

Overcoming Oppressive Theology

Isaiah 61:1-4 John 8:31-38
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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If Christianity has learned anything from the Protestant Reformation back in the 15th and 16th centuries it's that **church doctrine shouldn't be engraved in granite.** Reformers, like Martin Luther and John Calvin, also realized that theology (which literally means "the study of God" or perhaps more appropriately, "human words about God") isn't etched in granite either. At one level, each of us probably know that to be true.

Think for a moment about your own understanding of God. First, picture what you thought God was like when you were a child? Your Sunday School God. Now, what do you think today about what and who God is?

Is it not true that all of us see things a bit differently than we did when we were young? Perhaps even differently than we saw things a few years ago? More likely than not, our theology has progressed since we first met Jesus.

Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time, is the title of a book I highly recommend by biblical scholar and religious professor Marcus Borg. He attempts to strip away the "words about Jesus" that the church has added over the millennia and seeks to present a truer historical Jesus that has meaning to contemporary faith. I certainly consider Borg as one of the reformers of our day.

Unfortunately, however, in the ensuing centuries since the Reformation there are those who have returned to the practice of engraving church doctrine and theology back into granite. For example, some of Calvin's followers, called Calvinists, started doing this soon after his death. To this very day, theological stone carvers seek to determine what *all* Christians *should* believe, demanding that others believe like them or face the charge of not being a 'faithful Christian'.

Fundamentalism has crept (sometimes sprinted) back into the church recently, including the Presbyterian Church, and is spreading what I consider to be nothing less than a controlling, binding, oppressive theology. What confounds me is that fundamentalists don't seem to realize that it flies in the face of Jesus' own words as recorded in **John 8:32, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Not bound and imprisoned by dogma, but free!**

I am thankful for those progressive individuals and organizations that have found the courage to unmask the dangers of fundamentalism and authoritarian systems of belief. Into this progressive category, I would certainly include the mission and ministry of this congregation.

That is a major reason why I am so excited that starting on September 13, Rally Day, we are forming a new combined Adult Church School Class, led by Rev. Don Roulet and myself, that will explore **Progressive Christianity**. This class will focus not on giving answers, but rather on allowing all participants to ask and struggle with their questions.

Some folks will be new to these new-fangled ways of approaching our Christian faith, some will have been on this path for quite some time. I truly believe that this class will be a remarkably transforming opportunity and experience for this congregation, and I would like all of you to seriously consider attending, even though I know 9:30 a.m. on Sunday morning will be a burden to some.

Many in this congregation have already become devoted readers of books and material by leading progressive biblical scholars and theologians that are trying to help lead the church into the 21st century. Among those leaders, as I frequently mention, is Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, who felt the calling long ago to right the wrongs of oppressive theology. His most popular book is entitled, ***Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism***.

There are many others engaged in this ministry. One is Keith Wright, who wrote a book in 2001 entitled, ***Religious Abuse: A Pastor Explores the Many Ways Religion Can Hurt as well as Heal***. In the Preface, he writes:

Yes, the church has done some wonderful things in society and in the lives of individuals, but the church has also been a destructive force in society and in the lives of people.

The evidence is too overwhelming to deny that religion has a dark side as well as a light side. I believe that all who are connected with the church know this deep down in their hearts.

The problem is that no one wants to confess it in public and thereby take responsibility for making changes that would *increase* the church's ability to bless and *decrease* its ability to hurt.

I stand here today as your pastor as one of those willing to confess it publically. **And I am proud to be part of a congregation that is also willing to take responsibility for making changes that will increase the church's ability to bless and decrease its ability to hurt.**

Thank goodness we are not alone in this endeavor. There is a church in San Francisco, the City of Refuge Community Church, a United Church of Christ, which has also been doing this for quite some time. Their primary ministry is to those who find themselves relegated to the margins of church and society. Their Senior Pastor, Yvette Flunder, and Associate Pastor, Valerie Brown-Troutt, have written very eloquently on this subject. They write:

The church of Jesus Christ is in the midst of change, some of it for the better, and some of it for the worse. Some of our theology binds, while some sets free.

The theology of those at the center of society often seeks to characterize people on the edge as enemies of God. This is especially true when individuals or groups unrepentantly refuse to conform to the dominant definition of normativeness.

Overcoming oppressive theology, or a theology that excludes certain people, is critical in creating a Christian community for people on the periphery.

Marginalized people respond to a community of openness and inclusiveness where other people from the edge gather. Such an atmosphere welcomes people and makes them feel safer to be who they are. **A liberating theology of acceptance must be embodied by a liberating Christian community.**

That, in a nutshell, is a guiding vision that I have for this congregation! Those two pastors go on to correctly mention, "A person, church, or society can do extreme harm in the name of God and virtue and with the 'support' of scripture. Oppressive theology is a ball and chain on the heart of the body of Christ. With it we can keep each other in bondage. It is crucial in the formation of community that those who were and are oppressed seek to overcome the theological millstones tied around their necks."

By God's grace, I have been able to untie a good many (though not all) from around my own neck. That's where today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 61 comes into play. It reminds us of the purpose for which Jesus came. Jesus, in inaugurating his own ministry, is said to have read from this very same portion of Isaiah's scroll in the synagogue one Sabbath morning. He said the spirit of the God was upon him for the following purposes:

- to bring good news to the oppressed;
- to bind up the brokenhearted;
- to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners.

These must be our purposes as well. **For far too long, fundamentalism and rigid traditionalism has not been a message of good news that sets people free. Instead, it has left in its wake countless persons who are brokenhearted and held captive and imprisoned by oppressive theology.**

I would venture to guess that many of us here in this sanctuary have witnessed and know people who have contempt for the church and for organized religion, stemming from exposure to oppressive theology, biblical literalism and unyielding tradition. But before we pat ourselves a little too hard on the back, it also needs to be stated that **if we become so certain and absolute of our own progressive theological position, engraving it in granite and taking on an 'I am right, therefore you must be wrong' attitude, then we can fall into the same trap of becoming dogmatic.** Heaven forbid. Yet, **College Hill has boldly declared itself to be a safe place, a sanctuary, where people can escape from oppressive theology.**

Unfortunately, there is not enough time this morning to have a thorough discussion of what many of us consider to be oppressive theology, nor the time to explain how and why progressive Christianity has taken a different route. This is one of the goals of that upcoming church school class. But stated in the broadest possible terms, **I believe that any theology that leads to an understanding that 'God is on our side and not yours,' thus fueling fear and judgmentalism, is oppressive.**

The truth of the matter is this: We will be truly be free until we adopt a theology that does not oppress anyone. I'm not saying that Christianity or church membership should be easy, because it's not. It's just that it shouldn't be oppressive.

Overcoming oppressive theology has great benefits! Let me close with a paragraph from Kathleen Ritter and Craig O'Neill's book, ***Righteous Religion: Unmasking the Illusions of Fundamentalism and Authoritarian Catholicism***.

Once trapped spiritual energy is released, believers feel more open to allowing their faith to unfold. The intensity of the search for the perfect faith is diminished as what previously seemed fundamental is altered. Rather than seeking just the right answers, they realize that many possible ways to express their faith exist.

With this increased flexibility and openness, individuals somehow realize that [old teachings and authoritarian demands] had to be surrendered in order to move into deeper spiritual connections. They now understand that even the pain of disillusionment was necessary to reformulate the images of faith.

Let us together stand as a beacon in the city of Tulsa by allowing the exploration and practice of Progressive Christianity that exposes oppressive theology for what it is. In the process, we hopefully will find a faith in God that will indeed set us free. **What oppressive theology is still binding you?**

Amen.