



**Progressive Christianity
Study Series**

Study Number 004

A Lifetime's Reflection on "Progressive Christianity"

Thelma Pike



Let me tell you some stories...

First story

David Pocock, one of the best International Rugby players in the world and at 23 the youngest ever captain of the Wallabies, was featured in the ABC Australian Story on the 12th of September 2022. His family had emigrated from England to Rhodesia and owned a farm in what became Zimbabwe. However, under the rule of Mugabe, farms were being taken back by the local people. When a white boy from a neighbouring farm was shot dead, David's parents and their three sons fled to Australia. David was 12 years old.

From an early age, David was obsessed with Rugby and exercise. In later years he described himself as introverted, shy and "everything was about me". He married in 2010. Later he realised that his Rugby days were over. In 2021, he and his brother spent most of the year working on a conservation project in Zimbabwe.

In Australian Story, his wife made this statement about changes in their faith:



"We have moved away from our traditional Christian faith and try to understand the political and social implications of Jesus' teachings and how our faith might be acted out in this world."

In 2022, David was elected in the ACT as an independent member of the Australian Federal Parliament. David's life has changed dramatically; he is realising that being a member of Parliament is harder than playing Rugby. Quite early in his new role he had 18 bills to read and to vote on. He is not a 'Greenie' but he has a passion for sustainability and the environment.

Second story

Bishop Tutu was born to a poor family in South Africa on the 7th of October 1931 and died in Cape Town in December 2021. He attended St Peters Theological College in Johannesburg and was ordained an Anglican Priest in 1961. In 1966, he obtained an MA from King's College, London.

He drew national and international attention to the iniquities of Apartheid and encouraged economic pressure on South Africa.

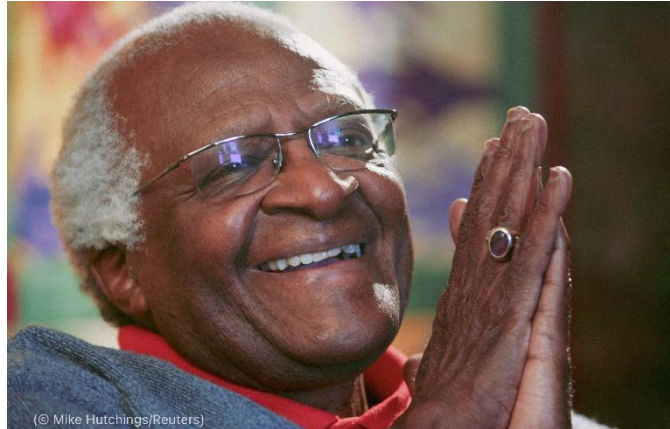
He headed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights violations during Apartheid.

He acted on his strong conviction for justice and forgiveness leading to reconciliation.

In 1984, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace.

In 1986, he became Bishop of Cape Town – titular ‘head’ of 1.6 South African Anglicans.

He retired from public life in 2010.



Third story

Nelson Mandela was born on the 18th of July 1918 into the Thembu Royal Family in South Africa. His mother was a devout Christian and sent him to the local Methodist school. He was baptised and then left by his mother in the charge of guardians. He attended a Methodist Mission School which became a great part of his life. At that time, he regarded the European colonisers not as oppressors but beneficiaries who had brought education and other benefits to South Africa. His secondary education was at a Methodist high school, a Western style institution and the largest in South Africa. After his father died, he renounced his claim to the chieftainship to become a lawyer. It seems that a sense of the need for law and a fair go was already in his reasoning.

At university he gave Bible classes in the local community as part of the Student Christian Association.

In 1944, he joined the African National Congress (ANC), a Black Liberation group. He held leadership positions, helping to revitalize the organisation and oppose Apartheid policies. In 1952, he established the first black-owned South African law practice. He travelled the country trying to garner support for non-violent means of protest against



discriminatory laws of Apartheid. In 1955, he was involved in drafting the Freedom Charter, a document calling for non-racial social democracy in South Africa.

After the Sharpeville massacre of unarmed black South Africans and the banning of the ANC, Mandela abandoned his non-violent stance and, advocating acts of sabotage, he went underground. He was eventually arrested and sentenced to life in prison on Robben Island.

During the latter part of his time in prison he began negotiating with President de Klerk who, fearing a racial war, ended Apartheid and Mandela was released in 1990, after 27 years of incarceration.

On a personal note, I have read Mandela's biography by Anthony Sampson and *Mandela – Long Walk to Freedom*. With much emotion I saw the live TV footage of him walking free to the crowds of people. I wonder how much his sense of social justice was developed through his background of Christian teaching in his childhood, teens and early adulthood? One of his quotes is well worth remembering:

“As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”

My story

At three years of age, I was sent to Sunday school at Kent Town Methodist Church. There were some fine people there who taught me the beliefs of the Church and the need to accept Jesus as my Saviour. At University I became a member of the Evangelical Union (EU) and then secretary. In the third year of my science course, my father, aged 43, died. He was a wonderful father in very hard times, one of the 30% of males unemployed during the Great Depression. Born in 1908, he was five years old, the middle son of five boys, when his father was killed by a bolting horse. In his childhood or later, no-one in his family, or in my childhood, attended church.

Church was an unknown world to him. At the age of 12, he became, with his younger brother, a ward of the state for two years. He was on a farm in the Adelaide Hills with unkind foster parents. One of the EU members said to me, “I'm sorry, Thelma, that he wasn't a Christian,” and thus began my reflection on evangelical teaching.

At home with two small children, I read books by the German Theologian, Paul Tillich, who put forward his view that God was “the Ground of our Being”. Does this mean that God is in the being of all people? Does it mean that God is “Being” itself? He believed that the Christian faith had to be interpreted through reason. God is not just a Deity ‘out there. In the end, there could be no conflict between God as Being itself and reason.

For me these statements seem to be consistent with the life and teachings of Jesus.

A summary of Tillich's background:

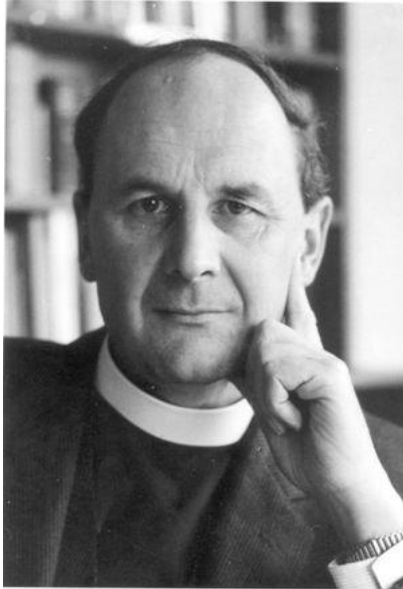
- Born in Germany to a Lutheran pastor and his wife in 1886, died in 1963.
- Ordained as a Lutheran minister in 1912 and served as a military chaplain in WWI for four years.
- Lectured in philosophy and theology in universities including Berlin, Dresden, and Frankfurt for 20 years.
- Due to his liberalism and opposition to the Nazi movement, he was dismissed in 1933 and offered a position in Union Theological Seminary in New York.
- Became an American Citizen in 1940 and in 1954 gained positions in Harvard University and the University of Chicago.



Fourth story

In 1963, Dr John Robinson, Bishop of Woolwich, published a revolutionary book, *Honest to God*. It had nine reprints. Formerly a Cambridge Don, he was often in the newspapers for his unconventional views on morals and politics. At the time of writing, he was one of Britain's most brilliant New Testament scholars. Interestingly, the third chapter in this book is titled "The Ground of Our Being".

I have written here a statement on the back of his book:



This book is a personal confession of convictions borne upon him by the need to be utterly honest about the terms in which the faith can truthfully be presented today. He speaks for those who find their integrity strained by the thinking, piety, and moral attitudes of the conventional Church. The revolution to which he believes the Church is being called is, on his own admission, a 'reluctant' one, for the Bishop is an 'insider'; nevertheless, it means questioning the entire 'religious frame' in which Christianity has hitherto been offered. "*Honest to God*", he says, "will seem to be radical, and doubtless to many, heretical. The one thing for which I am fairly sure is that, in retrospect, it will be seen to have erred in not being radical enough."

I remember that *Honest to God* was not received well by evangelical Christians.

My story continued

Prior to 2008, when the Church book club began, the Reverend Geoff Bridge had introduced a few of us to the writings of an American Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong. Out of these meetings the Church book club was started in 2008 and is still meeting monthly with about 15 members; some have left, and newcomers have arrived. We read amongst others, secular novels and biographies as well as theological books.

John Shelby Spong: 16/06/1931 – 12/09/2021

When Spong was appointed to a Church, all white, and where black people were not allowed to enter, he objected. He was the first Bishop of the American Episcopal Church to ordain women in 1977.

He described his own life as a journey from literalism and the conservative theology of his early childhood to an expansive view of Christianity.

He is the author of many books, including *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, and *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. In an interview in 2013, Spong credited Bishop John Robinson as his mentor in his journey and said that reading Robinson's writings in the 1960's led to a friendship and mentoring over many years.

A prominent theme in Spong's writings was that the popular and literal interpretations of Christian scripture were not sustainable and do not speak honestly to the situation of modern Christian communities.

In a speaking tour of Australia in 2001, Spong was banned by Peter Hollingworth, Archbishop of Brisbane, from speaking in his diocese. After *Jesus for the Non-Religious* was published in 2007, Archbishop of Sydney, Peter Jensen, banned Spong from preaching in any of the Churches in his diocese. (The Sydney Anglican Diocese is still one of the most conservative in Australia.) According to them, homosexuality and same sex marriage are sinful, etc.

However, in 2007, The Primate of Australia, Phillip Aspinall, invited Spong to preach two services at St John's Cathedral in Brisbane.



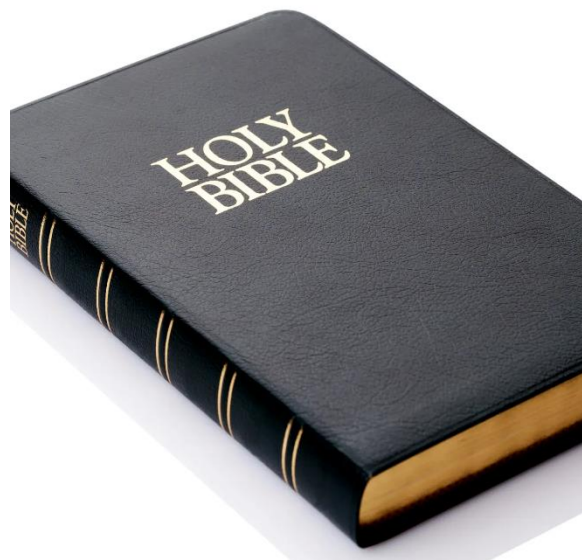
My story continued

Considering this historical background, the teaching of the Church on what we should believe, and personal experience, how would we answer some of the questions in "Some possible topics" in Michael's red boxes? (see APPENDIX). Here are some of my answers:

How do we view the Bible?

Let me first say that I believe that the Bible is a book that contains the wisdom of the ages. Some of the best prose in any language is written in the Bible; for example Psalms 133 and 104 and many more.

Many of the Laws in the early chapters of the Old Testament (OT) are concerned with the behaviour needed for a safe, healthy and secure society; for example when Jesus read from Luke 4:16-19 in the synagogue, He was reading Isaiah 61: 1-2. There are also many passages in the OT about the sharing of resources.



Some of the books, particularly from the Minor Prophets, deal with issues of justice in very clear and excellent ways: for example in Amos 5:24 and Micah 6-8.

Jesus taught by stories. His parables give amazing clarity into how the Jewish law should be lived. I love the parable of the Prodigal Son, showing so clearly God's love for all and the power of forgiveness in relationships. When the son who had stayed at home complained that he had never been celebrated, the father says, "Son, you are always with me and all that is mine is yours." (NRSV) Wonderful.

Do I accept a literal acceptance and explanation of all that is written in the Bible? No longer. In my early teens I had to sign a statement accepting that all scripture was inerrant (that is without error) and all factually true in order to be a member of EU. I do not accept that statement anymore. We need to consider the time and context in which the Bible is written. The Patriarch Abraham is thought to have lived around 2000 BC and his and subsequent stories were passed down by word of mouth until 600 and 550 BC when Jewish scribes wrote them down to put together the Hebrew Bible.

I wonder what the world was like in 550 BC compared to ours 2,572 years later.

Just like the parables in the New Testament, many of the stories in the OT are myths with special meanings. I do not believe in talking snakes and the story of Adam and Eve, but I do believe in sin. The book of Job is a wonderful story about suffering, but the characters are fictional. Did God really 'part' the Red Sea for Moses?

The story of the Israelites is one of a nation developing an understanding of Yahweh, the one true God, and so everything which happens to and for them is God's will! As they travelled to the Promised Land, God told them to conquer the Canaanites through warfare, killing the women and children. This warlike God is not one I believe in. What the Jews have done to the Palestinians in the present day is unacceptable to me, although I realise that the Jews have been a much-maligned race through history. Land or religion have been major reasons for war and many of the atrocities perpetrated on human beings throughout history.

I read the bible using the notes from the Uniting Church; I don't always agree with them. However, the discipline helps me to appreciate scripture and to THINK and learn more about my faith. In most cases I do not appreciate scripture read as a paraphrase, often read as the author's understanding in modern day language. Why not leave the interpretation to the preacher? Translations, back to the original language when written, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) give the reading in a more presentable way for today's readers.

I reject the patriarchal nature of most of the OT. The role of women was mostly subservient to men. Unfortunately, it has taken a long time and in some countries there persists physically cruel and unjust ways to treat women as subservient to men. In Australia, in 1931, a manifesto of Christian Churches proclaimed:

"The housewife whose life is spent largely in cooking meals and washing dishes, could look upon the joy of her drudgery, if it were performed 'by the grace of God'."

Today many women and men would find such a statement from a group of male Churchmen unbelievable. Jesus and St Paul changed some of these attitudes; for example; Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

This review of how our understanding of the Bible has changed leads into my next topic, which I don't think is listed in Michael's 'red boxes'.

Religion and sex

Before tackling this topic let us understand that *faith* is different to *religion* which is the way in which Christians over the centuries have developed essential beliefs and behaviours for Christian people. The Apostles Creed, a basis for the beliefs of Christian people, was written between 400 and 500 AD. I puzzle over a few of the statements.

'Jesus was born of a virgin.' At the time of Jesus' birth, some Roman leaders, such as Julius Caesar, were regarded as gods and to be a god had to be born of a virgin. Does it really matter whether Jesus, Son of Man, had to be born of a virgin?

Right up until the 17th century people believed that the beginning of life was in the sperm and that the womb of a woman was the incubator. In 1827 the mammalian ovum was discovered and not until 1928 was the human ovum observed. Genetics has opened a different belief in conception, the combination of a female egg with male sperm to produce a fertilized egg.

Human sacrifice has been practiced over the centuries by several countries to appease their gods. In Peru, archaeologists have unearthed the skeletons of 140 children, sacrificed in one killing about 500 years ago. Sometimes young women, who had to be virgins, were drugged and taken to the top of a mountain to be sacrificed.

In the OT, the tribes of Israel believed that there could be no forgiveness of sin without the shedding of the blood of animals and I believe this Jewish idea was used by St Paul in his writings about Jesus' death on the cross. At this stage in my spiritual understanding, I believe that a loving God does not sacrifice his Son on the cross. Evil, the mob hysteria and the religious leaders of the day who objected to Jesus' teachings were responsible for the death of Jesus. Politics and the sin of humankind, our sin, were responsible for His death. We are saved by His death, His forgiveness, His teachings and grace, but not as a blood sacrifice to atone for our sins, commonly known as the "Theory of the Atonement". I clearly remember a retired Moderator of the Uniting Church, when preaching at Blackwood UC, saying, "I do not believe in the atonement because a loving God does not require his/her own son as a blood sacrifice." The preacher concluded, "There I have said it."

In my opinion he was a brave man, but I wonder how many of the congregation accepted his statement?

Understanding sex

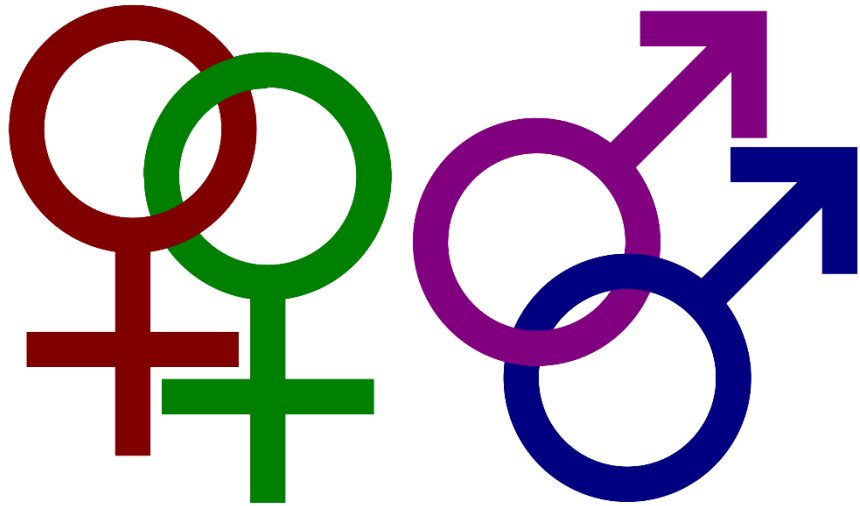
In the early sixties, I heard a women doctor on Radio Sarawak say, "The Christian Church has never been able to understand or manage sex." Catholic priests had to be celibate, sex outside marriage was a sin, sex with the use of a contraceptive was a sin, and sex for pleasure alone was wrong because the real purpose of sex was procreation.

Responding to widespread concern within the Uniting Church on issues relating to sexuality, the Sixth Assembly (1991) established the Sexuality Task Group. Its brief was to respond to these issues and to bring this report to the Assembly in 1997. I have a copy of this report, *Uniting Sexuality and Faith*; an excellent document.

I sometimes wonder how much we appreciate the many hours those in the Church spend on tackling these issues.

Of course, one of the topics causing the most contention was homosexuality. Unfortunately it still is, and has divided the Uniting Church at individual and at Synod levels.

As a representative at Synod, even in the eighties when the debate was on homosexuality, I remember a well-renowned and excellent minister saying that if he was homosexual, he would not have met his wonderful wife. I felt like responding if that was so he would not have wanted a wonderful female wife because homosexual partners love one another as much as heterosexual partners.



The conservative section of the Church, mainly against homosexuality, rely on the verse from Leviticus 20:13: “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, they have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.” It could be worthwhile to read on in this chapter where several different cases of sexuality should result in being killed or burnt to death. Also, it is sobering to read Genesis 19.

In this reading, men knock at Lot’s door and want his male guests to come out in order to have sex with them, but Lot replies, “Look I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you and do to them as you please.” It was better for the mob to rape his virgin daughters than his two male guests!

Personally, I believe that the church and the state have had blood on their hands over homosexuality. At the age of 27, the son of a Lutheran Pastor who was our friend, considered suicide as he didn’t want to upset his parents, but on telling them he was homosexual was then wrapped with love. This young man was a singer, an ice-skater and a brilliant dancer with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet. The incidence of homosexuality in the Arts is greater than in the wider population. Plays, operas, ballet, orchestras, bands, films – such as *The Bohemian Rhapsody* – all enhance society. The gay playwright and author Oscar Wilde, who wrote beautiful children’s stories – such as *The Selfish Giant* – and the plays *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Brief Encounter*, was imprisoned for being homosexual. An Australian High Court judge and devoted Anglican, virtually hid his male partner for nearly 30 years.

Homosexual people have been and still are one of the most persecuted minority groups in the world. They have been persecuted, isolated, put in jail, murdered, punished, and regarded by the Church as sinners. They have been prayed for and, in some cases, given chemical treatment in a bid to change their sexual orientation.

Belief in the Trinity

In his letter from prison, Paul writes, “Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.” (2 Timothy 1: 14)

The doctrine of the Trinity describes three aspects of the one God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. I wonder whether this doctrine helps or only confuses?

So, there is one God. Jesus is God and the Holy Spirit is the ‘Ground of our Being.’



A brief note from ROD PIKE:

God is Spirit. Any sense of a heavenly body having a gender (“father” or “mother”) is inappropriate. The God Spirit of goodness, love, justice, forgiveness and integrity are so complete in Jesus that, to me, He can be the same as God. The concept of the Holy Spirit is simply that God is with us.

In my own journey of Faith, which I am still on, I believe:

- in the need and value of prayer.
- the value of meeting with members of the Christian community.
- the value of sincere worship and praise and teaching.
- the need for organisation and guidelines in the Church and society.
- as a member of the Kingdom of God, with God’s help, to live out Jesus’ teachings with all people,
- the need for forgiveness,
- wonder at creation and the mystery of God
- to live with thankfulness for God’s grace and continual presence.

I want to say that every person has a right to what they believe. Conservative and liberal Christians, people from other faiths and those with no faith, have sacrificed income, careers and sometimes their lives to help other people in the wider world.

In conclusion

From 1952 to the present day, we have seen how, for many praying Christians, that “the popular and literal interpretations of Christian scripture are not sustainable and do not speak honestly to modern Christian Communities” (Spong).

I wonder why so many young people, or even those between 40 and 60 and who grew up in the Church, do not attend Church. Is it because they no longer accept some of the dogmas of the Church? Or is it that, having faith and a commitment to Jesus, they do not like the services?

Or do they think that if they continue with Church they would have to comply with some of the behaviours, such as no drinking, smoking, dancing, wearing makeup, watching certain films, etc? Or have they, perhaps, been hurt by the Church or a member? No-one likes hypocrisy, but none of us are perfect, and we all sin or just simply make mistakes.

I am sure that there are other people more qualified than me to address this issue. In part it may be that some churches will not change in their beliefs or their form of services.

From the history written in this article we can conclude that it was often a desire for justice for all people instead of “saving souls”, which changed the attitude of these pioneers to Scripture and human behaviour.

So why the term “Progressive Christianity”? Sometimes it seems a little superior to me. The term was founded in 1996 by a retired Episcopal priest, James Rowe Adams, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There is much about it on the internet, but I have copied this paragraph:

“Progressive Christianity, as described by its adherents, is characterized by a willingness to question tradition, acceptance of human diversity, a strong emphasis on **social justice** and care for the poor and oppressed, and environmental stewardship of the earth. Progressive Christians have a deep belief of the centrality of the instruction to “**love one another**” (John 15:17) within the teachings of **Jesus Christ**. This leads to a focus on promoting values such as compassion, justice, mercy, and tolerance, often through political activism. Though prominent, the movement is by no means the only significant movement of progressive thought among Christians.”

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Christianity

Thelma Pike

APPENDIX: Some possible topics (or choose one of your own creation!)

