

The Center for Progressive Christianity

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
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History, Beliefs, Practices

Identity:

The Center for Progressive Christianity (TCPC) was founded as a non-profit organization to help churches focus their attention and outreach on people who think of organized religion as repressive or irrelevant to their lives. Through its website, seminars, articles, and children's curriculum the Center provides networking opportunities and resources for churches and individuals in order to encourage an approach to Christianity that is inclusive, innovative, and informed.

Founders:

TCPC was founded in 1994 by James Adams, rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Capitol Hill, in Washington, D. C. In 2005 Fred C. Plumer, a retired United Church of Christ minister from Irvine, California, became president of the organization.

Statistics:

TCPC claims over 60,000 visitors to its website per month, a mailing list of over 6000 names and organizations, and 17 different denominations represented among its affiliate members.

History:

TCPC was founded in 1994 by James Adams, rector of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Washington, D. C. to encourage churches to focus their attention on people who had come to think of organized religion as "ineffectual, irrelevant, or repressive."¹ Eight distinct points of belief were developed to help churches and individuals identify themselves as progressive with respect to the Christian faith. According to its website, the progressive Christian movement began by "deconstructing the dominant paradigm of the faith in America, taking apart its patriarchy, literalism, and chauvinism."

Along with its website and newsletter, TCPC sponsors conferences, workshops, and online discussion forums to promote its teachings. The organization provides a children's curriculum for 6 to 10 year olds for use in Sunday School or home schooling. The curriculum uses biblical stories, folktales from around the world, and the stories of individuals such as Thomas Edison, Harriet Tubman, John Muir, St. Patrick, and St. Francis. Lesson titles include "Learning from Mistakes," "Experiencing God as Joy," "A Spiritual Teacher (the story of Jesus)," and "The Nameless One (who or what is God)."

Along with reaching out to those who find organized religion repressive or irrelevant, TCPC includes in its mission the desire to "support those who embrace the search, not certainty." The fulfillment of

¹ All quotations concerning the history and beliefs of The Center for Progressive Christianity are taken from the organization's website at www.tpc.org.

its mission includes the development of “strategies for evangelism that do not assume the absolute superiority of Christianity so that we do not contribute to the world’s tragic divisions.” It is the hope of TCPC to “build an international network of progressive Christians” and to “be a force for social and environmental justice and peace in the world.”

Texts:

There are no founding texts for TCPC. The children’s curriculum, *A Joyful Path*, is available through the TCPC website. Founder James Adams has written several books, including *From Literal to Literary: The Essential Reference Book for Biblical Metaphors* and *So You Think You’re Not Religious: A Thinking Person’s Guide to Church*.

Beliefs and Practices:

TCPC encourages people to believe that the life and teachings of Jesus provide “an approach to God,” that is, one approach among many ways to God. Jesus is not presented as the Savior and the sacrifice for the sins of the world, but as a life model and teacher. TCPC advocates do not believe that human beings live in a sinful, fallen state, but that they are able to “grow, evolve, and transform” by following the example of Jesus.

TCPC recognizes “the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us.” Because science has discovered black holes, post quantum physics, and multiple dimensions, TCPC believes that it is impossible for one religion (including Christianity) to “have the whole picture or the correct understanding of God, let alone have an exclusive path to that God.” Jesus’ words, “No one comes to the Father except through me,” (John 14:6) are said to have been “placed . . . in Jesus’ mouth” by the “author of John’s gospel.” TCPC believes that the exclusive nature of that biblical statement has been a source of power and control in Christendom, used to oppress those who do not have the same beliefs. TCPC rejects dogmatic certainty and finds “more value in questioning than in absolutes.” The Scriptures are thought to be “culturally and social bound” to the times in which they were written and thus subject to new interpretations or dismissal in light of today’s cultural issues. Absolute answers, such as those expressed in Scripture or in the doctrines of the church, are believed to offer a false confidence that prevents an awareness of God.

According to TCPC, the Christian ritual of sharing bread and wine is a representation of “an ancient vision of God’s feast for all peoples.” TCPC advocates believe that the meal is intended to be an inclusive symbol and is misused when churches create rules to exclude people from receiving it. In order to be “progressive,” a church must welcome all people “without imposing on them the necessity of changing their attitudes, their culture, their understanding of the faith, or their sexual orientation.” TCPC believes that the exclusion of certain people confuses “cultural norms with morality.” Belonging to the kingdom of God is not about right belief but right action. Because of this view that actions are more important than beliefs, TCPC is dedicated to “striving for peace and justice among all people, protecting and restoring the integrity of all God’s creation, and bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers.”

A Lutheran Response

People who are dissatisfied with the exclusive claims of Christianity “deconstruct,” that is, take apart, the historic Christian faith and rebuild it according to their own interests and desires. This reminds us of Paul’s warning to Timothy, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” (2 Timothy 4: 3–4). Because the leaders and founders of TCPC do not accept the teaching that salvation is found only through Jesus Christ, they have rebuilt faith in Christ, and Christ Himself, into something more “acceptable” to today’s culture. TCPC claims that Christianity is no longer faithful to the teachings of Jesus because it was “reconstructed” in later centuries, especially after Christianity became a legal religion in the fourth century. TCPC advocates do not believe that Jesus ever presented Himself as the Savior who came to die for the sins of the world. The TCPC website denies that God sent His Son as a sacrifice, “a cosmic saving act for all humanity.” Instead the site refers to Jesus as an “enlightened teacher who asks only to be followed.”

Jesus was certainly a great teacher but He was much more than that. He clearly proclaimed Himself to be the only Son of the Father and the promised Messiah, sent to die for the sins of the world. In Mark 10:45 Jesus states, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In Matthew 16:13–28, Jesus praises Peter for confessing Him as the Son of God. Soon after that incident, when Jesus tells His disciples that He will be killed and rise from the dead, Peter responds, “This shall never happen to you.” Jesus rebukes Peter for setting his mind on “the things of man” instead of “the things of God.” It was God’s plan that Jesus should die for the sins of the world. Jesus clearly announced that plan and followed it to the cross. After His resurrection Jesus did not tell His disciples to teach people that He was a good example to follow. He told them that He must be proclaimed as the crucified and risen Savior in Whom forgiveness could be found: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:46–47).

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis states that Jesus cannot be thought of as only a moral teacher. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, sent to die for the sins of the world (John 3:16). If that claim is not true, Lewis argues, Jesus is not a good teacher, He is a liar. This is what Lewis wrote:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: 'I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God.' That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.²

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 52.

TCPC states that “it is impossible to believe that any one religion could have the whole picture or the correct understanding of God, let alone have an exclusive path to that God.” The exclusive claims of Christianity were not invented by authors of later centuries in an attempt to change the teachings of Jesus. Jesus Himself makes the exclusive claim in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (The TCPC website denies that Jesus said this, claiming that the words were “placed” in Jesus’ mouth by the author of the fourth gospel.) In Acts 4:12, Peter announces the exclusive claim of salvation in Jesus’ name, “And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” The disciples were *eyewitnesses* to Jesus’ death and resurrection (Acts 5:29–32) and they faithfully reported what they had seen. The apostle John writes, “We have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). Many early Christians were killed because they refused to accept the Roman emperor as god or worship any other god. Christians throughout the centuries have been persecuted, imprisoned, or put to death for their exclusive confession: “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3). As Christians we do not have to be embarrassed or ashamed of the exclusive claims of our faith in Jesus Christ. John explains that the good news of Jesus was written down “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

TCPC states that the church’s meal of bread and wine is open to everyone as a representation of the “ancient vision of God’s feast for all peoples.” As Lutherans we believe that this meal, the Sacrament of Holy Communion, was instituted by Jesus Christ on the night He was betrayed. With the bread and wine we receive Jesus’ true Body and Blood, just as He promised: “This is my body which is given for you” and “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:19–20). St. Paul describes the presence of Christ’s Body and Blood in the sacrament in 1 Corinthians 10:16, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” As Lutherans we welcome all people to worship, but only those who have been instructed concerning Holy Communion are invited to partake of the Sacrament. Those who are not instructed are excluded because of the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29, “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.” Properly “discerning the body” means trusting Christ’s promise that His Body given for us and His Blood shed for the forgiveness of sins are truly present in the Sacrament. In the *Small Catechism* Martin Luther writes that the person who is “truly worthy and well prepared” to receive the Sacrament has faith in Christ’s words, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.”³

Along with its denial of Christ as Savior, TCPC also separates itself from the historic Christian faith in its denial of the authority of Scripture and its departure from the teachings of the Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. As Christians we know that Holy Scripture was written by many authors during different historical and cultural circumstances, but we also know that its words are the Word of God, inspired and without error. We read in 2 Peter 1:21, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” and in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” The Scriptures bear witness to Jesus Christ (John 5:39), and in

³ Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, in *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 327.

Christ we approach our heavenly Father in “boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him” (Ephesians 3:12).

TCPC separates belief from action, elevating “right action” above “right belief.” As Christians we know that our “right belief,” our faith in Jesus Christ, motivates and inspires “right action” in the world as we serve Christ by serving our neighbor. The Scriptures make us “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” and help us to be “equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15–16). We work for justice and peace in Christ’s name, but we also know that God’s designs for human sexuality, marriage, family relationships, the sanctity of human life, and for all of His creation are not subject to the changing patterns of human culture. As Lutherans we proclaim God’s holy Law *and* the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus, obeying our Savior’s command that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47).

For Further Reading

Francisco, Adam. *Faith on the Edge: The Quest for Spirituality*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001.

Garcia, Alberto L., and A. R. Victor Raj. *The Theology of the Cross for the 21st Century*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001.

Steinbronn, Anthony. *Worldviews: A Christian Response to Religious Pluralism*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

Links and Websites

The Center for Progressive Christianity website: www.tcpc.org

Reports by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod:

Theology and Practice of the Lord’s Supper (1983) available at http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Theol_lord_supper1.pdf

Admission to the Lord’s Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching (1999) available at <http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/admisup.pdf>

The Inspiration of Scripture available at http://www.lcms.org/graphics/assets/media/CTCR/Inspiration_%20Scripture1.pdf

See additional reports from the CTCR on social and ethical issues at <http://www.lcms.org?514> and on marriage and human sexuality at <http://www.lcms.org?512>