

CHRISTIAN BUTTS or
WHAT IS PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY? PART I

By Rev. Dan Stern

Trinity Sunday (1st Sunday after Pentecost)
June 11, 2006

I John 4:7-8:

"My beloved friends, let us continue to love each other since love comes from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and experiences a relationship with God. The person who refuses to love doesn't know the first thing about God, because God IS love. You can't know God if you don't love."

Mark 16:15:

"Jesus said to his followers, 'Go everywhere in the world and tell the Good News to everyone.' "

1 Thessalonians 1:8 (Peterson translation):

"The news of your faith in God is OUT. . . YOU ARE the MESSAGE!"

Add to these, this concise summation of Matthew 14:22-33:

"Jesus and the disciples were out on a small boat when a great storm arose. Jesus kept perfect calm and balance in midst of it."

And Matthew 22:34-40:

"When the Pharisees heard how Jesus had bested the Sadducees, they gathered their forces for an assault. One of their religion scholars spoke for them, posing a question they hoped would show him up: 'Teacher, which command in God's law is the most important?' Jesus replied, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, mind and strength. This is the most important. But there is a 2nd to set alongside of it- Love others as well as you love yourself. Together, these commands are the pegs on which everything hangs in God's Law and the Prophets.' "

And finally, 2 Peter 3:17:

"Don't let the errors of deceptive people lead you down the wrong path and make you lose your balance."

Today being Trinity Sunday reminds me of a story my relatives used to tell about my minister grandfather, George Stern. Many of you know that I was raised in The Church of the Brethren, a faith tradition which practices baptism by triune immersion. In other words, when you join the church you get dunked three times, fully immersed under deep water, one dunk for each of the three persons of...the Holy Trinity. Well it seems that my grandfather's very first candidate for baptism happened to have been a mature woman with short legs and – how can I put this delicately? – a rather ample bottom. With this woman in water up to here (show how high) on her, my then-inexperienced minister grandfather earnestly prayed for her, and then took hold of her head with both hands and put her upper body under the water in the name of the father. But the baptismal candidate's ample center of gravity caused her to lose her footing and she found herself coming up gasping for air and searching for a place to put her feet. My grandfather thought it best to keep going, so he immersed her head a second time, in the name of the son. Again, she came up gasping, her short legs kicking around for some secure landing place. But

having gone this far, my grandfather did not feel it appropriate to stop, so he dunked her the third and last time, in the name of the Spirit. Once more, after flailing about and finally getting her footing, the first words that came from the mouth of this newly baptized member of the church was this, “Thank God there’s only a Holy Trinity! If there was a Holy Quartet, I’d be dead by now!”

Well let us also give God thanks this morning for the Holy Trinity, God in three persons, blessed Trinity.

I want to thank my UCC colleague and founder of the Crosswalk America movement, Rev. Eric Elnes of the Church of the Beatitudes UCC in Phoenix, Arizona, for inspiring both today’s prayer-walk from Mercer Island and the remainder of this sermon; I quote him freely, as well as Tony Robinson.

You may have read recently about this UCC minister, Pastor Eric, who was so surprised to hear Linda, one of his congregation’s most faithful, long-standing members say that she was getting sick and tired of being a Christian butt. At first Pastor Eric was a bit shocked to hear it. It wasn’t because of her use of course language. What surprised him was Linda’s apparent displeasure in being a Christian. Linda had been a member and regular attender at church for over 30 years. The Christian faith always ‘made sense’ to her; she drew plenty of wonder and joy from her faith. She continues to participate actively in all aspects of church life, and had even of late started to ‘come out of the closet’ about being a Christian, becoming more and more willing to share with others about her faith. Previously she had been content to consider her religious beliefs a private matter, something to be discussed with those outside her intimate circle about as much as her personal sexual history. Of late, Linda would convey to her work colleagues something that moved her during worship nearly as often as she would mention a fascinating new film she’d seen. But not because she’s felt such a need to convert anybody. When she mentions a movie, she isn’t trying to sell movie tickets either. In both cases, she’s just sharing her excitement about life. “The glory of God IS a person fully alive...” like Linda! So why in the world, would she tell her pastor that she’s getting sick and tired of being a Christian butt? Pastor Eric decided that he had to get to the bottom of it, no ifs, ands, or butts.

When Pastor Eric asked her why she said this; Linda replied without hesitating. “I’m tired of having always to qualify the word ‘Christian’ when I tell people I go to church. I may as well say I’m radioactive. They get a surprised expression on their face and start looking for an escape route. So I find myself throwing in more and more ‘buts’ all the time: “Yes, I’m a Christian, but...”

“Oh I get it”, said Eric. “I thought you meant ‘Christian b-u-t-t.’”

“Once I use the C-word,” Linda replied, “They’re going to think I’m a b-u-t-t, unless I throw in a few b-u-t’s.”

I too wish I could just say I’m a Christian, and leave it at that. I wish that word stood for something clear and good that I could unequivocally endorse.

“The label ‘Christian’ should stand for people of extravagant grace and generosity; people of unusual courage and compassion, who stand for justice and are known for being far more loving than the norm; far more forgiving. Instead, being Christian seems to have become synonymous with being a butthead.”

Why is this? Well in the last 25 years, three unfortunate things have happened: 1) groups like the John-Birch Society-funded Institute for Religion and Democracy have, with a great degree of success, strategically discredited moderate Christian groups and their leaders, shifting the public perception of Christianity in a narrow, politically-charged, far to the right ideological direction. Cult-like media personalities parrot their agenda while de-legitimizing moderate or liberal church leaders. For instance – hear what Pat Robinson has to say: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, antifamily political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.” Robinson is no more charitable toward fellow Christians who are not of his exact fold. I quote him some more – “You say you’re supposed to be nice to the Episcopalians and the Presbyterians and the Methodists, and this, that, and the other thing. Nonsense. I don’t have to be nice to the spirit of the Antichrist.” Pretty harsh stuff! Downright mean and nasty. A second thing that has happened in the last couple of decades: America’s media has come to be increasingly owned by giant corporations; stations are no longer independent, and are compelled now by few if any legal obligations to air wide-ranging views in the public interest. Big media has been all too-happy to comply with the agenda of the hijackers of Christianity, recently having put far Right fundamentalist leaders Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Jerry Falwell and James Dobson on major television news programs forty times while leader of more-moderate and mainstream Lutherans, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians have not appeared even once. Heaven forbid they would allow those awful UCC liberals to air their controversial ads about inclusivity! You do remember seeing Jimmy Swaggart don’t you – the one who wept loudly on national television a few years back, asking God and the rest of us to forgive him for cavorting with prostitutes? Swaggart made news not long ago in another internationally televised worship service in which he warned his congregation about homosexuals seeking marriage rights stating, “If one ever looks at me like that (meaning with amorous intent) I’m gonna kill him and tell God he (up and) died.” Upon hearing this, Swaggart’s congregation burst into wild applause.

If millions weren’t hearing and taking such individuals seriously, many of us might find such bluster laughable – and therefore more easily forgivable. But the fact is, such commentary has become for millions the public face of American Christianity.

A third thing that’s happened in the last 25 years: So many on the Christian moderate or left side of things have been mute – or tired – or lazy or not very articulate about their convictions and thus have shown scant interest in maintaining their own faith communities...so in the absence of let alone increasing the vitality of a, strongly articulated Christian alternative, the public has actually begun to believe that Jesus would approve of some of the awful things that get said in his name.

Is it any surprise that so many are wondering the spiritual streets of America right now?

Though nine out of ten Americans still identify themselves as Christians, only two or three of these are actually involved in a faith community. Add to these those many Christians who DO go to church but feel significantly uncomfortable with the beliefs exposed by religious leaders, and you've got a lot of spiritually homeless or misplaced people ready for some changes.

Linda's husband, Ray had long been one of the spiritually homeless ones. He grew up in a Christian family, but unlike Linda, he left church years ago, shaking the dust off his feet. Pretty much all he ever heard about Christianity from that point on was fed to him by television. So Ray became a diehard Anything BUT Christian. That is, until he met Linda. They met on a Sierra Club hike. They fell in love. They got married in church. From then on, the Christian But and the Anything But Christian had to negotiate a shared existence.

One day Linda dragged Ray begrudgingly to her UCC church. Linda had promised him it wasn't anything like the church of his childhood, certainly nothing like the church of those TV evangelists he so despised, but Ray didn't believe it. Still, to make a long story short, love won out. Ray's no longer an Anything But Christian. He too is now a Christian But. And not only that, he serves on the Board of Directors for Crosswalk America, and is trying valiantly, with Linda and Eric and increasing numbers of others to show the world the public face of progressive American Christianity.

We Progressive Christians shouldn't have to modify our language about ourselves to say what the word 'Christian' alone should convey. But for the time being, we ARE compelled to say, "I'm a Christian BUT...I DON'T hate homosexuals..."; "I'm a Christian BUT...I care about the poor!"; "I'm a Christian BUT...I'm an environmentalist; I'm a Christian BUT...I don't think people who believe differently from me will fry in hell for eternity..."

The good news is that the Still-Speaking God of our ancestors is helping us change that little b-u-t word to a-n-d. I'm a Christian and that means that I care about the poor, am an environmentalist and so on. A Holy Spirit-breathed change of emphasis is starting to get noticed in spite of media bias against it. Progressive Christians are letting their light shine more and more. It is a light that centers around the three great loves: the love of God, the love of neighbor and the love of self. These three great loves are the ones identified by Judaism and confirmed by Jesus when he said the two greatest commandments are to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself. Upon the love of God, neighbor, and self, says Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:40).

And though progressives are far from perfect at balancing these loves, what marks a true advance over recent years is that Progressives seem less and less willing to practice one or two to the exclusion of the others. This is evident in Crosswalk America's Phoenix Affirmations. Scott, Mo, myself and hopefully others of you plan to catch up with these folks today when our Annual Congregational Meeting concludes. I'll continue to stress what we mean by being progressive about our Christianity, in sermons, newcomer classes, and discussions to come. For today, I'll just mention three of the twelve affirmations: 1) "The Christian love of God includes walking fully in the Path of Jesus without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity." Note the dual emphasis on walking FULLY, unapologetically in the path of Jesus, while at the same time, not denying the legitimacy of spiritual paths that others take. Just such a

blend of both commitment and openness is evident throughout the affirmations. For example, #5: “Christian love of neighbor includes engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating ALL as creations made in God’s image, regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality or economic class.” Pretty much Broadview’s own motto. And I stress today a third affirmation too: Christian love of self includes basing our lives on the faith that, in Christ, all things are made new, and that we, and all people, are loved beyond our wildest imagination – for eternity.

Pastor Eric says that we have in America now a perfect storm gathering. It COULD ruin us as a nation if hate wins out. On the other hand, if the storm takes a different course, it may very well provide us with water for a weary land, loosening the soil for the seeds of faith and love to once again take root, grow, and bear fruit. This is the kind of storm that the Progressive Christian movement can weather. Maybe sometime soon we won’t have to BE Christian B-U-T-S anymore. That is – if we get off our b-u-t-t-s and let others know now exactly what it is we stand for. It’s time to walk our talk because we trust Jesus and Jesus is already walking. Jesus is also beckoning us out onto deeper water – beaconing us into a Realm where love of God, neighbor and self are normative, where justice will prevail, and where the homeless will find a home. May it be so.