, we should not be asking "what does the Bible say?" but "what does Jesus (the Living Word) say?"

All progressive Christianity claims is that it wants to follow Jesus and love people. It is an especially tempting option for Christians in the Anabaptist tradition who have always argued for the centrality of Jesus and the importance of peace and reconciliation. Progressive Christianity embraces an unequivocal good news message about the nature of God and God's calling for humans. It is easy to see why progressive Christianity is so incredibly



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attractive for people of all ages—especially for younger adults who have grown up deeply immersed in cultural waters that fit well with the positive message that progressive Christianity proclaims.

Our biggest question about progressive Christianity is not whether it is attractive (it certainly is for Christians moving through deconstruction of their faith) or whether it has led progressive Christians to loving others sacrificially and doing good things in their neighbourhoods (it certainly has), but whether it is *true*. Is it true that our biggest human problem is not alienation from God (which spills over into alienation from others, creation, and one's self), but rather ignorance about the true nature of God? Is this the truth that will set us free? (John 8:32).

Progressive Christianity removes the bad news and the difficult elements that are part of what we have proclaimed as the gospel. There is no bad news about sin, guilt, alienation from God, or the need for a new identity in Christ. There is no message that people need not only a new understanding of God but forgiveness from that God and freedom from spiritual powers of death, sin, and evil. There is no mention of every human facing a future of either eternal life or eternal separation from God. Instead, there is good news that God basically affirms everyone's pursuit of a life of personal happiness and personal freedom and (as much as possible) a life without personal suffering. This good news plays well with our secular culture. It is not entirely clear if progressive Christianity really needs God at all.

Our MB Confession, on the other hand, describes a gospel that is more like a good news—bad news—good news kind of story. The good news is that in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, God has forgiven sins, conquered all the powers of Satan, sin, and death, created a renewed people of God—and brought God's Kingdom to earth! The bad news is that, without a person receiving



reconciliation with God through Jesus, there is no Kingdom life, no Holy Spirit presence, and no new identity in Christ (viz., child of God, Kingdom citizen, and member of the body of Christ). The good news is that Kingdom life (a.k.a. eternal life), Holy Spirit presence, a new identity in Christ, and inclusion in the people of God, are available to anyone through grace, faith, and forgiveness by means of Jesus.

However, this Kingdom life necessarily leads to walking in the path of obedience to Jesus. This discipleship journey is best lived out within the context of a worshipping church community participating in God's Kingdom mission until Jesus returns. There is profound love and compassion in this story, even though it has some "bad news." There is universal invitation but only inclusion for those who respond to that invitation to salvation and discipleship. And while for disciples of Jesus, some suffering might end, walking in suffering is part of Christian discipleship. This suffering has a purpose (cf. 2 Cor 4:16-18; Rom 5:3-4) and an ultimate end (1 Peter 5:10; Rev 21:4).

As one can tell, there are profound differences between progressive Christianity and what our MB Confession of Faith describes as our shared convictions. Some argue that we should not be concerned about progressive Christianity since our highest priority should be "unity" and modeling this unity to the outside world. We should embrace a "centered-set" approach where we don't worry about boundaries (and differences in how we understand those boundaries) but walk together since we both have the same centre (viz., Jesus). While this sounds plausible and defensible, the challenge here is that a centered-set approach is only possible if we can agree about the centre. If we both use the same word for the centre (viz., Jesus) but we differ profoundly in terms of our understandings of Jesus and Jesus' purpose and mission, then we are not really moving toward the same centre. In addition, since we don't share the same hermeneutic methodology, there is no way to adjudicate between competing truth claims about Jesus and Jesus's mission. We can't just sit together and study the Bible with the expectation that in the end we will have resolution—since our methods of studying the Bible differ profoundly.

I have tried to describe what I see as the nature of progressive Christianity and some of the ways it is on a collision course with our MB Confession of Faith. But your actual question is, how can we "wisely and winsomely respond to those who either express these views or are contemplating them?"

### *So what advice do I have?*

- I would begin with a posture of: What can we learn from all of this? In what ways have we

failed to embody the character and mission of Jesus so that progressive Christianity became so attractive? How have we failed to communicate well the nature of Scripture, the character of God as Creator, Redeemer, and King, and the amazing magnitude of God's Kingdom mission? How have we failed as church families to love people in suffering, and failed to care about God's good creation? I want to engage with each person in the midst of deconstruction and see what we can learn in order to be more faithful in our pursuit of and participation in God's Kingdom mission.

- On a positive note going forward, I do think we need to take more seriously our responsibility to preach, teach, and live out the fullness and beauty of God's Kingdom story evident all through the Bible. The Bible is "inspired," "infallible," and our authoritative source for understanding God, God's character, and God's purposes—because God is using it to tell God's story and to shape us into Christlikeness through this story. While we declare that the Bible is "a unified story that leads to Jesus" (to borrow words from the Bible Project), this does not mean that only the Gospels are inspired. We believe that the entire Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) is a faithful description of the ups and downs of God's big and beautiful Kingdom story. The loving, holy, righteous, and just Triune God is bringing his Kingdom to earth as it is in heaven—and bringing into submission everything that opposes his good purposes! Becoming a redeemed disciple of Jesus is the path to human flourishing and the healing of alienation with God, others, creation, and the self. This Kingdom story is still ongoing and will be complete only when the events described in Revelation 21-22 are a reality. I want to do everything I can to communicate that "wisely and winsomely" and I hope all MB pastors, leaders, and teachers join in with this.
- But finally, while we hope, by God's grace, to speak the truth in love, seek first God's Kingdom with integrity, confess our own failings regularly, and trust Jesus, it is only Jesus who can preserve his Bride without spot or wrinkle (Eph 5:26-27). Again, thanks for your question. I hope that something here will be encouraging and helpful.

Blessings and Shalom in Jesus!  
Ken Esau (National Faith & Life Director)