

Foreword

When I was a pastor—and had a pastor’s expense account—I subscribed to the flagship magazine of liberal Protestantism and the flagship magazine of conservative Protestantism. I just wanted to keep up-to-date with both sides.

Each of these magazines has an editorial in each issue, in which the magazine weighs in on the issues of the day. After subscribing for a while, I started to play a game with myself. I’d read the headline and first couple sentences of the editorial, then guess as to the magazine’s concluding position on the issue.

And you know what? I was right every time. I batted 1.000. No matter the issue, be it abortion rights, politics, immigration, cloning, health care, what have you, I could predict with perfect accuracy the position of the Christians on the left and the Christians on the right.

Of course, this was not due to my prophetic abilities. No, it is instead a testament to how predictable and, dare I say, stale American Protestantism has become. We know what the left will say, and we know what the right will say. So, what more is there to say?

A lot, it turns out. For just when the pundits are proclaiming the death of progressive Christianity, along comes Philip Clayton.

Philip’s is an intellect par excellence, and he’s got all of the letters after his name that gain him serious street cred in the liberal academy. Yet he cannot deny that his soul has been sprinkled with the spice of passionate evangelicalism. What this makes him is unpredictable (thanks be to God!).

In the following pages, you will find some items with which you wholeheartedly agree and others that will discomfit you. That’s because you can’t quite pin Philip down. He’s a theologian, a scientist, and, I daresay, an evangelist. His gospel? Why, Jesus Christ, of course.

A thinking, feeling, studied understanding of Jesus Christ emerges from Philip's studies and his conversions (yes, there have been more than one). If that attracts you, then read on. If it discombobulates you, even more reason to read this book.

Ultimately, what Philip points out herein is what drew many of the leaders of the emerging church movement out of evangelicalism a decade ago: A desire for a robust, nuanced theology. One that can handle paradox. One that can be in sophisticated conversation with the best philosophers and scientists of our day. Indeed, that's what has drawn many emerging leaders to the progressive side of Christianity.

But what Philip and his intrepid Sancho Panza, Tripp Fuller, have found is that mainline Christianity has abdicated the one thing it has going for it: *theology*. So they're calling us all back to the one thing that can give rise to progressive Christianity's resurrection: theology, debate, Christology, doctrine. If there is to be a salvation of mainline Christianity, it will be theology. Indeed, it will be populist theology. I'm going to repeat that: *The salvation of progressive Christianity will be populist theology*.

I've spent time with some of the most renowned liberal Christian theologians of our day. Many fit the stereotype of "academic liberal" all too well. They are enamored of their own projects in Queer Theory, socialist economic models, and interfaith dialogue (not that there's anything wrong with that!). And they are, for the most part, completely uninterested in promulgating their ideas over the high walls of the academy (gasp!) by posting something on Facebook.

But some are like Philip and Tripp: They are passionate about bringing to light the story of Christianity that we, as progressive theologians, believe. It's a good version of Christianity. Some of us think it's the best version of Christianity. And we should stop hiding it under a bushel.

May this book be a first salvo in that effort.

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