

# John 14:1-11: The Road We Make and the Road that is There

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Steven Griffin

[ 0 : 00 ] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah. It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself? The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know as I'm preaching how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

It is a privilege to step in for George. I'm Steve Griffin, by the way. Welcome to you if you are visiting or if you're joining us online, either as we are gathering together at 10 a.m. or whether you meet us downstream. Either way, welcome. It's a pleasure to have you with us. I'm stepping in for George over the next four weeks, and it is a joy to be able to do that and to open up God's Word with you together. I'll just take this as a topical verse. Verse 5, as we just heard, Thomas said to him, Lord, we do not know where you're going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. I invite you to join me in prayer as we open up God's Word. Father, we thank you that we can gather in your name to hear your Word, to sing your praises, to fellowship with one another, to encourage one another as we meet regularly, to break bread and to fellowship together. We ask that you would strengthen us this morning by your Spirit, to hear your Word, to take it and digest it inwardly, and to share it with others in a needy world. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Now, a very sad trend within the evangelical world over the last, at least the last couple of decades, has been what I like to call the journey from

Kumbaya and into the flow. It's a journey that a Christian leader who, as far as anyone can tell, starts really well. He accepts Jesus into his life, is converted, and because he's a gifted communicator, many, many, many more come to do the same through his ministry. But eventually, he ends up embracing a religion that completely undermines that early experience. He enters and publicly promotes the flow, a system of belief that here and there sounds very Christian, but has no Christian foundation at all.

I'm thinking here of former leaders like Brian McLaren and Rob Bell. If you've followed Rob Bell recently, you'll know that he's gone as far as to promote the use of psychedelic drugs as healing, sacred, and even transformative. Somewhere along the way, these and other leaders embraced what is now generally known as progressive Christianity, whose basic shape I want to unpack and respond to today and over the next three Sundays. I've called the series The City with Foundations, recalling Abraham there in Hebrews 11.10, because he was looking to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

Now, you might be asking, well, what's the point of trying to understand progressive Christianity? Why devote so much attention in a sermon to that? Well, the fact is, it's presented to us as a new and better way to be a Christian. So it's very much an internal issue for us within the church and within families. And many will find it compelling. Apart from that, it's the one version of Christianity that modern Western culture finds that it can endorse, the kind that we'd be expected to bend to if we were ever put on trial in any way for anti-social beliefs and behaviors, as it happened in the new

Soviet Union after 1917. I can't help but recall here, 1984, I've mentioned before how I did have the privilege of studying there at the time. And as it happened, I met these ballet dancers, male, of the male kind, who befriended me, who got to know me in that good, spontaneous Russian way. And they invited me to one of their rehearsals.

[ 5 : 35 ] And it happened to be taking place in the, what's called the Palace of Congresses, Dvoriyatsyazdov. It's where you have all of the main party meetings happened there in the Kremlin or back in the Soviet times. And as, because we hadn't gotten to know each other a little bit, they knew I was a Christian. And as we were in the Palace of Congresses, the heart of Soviet land, and we were talking about Christianity. And they said, you know what, Steve, that's not going to work in here. And for the first time, I felt like, okay, there's this strong sense of censorship, or at least we could talk maybe freely out walking on the street, but not in here.

So my approach will be this. As someone who was also at one stage headed in that general progressive direction, I'm not here to ridicule it. I'm not even here to try to oversimplify it, but to try to understand why some or much of it might sound very compelling. So what do progressive Christians, believe? Well, progressive Christianity is, as you'd expect, progressive. It's a work in progress.

It's focused mainly on the practice of the faith, and it shies away from producing statements of faith. That said, it does operate with certain core values. So if you want to have a sneak peek at some of the topics I'll be trying to cover, take a look this week at the Center for Progressive Christianity's website.

You'll see how it tries to present the movement as a thoughtful, humble, compassionate alternative to traditional forms of Christianity. Each of the four talks will have the same pattern. I'll describe a core value of progressive Christianity on its own terms. I'll acknowledge a partial truth that's behind this core value and point out some of the internal problems or issues that I see. I'll explain why, if we're not on our guard, we may make space for it within the church, reckoning that, well, this just isn't a hill to die on.

And then we'll turn to Scripture in the second part of the talk, looking to see how God's view of the matter satisfies our deepest needs and longings in a way that the progressive message can't.

[ 8 : 09 ] So what's today's topic? Well, you see the title, I think. The road is made as you walk it. Thank you, Claire, for the slides. I'll give you a cue at each stage, and that will be great. The road we make and the road that is there.

And you've heard the passage that I'll be considering a little bit later on. To get to the first core value of progressive Christianity, imagine that Jesus, imagine, right, let's not clip this and put it on YouTube because it would be taking it out of context. Imagine that Jesus were to say something like this to his disciples.

Don't be troubled about the things I've spoken to you, that is, about having to leave you and that one of you will betray me. Look, if you believe in God, you should also believe in me, and you should also believe in the Christ that's in the deepest part of you.

So you see, I won't really be leaving you. You won't see me, but I will be more fully in you, and actually in everything that is, more than you can even imagine. Well, with that, Jesus probably would have had the question from his disciples, so what's it going to mean to follow you in that case? To which Jesus would have to reply, well, to follow me will mean to think of life in terms of a journey, not a destination. It will mean to learn to live with questions without claiming to have right answers, and here, thank you, we're on the right slide, to have the right answers.

To follow me, you'll have to learn to live in the moment and to listen to what your heart is telling you. Well, there you have the first core value of progressive Christianity. It's summed up in the idea that we make the road by walking. Brian McLaren gave one of his books the title, that title, borrowing a line from a 1912 poem by a man named Antonio Machado that went like this, just that one line, Traveler, your footprints are the path and nothing more. Traveler, there is no path, the path. The path is made by walking. Now, when it comes to thinking about knowing God, since this is intended as a philosophy of life, the popular wisdom here is about improvising our way through each present moment. That's because the past is gone, and if we dwell on it, we're just going to, well, we're going to feel sad. Living in or for the future, we're told, is just going to make us anxious. So, let's just embrace the moment, so the wisdom goes, because only really the present is real.

[ 11 : 13 ] So, let's just look a little more closely at what this core value involves. Now, it's certainly true, isn't it, that life's challenges do often require us to improvise, to make do with what we have,

and in a sense to create the road as we walk it, in a manner of speaking. Even Abraham must have known something of this when he obeyed God, because scripture says he set out for the promised land, even though he didn't know where he was going.

It's also true that the future is in some sense, at least, open, because God's sovereignty and promise to do this or that does not make your freedom and my freedom an illusion. And the present, the moments of our day-to-day lives, really, this present moment is something we should be paying attention to. But the first core value of progressive Christianity isn't about that precisely. It's about knowing the truth only as you look within yourself. That means, at least in principle, that there's no reliable word or promise from above or outside ourselves. With that very individual approach to knowing God, you wouldn't think that progressive Christians would want to make particular claims about God and salvation. But the fact is, is that they do. Consider these statements from a progressive theologian named Lindsay Paris Lopez, who writes for Sojourners magazine. For those unfamiliar with that magazine, Sojourners describes itself as the largest network of progressive Christians in the United States, focused on the biblical call to social justice. You see the practical emphasis. It happens to be, an affiliate member of the World Evangelical Alliance, for those of you familiar with that large organization. Well, Paris Lopez does have specific claims in a piece she has written on progressive

Christianity about God and about salvation. She says this, God is love. Love has moved through the world from the beginning and is carried in every heart, uniting all creation.

Love redeems and reconciles us all. Faithfulness is trusting the voice of love within us that keeps us seeking understanding, knowing that the journey never ends. And then she concludes, if I'm asked, how do I know that love is at the heart of all things? I reply that my faith simply takes two things to be absolute. Love and the redemption and reconciliation of all things.

If I could have the next slide, the internal problems slide. Clearly, according to Paris Lopez, there is a road after all, a vision that guides the journey. And it is that there is only one road to take.

[ 14 : 23 ] And it's endless. And it has one clear road sign, universal salvation ahead. And that vision is based on the basic, on one basic theological assumption. And that is that divine love flows through everything and everyone, bringing all things into an ever deeper unity.

So salvation is not an if question, but a when question. We are taken up more and more into divine love as we learn to trust the voice of love that's inside us.

Now, I would suggest that there's just one small problem here, and that's basic consistency. That is, if I say I only have the voice inside me to guide me, where do I get the ideas that God is love?

That love is absolute. And that all will be reconciled in the end. How can I possibly know these things? They're not universal. For that matter, how do I even know that God is one?

One. The fact is, the truths that God is one and that he's love are particular to biblical revelation. These truths can only come to us from above. That is, by revelation that comes to us from outside ourselves through external means that God chooses to use. If I listen to voices from within or that are within me, I'm bound to imagine God or the gods in all sorts of ways. And the assumption that everyone will be reconciled to God in the end has been the view of some Christian thinkers and leaders who are happy to play pick and choose with the clear teachings of Scripture. Jesus himself made it very clear that there will be a final, eternal separation of the righteous from the unrighteous.

[ 16 : 22 ] Jesus. Furthermore, the assumption that divine love flows through everyone and everything is based on a misreading of Paul when he said there in Acts 17 that in him we live and move and have our being.

He was taking a quote from the pagan poets and affirming, yes, God is closer to us than we can imagine. He's everywhere accessible to us. But his whole message there in that sermon in the Acropolis makes it very clear that God is maker of heaven and earth not to be confused with anything in creation and that he has appointed a day of judgment when everything will be exposed in the light of the one he raised from the dead. Look it up in Acts 17. You'll see what that phrase that Paul borrows from the poets means and doesn't mean in the context of the whole message. So as God gives us the opportunity we have to ask our progressive friends, why this biblical teaching and not that one? Does that not leave us deciding what salvation is? Does that not, or perhaps worse, does that not leave us in the place of God? Well where does progressive Christianity lead? If we follow it to its conclusion. If revelation, in other words, if knowing

God is what happens as we look within our own hearts, well the end of that can only be death.

Agustin Laje, a public intellectual from Argentina, a sort of Latin American Jordan Peterson, if you

like, can help us here.

Very, very perceptively he says, consider how it's come to be that a child that's in its mother's womb has no intrinsic, no objective value. Whether it's to be considered a human being or not comes down to this question, is it wanted? Think of that. It's a human being if it's wanted, but if it's not wanted, well that's another matter. Behold the culture of death. It's the end of the road when the value of things is a matter of personal preference. Now before we turn to scripture, let's consider briefly how we we make room for this, how we accommodate this in one way or another within the church. It happens like this. Someone at some point in the life of the church, maybe even a leader will come along and say, you know what? As long as you love Jesus, as long as you are Christ-centered, as long as you have your quiet times, you know what? Your specific beliefs about God and about his nature, about salvation and revelation really are secondary. They're important, they're important, but they're very secondary.

They're not hills to die on. I wonder if you've ever heard anything like that. I certainly have. My brothers and sisters, this may come in evangelical dress at times, those of us who come from that evangelical background, but it comes straight out of 19th century liberal Christianity. We can thank Mr. Schleiermacher and others for giving it credibility within the Protestant tradition.

[ 19 : 41 ] And the idea is this, true religion is about a relationship, not doctrines. Please don't excerpt that either in the... This has the advantage of sounding very pious, but it's always a conversation stopper on the pretext that, no, no, we're just going to get into arguments.

And it, but it almost never acknowledges that the statement, true religion is not about doctrine, but about a relationship is itself a doctrine. And the bottom line here is that we can't get away from doctrine at some point in the life of the church. We can do it graciously, and we pray that we'll do it graciously, but we can't get away from it. So with that, please turn with me back to John 14.

What I want us to consider together is the way in which scripture offers a totally different way of thinking about God and about time and about revelation and about salvation from the one that the progressive Christianity holds out to us. So how does the chapter begin? And here we on the scripture slide. Thank you. How does Jesus begin? He says, let not your hearts be troubled.

In moments leading up to this point, Jesus had spoken of troubling things. The disciples are now looking within themselves and they're saying, maybe I'm going to betray the master. And maybe I'm worried that this whole Jesus discipleship project isn't going to turn out so well for me after all. But Jesus says, don't let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe in me too. He speaks a word of comfort. Even as David heard from God when he declared in Psalm 27, 1, the Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I what? Whom shall I fear? Comfort. We have here what we need, a word from above, a word that comes from outside ourselves, from our own resources. God has spoken and God has acted by sending his son into the world. So we can say, whom shall I fear? Because we're not having to look within ourselves, but to the living God who has come among us. This means that we can believe in Jesus in the same way that we believe in God. To believe in something is to entrust yourself to it.

And so here we're offering our whole selves, our hearts and minds and wills to God. We're not going to do this perfectly. We need to constantly depend on God's grace to give him our wills, to give him our thoughts and our hearts. But it's only that way that we can rest and find rest in the one who's our light and our salvation in David's words. We can rest in the God who rescues us, who cleanses us as we repent and we receive his pardon, and who gives us his law to guide us. What comfort? Well, the progressive gospel doesn't even begin to grasp the depth of our need for God. The sin and rebellion that's in our hearts doesn't quite manage to hit the register. Well, from the foundation of belief in Jesus, we come to the blessings that we have in him. Think mentally down to verse 4 of Psalm 27, if you know that Psalm, where David says, he already has said, the Lord is his light and his salvation in verse 1. And then he says, one thing I have desired, that thing will I seek, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to dwell in his house. As if to reassure the disciples with the blessings that God promises in that Psalm, Jesus promises them in the first place, enduring fellowship, an eternal dwelling with him. So he says in John 14 too, in my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I'm going to prepare a place for you?

[ 24 : 02 ] What's the source of comfort here? In a word, a promise regarding a future that's already there. It's already there. I don't think we need to imagine here that when we come into Jesus's presence, we're going to be issued the keys to a heavenly hotel room or to be taken in a golf cart

out to a private mansion somewhere in the outskirts of the new city. I don't think the point is that.

The point, to borrow from C.S. Lewis, is that the future is heavy and it's solid in a way that this present life isn't. It's there and the promise is one of an enduring identity for us. Jesus says, a place for you. It's all about dwelling with him forever, about knowing who we are precisely because we're already known by him. The journey home will have ended and we'll enjoy eternal rest with God. And this promise brings us to the second thing that David desires in Psalm 27 4, and that's what? To behold God's beauty. To anticipate the revelation of Jesus's glory and majesty is to have the blessing of purpose, of direction. So not only do we know who we are, we know where we're going. So Jesus says in verse 3, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you also may be. For comparison again, the progressive gospel speaks of an endless process of universal reconciliation and we really must ask whether anyone ever arrives, whether anyone ever has a homecoming. In any case, the God who's reduced to a kind of force that animates all things is hardly personal, but more like an impersonal power that just kind of overwhelms us and swallows us up.

Even Chekhov, an agnostic, quarreled with Tolstoy over that. He says, I'm not interested in your view of the afterlife where the eye is just poured out into space. But through Christ, through union with him, by his spirit, we have a personal relationship with God. We are children by adoption. As we heard in the epistle, we're part of God's family, part of his household. And in all this, there's a third blessing, and it's marvelous. It's a blessing of understanding. David's desire in Psalm 27, 4 is also to inquire in God's temple. And Jesus opens a way to understanding what his promises mean when he says to them in verse 4. You know the way to where I'm going. This statement must have come as a head-scratcher. To say the least, Jesus has them fixing their eyes on a destination, a dwelling with him in the new creation. And there's already a clue as to how they're going to get there, because he himself has promised to return to take them there. But still, the disciples are lacking in understanding.

And here, Thomas speaks up first. He asks in verse 5, Lord, we don't know where you're going. How can we know the way? And whatever Thomas might be thinking, maybe he's thinking that Jesus is going to go to some neighboring village or town in the region. Jesus names the road and the destination in his reply in verse 6. I am the way and the truth and the life. There's the road. No one comes to the Father except through me. There's the destination. In the light of progressive Christianity's first core value, what Thomas learns here is that there is a way that's laid out before us.

[ 28 : 11 ] Just because God is nearer to us than we can imagine doesn't mean that there's also a kind of distance between us. It's not a distance that you can measure in physical terms, but it's a separation all the same. It's the gulf that separates the holy and living God from a sinful humanity that's set on a course of destruction. So it's a distance that requires a way, a way to God. Now Thomas also learns that Jesus is the only way, but I'm going to hold off on that idea for right now because what concerns us here simply is that there is a road. That is, that we don't have to come up with one on our own.

So let's move on to verse 7. Jesus says, if you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on, and there's an underliner, from now on you do know him and have seen him. Here we see something of God's kindness and patience in leading us into the truth because there was much that the disciples would not really be able to understand until they had seen the, witnessed the whole drama of Jesus's saving work. But in the light of the events that are unfolding, Jesus can say from now on, you do know the Father and have seen him.

Starting in verse 8 and through the rest of the passage, there's something of a transition because in his exchange with Philip, Jesus reminds him that there was much truth that they already knew by revelation. That's why the tone is now one of mild or gentle rebuke, but it's rebuke all the same. Let's hear Philip's question again, which comes as a request. Lord, show us the Father and that'll suit us. That will be, we'll be content with that. And Jesus answers, and here let me, let me just paraphrase the rest of the passage. He says, look, Philip, how can you, how can you not know who I am after all the time we've been together? How can you ask, show us the Father when to see me means to see the Father? You have to believe that the Father is in me and that I am in the Father. You see, when I speak, it's the Father that's working. So you can believe that I'm in the Father and that the Father is in me. In other words, you can believe it because I say it, or you can believe based on the works themselves. What I think we need to see here is this, the understanding that

Jesus graciously imparts and that really is marvelous. It's grounded in what? Well, it's in grounded, we see, in a relationship with him, a fellowship problem, if you like, that that's been sorted out. It's grounded in a promise of being with him forever, a purpose and direction problem that's been sorted out.

[ 31 : 23 ] And now we see God's blessing come as food for the mind, for all who inquire in God's temple, as we learn a lesson about how God has chosen to make himself known in the world.

Let me just say a few words about how he's chosen to do that. The wonder of it is that God's works and his words are one. Think of creation happening by the word of God, by the spoken word. Or think of Jesus speaking healing into someone's life. Or look at it the other way around, as when Paul says that the cross is a message. Where does he say that? He says, the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it's the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1 18. The fact is, biblical faith keeps words and works together. We don't have works in isolation with no understanding of what they mean. And we don't have understanding apart from the mighty works of God themselves.

And so it is that Jesus, as God's chief work in the world, can declare this to Thomas, and to you and to me this morning. I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me. To take hold of this, of his word, Jesus's word and promise, is to take hold of him and to have eternal life. Thanks be to God. I'm not finished. I'm almost done. And for understanding, Jesus can say to Philip and to us, whether you consider the things I've done or the things I've taught you, either way, I've revealed that I'm in the Father and that the Father is in me.

In sending Jesus, the Father displayed his own works because Jesus did what only God can do. He forgave sins. He raised the dead. He defeated Satan. And in sending Jesus, the Father spoke his own words. He declared the Father's love for us. And we can be sure of that.

Well, let me just conclude with three questions that we can raise with progressive Christian friends or with anyone who's struggling to understand whether there's really a road that's there for us to walk on.

[ 34 : 03 ] Each question is asked in hopes that the other person might consider that what we really need is a word from above, a word that by the Spirit of God invades our hearts and takes hold of us.

And the first question is about humility, a virtue that the progressive Christian tries to value. Here's the question. If learning is an attitude of humility, I beg your pardon, if learning in an attitude of humility is what you're after, is the commitment to living with questions without presuming to have answers actually or necessarily humble. The point here is that we all operate with some sort of hope, some sort of conviction that we can then approach either in humility or without it.

To say that we're not interested in answers but only questions is itself an answer. It's an answer for the hope we have in us, namely the hope that life is not about a destination but only a journey. So if the real way to know the things of God involves faith, seeking to understand, humility and the claim to know things can be very compatible. Humility and the claim to know things can be very compatible.

The second question is all about discernment. We can ask if it's Christ you want to know and grow into, how do you tell the difference between the real Christ and the counterfeits?

[ 35 : 42 ] At heart the problem here is one of authority. We must ask at one stage or another, once we've come to believe that Jesus is alive and that he speaks, how do we know that the voice we think is his is really his?

And here we turn to scripture, God's record, his own record of his own mighty acts. And we have a standard in a way that we have no standard elsewhere.

And the third and last question is about the nature of God himself. If it's eternal life with God that you're after, is it a real comfort to you to think of God in impersonal terms?

Does that really meet our deep need to know and be known? The problem here, of course, is of our image of God. We so often imagine God as a kind of force, as when we make the mistake of even referring to the Holy Spirit with the pronoun it.

But as we confess on the basis of Holy Scripture, that when we say God, we mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. May God teach us to look to the city with foundations, whose builder is God, and who offers us eternal life in the fellowship of the Most Holy Trinity.

[ 37 : 05 ] I invite you to pray with me, and I'm going to use a collect that's actually for Ascension Day, but given the theme, it very appropriately pulls together the thoughts that I've tried to share with you from God's word this morning.

Shall we pray? Grant, we beseech the Almighty God, that like as we do believe Thy only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to have ascended into the heavens.  
So may we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.  
Amen.