

# Christianity and Progress

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The Protestant Reformed Churches are fifty years behind the times!

Have you ever heard this charge? It comes in many forms. Our Churches are old-fashioned. Our Churches do not keep up with modern developments. Our people are not interested in progress and shield themselves from change. Our doctrine is outdated and our life and walk is too narrow and severe to be real in these days. Our denial of every form of evolutionism including the period theory is hopelessly out of step with modern scientific development. Our emphasis on the truth fits no longer these days of ecumenical movement and church merger. We are slowly drifting out of the ecclesiastical stream.

There are broader charges made against our Churches and those Churches who still stand in the line of the Protestant Reformation. It is said that an infallibly inspired Scripture and our historic Reformed confessions are no more adequate for the needs of today's world. Modern times demand a revamping of our traditional views. The problems of the day are so different and so peculiar to our times that they demand a different gospel - one that fits. The atomic age calls for drastic overhaul of the church's confession. Ecumenicity demands a reevaluation of historic Christianity. The gospel must be made relevant. We must "go back to Dordt" to weigh in the balances of the demands of today's world the truths which our fathers incorporated in their confessions.

If we do not, we shall be left behind. Only when we do shall we be able to speak to our age. Change is what we need. And especially young people are eager for change.

Is it true? Are our Churches destined to eat the dust that swirls about us raised by faster moving Churches that pass us by? Do we get caught in the wake of other denominations that speed along toward the future? Is our fight for the truth and defense of the "narrow" principles of a Godly walk a drag to progress?

Let it be established immediately that stagnation and contentment with "things as they are" is wrong. We must never assume that "we have attained," that there is nothing more for us to do, that progress is to be frowned upon, that change per se is to be resisted. A stagnant pool of water begins to stink. A stagnant Church is a dead Church. It is a spiritual corpse that is no more a sweet-smelling savor in the nostrils of God.

But from this it does not follow that we must adopt the opinion of others and assume that their charges are correct. People are sometimes restless. They are eager for new ecclesiastical adventures and they long to strike out in new directions to new horizons. They are disturbed by the accusations that we are drifting behind. But of change for change's sake we must beware. And the change and "progress" that characterizes today's world is to be abhorred.

First of all, that the gospel is irrelevant to our modern times is sheer nonsense. That is, as long as the Truth is preached. Usually this charge is made in order to excuse the introduction of a social gospel; a social gospel is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is the preaching of the Word of God. God wrote that Word. He wrote it indeed several millennia ago. He wrote it in times when history was different, when men lived different kinds of lives, when there was no atomic age. But this does not alter the fact that God wrote His Word for all time. He wrote His Word to be the means of gathering and strengthening and feeding His Church until Christ comes back. That He could do this is evident from the fact that God determines all of history sovereignly and in His counsel. He determined this atomic age

as well. And, because God determined all of history, God is the sovereign Lord of history. History is the execution of His will and sovereign good pleasure. And when God wrote Scripture for His Church, He knew exactly what His Church would have need of in every age, in every time, under all conditions of life until Christ comes back. As long as God's Word forms the exclusive content of preaching, the gospel will surely fit our times.

Secondly, progress means that we go on from the past. Perhaps the progress which the Church is called to make can be compared with the building of a house. In the building of a house there is progress from the foundation to the putting on of the roof and the finishing of the exterior. But if one man builds the foundation and another man erects the walls and yet another man puts on the roof, they will naturally build on each other's work. If they would not, they would be fools. If the carpenter that erected the walls would ignore the foundation and build walls elsewhere, no house would ever be built.

The same is true of the progress of the Church. Generations gone by have laid the foundation of the truth of God's Word. Our fathers of the Reformation have erected the walls. Perhaps it remains for us who live in the end of the ages to put on the roof. But we would be fools to build without a foundation than that which our fathers have laid down. The trouble is that when the clamor for change and progress reaches its loudest pitch, a quick glance will show you that most men today are not interested in building the house of the truth — they are instead busily engaged in tearing it down. The house is destroyed by their evil hands.

The truth which our fathers discovered in Scripture, confessed with their mouths at the price of their blood, and incorporated into our confessions, is a truth which they were led to confess by the Spirit of Truth. When Christ was ready to walk that last dark mile of His cross, He promised His disciples that He would send to them and to the Church of all ages the Spirit of Truth that would lead and guide them into all truth. This promise has been most wonderfully and remarkably fulfilled. A great and glorious heritage of the truth purchased with much suffering, has been entrusted to our keeping. To ignore and despise this truth and to turn our backs upon it in search of something new is to despise the promise of Christ and to detest the fruit of the Spirit in the Church.

There is a practical consideration that immediately comes to the fore. If we expect to "progress" we must know what the Church of the past has said about God's Word and about His truth. We must study carefully and understand fully the foundation and the building that has already been erected. Else we will put on a roof that doesn't fit and that destroys the beauty and symmetry of the entire structure. A Church that wants progress must be a Church that knows her past. A church that ignores her past is a Church that speaks claptrap about progress.

Thirdly, this progress in whatever form it takes, must be fundamentally progress in the truth of the Word of God. The confession of the Church must grow. The knowledge of the truth must increase. The treasure of the doctrines of Scripture must grow richer. We do not have the last word on the truth of God's written Scriptures. They are the revelation of an infinite God Who is far beyond man's finite ability to understand Him. And, while Scripture itself is not infinite, there are always new depths to plumb, new fields to explore, new insights in doctrine to be gained, new riches to add to the treasures of the Church.

When doctrine grows richer there is possibility for progress in every other field of the Christian's endeavor. His walk in life is rooted in and based upon Scripture's doctrine. His battle of faith is fought with the armor of the truth. His life's calling — indeed his world and life view — is a walk upon which shines the light of the everlasting gospel. "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light upon my path."

Is there to be progress in our Churches in our missionary calling? Indeed, there ought to be. But this progress must be the progress of the truth of Scripture without which all our efforts are playing with tinker toys.

Is there to be “progress” in our Protestant Reformed Christian Schools? There ought to be. There is much work to be done. There is need of teachers who devote their best efforts to development of Christian and Reformed education. There is need of progress in teaching the subjects of the curriculum. But at the moment these efforts are divorced from sound and careful progress in doctrine, we can just as well close the doors of our school.

We must have progress. We must have progress in the classrooms of our schools, on the mission fields where God calls us to work; in our Christian homes where the seed of the covenant is brought up in the fear of the Lord; in all our walk and calling in life. But for that we need progress in our pulpits, in our seminary, in our societies, in our family devotions — in every place and at every time where and when the attention of God’s people is turned to the Word of God.

It is interesting and important that we note at this point that historically the truth of the Word of God has always developed over against the lie. Satan has come with his attacks against the confession of the saints. Satan knows better than any of us that to destroy the Word of God in the hearts and lives of the saints is to destroy the saints themselves. But, led on by the Spirit of truth, the Church has withstood these attacks. And yet, withstanding them, the Church has at the same time, developed its confession. Out of the struggles of the Church to defend the truth has risen clearer understanding of the truth. Out of the turmoil and cries of the battle field of faith has come more strongly forged weapons to fight the battles of the future. Out of the fire of affliction, of trial, of persecution has come the pure gold of the confession of the Church of all ages.

So it is and must be today. Battles are conducive to arming us with stronger weapons. The attacks of the enemy aid us in progressing in sound doctrine. Resisting the heresies of the day results in more “progressive” truth. We must not be afraid of the battle. God uses it for our good. But then we must not lay down our weapons, adopt the tactics of the enemy, compromise with the wretched compromises of Satan. We must be strong. Then we will move forward.

We may well conclude with a note of warning.

Progress demands strength and courage. It has been said that the Church today is not strong enough to write confessions. Perhaps this is true. Touching us as well as the world is the cold, death-like hand of materialism and doctrinal indifference. But a progressive Church is a strong Church. Not only a strong ministry. This too is essential. But a strong Church. All the saints must love sound doctrine and be vitally and vibrantly alive to the Truth. It must be their confession, their strength, their joy, their hope, their comfort, yea, their life.

Then progress will lead us not only forward but upward as we march from strength to strength to that heavenly Jerusalem.

Originally Published in:  
Vol. 23 No. 2 March 1963