

Why I don't like the label "progressive Christianity"

I've come to approach it with suspicion—for pastoral, political, and theological reasons.

by [Stephanie Perdew](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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The word progressive

I once served in a middle judicatory setting in my denomination, overseeing pastoral searches. Pastoral search teams were charged with creating a document called a profile, which explained the history, demographics, and aspirations of their congregation. Many churches described themselves as progressive. The adjective was sometimes paired with other descriptors: *open*, *inclusive*, *liberal*.

Pressing for precision, I'd ask: Open to what? Inclusive of whom? Progressing toward what? *Progressive* functioned as shorthand by which a pastoral candidate might recognize a desirable call. Asking for further definition was not an editorial exercise meant to frustrate search committees. It was born out of a desire to help congregations articulate their unique missions, gifts, and contexts as clearly as possible and to hold up a mirror of self-inventory and self-critique.

I pointed congregations to the Phoenix Affirmations, a set of statements articulated at a 2006 mainline Protestant gathering and later published by pastor and biblical scholar Eric Elnes. I suggested that this document might help them more vividly illustrate their ecclesial life and commitments.

The Phoenix Affirmations emphasize 12 aspects of Christian belief and practice, categorized under the headings of three "great loves": love of God, neighbor, and self. Among them are statements that sound familiar to many Christians: commitment to the way and teaching of Jesus, discernment of the word of God in scripture, love of God expressed in worship that is scripturally grounded and artistically vibrant. Love of neighbor expressed by standing with the least and the last, advocating for religious liberty, and resisting the commingling of Christianity with the state. Love of self, expressed in observance of weekly sabbath, daily prayer, spiritual discernment, and care for the bodies and minds that God gave us.

It was an effort to craft a public religious identity in contrast to the religious right and its underlying theological fundamentals, which were articulated by some American Protestants a century earlier. So love of God means listening for God's word in scripture but also witnessing God's glory shown forth in all creation (as Calvin would have us do) and thereby acting to care for creation. Following Jesus means doing so with lifelong discipleship while also recognizing the validity of other faith traditions and their paths to the sacred and holy. Love of neighbor means specifically affirming and celebrating the diversity of those created in God's image regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation.

This points to my second query of the congregations I served: How is progressive faith lived out *here*? How does inclusive welcome take actual hospitable shape in this place? When varying views are embraced, how expansive is that embrace?

Colleagues in judicatory ministry cautioned me that a congregation might invoke the word *progressive* to attract a pastoral candidate with promises it was ill-prepared or even unwilling to fulfill. Then pastors like me would be thrust into the breach to bind up the wounds of deep harm when a pastor of color experienced racism in a majority White congregation, when an LGBTQ pastor found that the congregation was not as open as it claimed,

or when a pastor took to the pulpit or the streets in the name of the congregation's progressive commitments only to be chastised for doing so. I came to understand that often we don't know what we mean when we say *progressive*, though we sure do like the well-meaning sound of it.

I've come to approach the label "progressive Christian" with suspicion—for these pastoral reasons but also for political and theological ones. For *progressive* is not really a descriptor of Christian theology. It is a political philosophy grown out of Western liberalism, itself grown out of a modernism that combines grand narratives and their reliance on reason, objectivity, and certainty with a liberal championing of individual liberty and free markets. Progressivism has pushed liberal politics toward using government intervention and regulation to bring about progress in realizing social equality, protecting civil liberties, and regulating industries and markets. But progressivism in the liberal tradition does not fundamentally critique its own origins and the ways it has profited from colonialism and capitalism.

The danger, of course, is equating the liberal state with the kingdom of God (or the "kin-dom," as progressive Christians might name it). If we read the Bible astutely we should be very suspicious that any state, empire, or government is going to exercise power well enough to consistently care for the least and the last. Here in the United States, we can see just how easily eroded such commitments are.

There is a particular problem in imagining that capitalism, even a compassionate capitalism, is foremost interested in social progress toward equality of opportunity. Capitalism's foremost concern is progress in building wealth, extracting resources, and innovating technologies, whatever the cost to the poor or the earth. We should take heed of this in a moment when technologies of artificial intelligence—which plenty of progressive church leaders use for help with sermons, strategic plans, social media avatars, and so on—are straining our electrical grids and fresh water supplies.

Is progress—defined as the expansion of markets and technologies in a marginally liberal democracy—really the telos we find revealed in scripture? Progressive Christianity too easily turns an eye away from the enslavement, Indigenous displacement, and economic degradation still perpetuated by liberal political philosophy embedded in capitalism. When its critics argue that progressive Christianity is not so much a theology as a politics, they are right. Embedding theological claims in the language of a particular political system makes it hard to extract those claims and thereby critique the underlying political and philosophical systems.

So the question is not just what we mean by "progressive Christianity" or whether we really mean it when we say it. The bigger question is this: Toward what progress, what goal, what telos are we walking as we follow the way of Jesus? If that progress and that way are entwined with the limits of progressive, liberal capitalism, maybe our imaginations and our theologies are not progressive enough.