

THANK GOD FOR PROGRESSIVES!  
DR. JUNE GOUDEY / NOVEMBER 22, 2009

In the beginning of Christianity there were many Christianities. Today, those who claim the mantle of orthodoxy - whether Eastern or Western - speak of the *one true* Christianity. Despite their claim to truth, contemporary orthodox believers live in a pluralistic world where Christianity competes with many established religions. Within Christianity the fault-lines of what is Christian and what is not remain fluid. Despite the best efforts of the Roman Emperor Constantine to eradicate non-believers and heretics in the third century and the horrors wrought by the various forms of Inquisition in later years, many people consider themselves Christian, even if Orthodoxy does not.

Timothy, the teacher, was keenly aware that one's daily actions spoke more than one's beliefs. So he admonished his followers to pay attention to their beliefs by practicing them daily.

Timothy writes:

Do not neglect *the gift* that is in you, which was given to you through *prophecy* with the *laying on of hands* by the *council of elders*.

Put these things into *practice*, devote yourself to them, so that all may see your *progress*.

Pay close attention to yourself and to your *teaching*.

Continue in these things, for in doing this you will *save* both yourself and your hearers.

The *gift* Timothy speaks of is faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah. The *prophecy* he speaks of has to do with future revelations concerning the return of Christ, and end time battles that will show Jesus to be the ultimate savior of humanity. The *laying on of hands* involves a blessing that signifies that the teacher has received the truth - the word tradition implies truths that were "handed over." *The council of elders* - called the presbyters - refers to the apostles who were sent to teach about Jesus as being the Christ, the anointed one.

Paul, whose many letters make up the "New Testament," was not one of the 12 disciples, but he believed he was divinely appointed by Jesus after his experience on the road to Damascus. That experience transformed him from Saul, citizen of Rome, and Jew who persecuted Christians, to Paul the Apostle. Paul in turn taught what was "handed down" to him directly from God. Why is this important? Because for Orthodox Christians, scripture and tradition are the essential foundations of one's faith - everything they need to know is in the Bible, particularly the letters of Paul, or has been handed down by church leaders.

Today scholars of Biblical Prophecy study scripture to find messages from the past that point to the future, regarding global politics, natural disasters, the future of the nation of Israel, the coming of a Messiah and a Messianic Kingdom, and the ultimate destiny of humankind. The destiny of the Middle East is not just a political matter, it has deep implications for many Christians who fear one thing: Being "left behind" when the rapture comes, when the sheep and the goats will be separated for all time and Jesus will be all in all.

All who received the laying on of hands were to teach basic church doctrine, to put their beliefs into daily practice, so that when Jesus returned many lives would be saved ... in other words, make it to heaven, not hell. One website devoted to Biblical Prophecy asks, "If you died today, where would you go?"

Our church claims a progressive mantle, not an orthodox one. What does that mean? It means we are not interested in where you are going when you die. We are more concerned with where you have been and what you have done with your beliefs. To know what to practice, you have to know what you believe. For many Christians, a belief in Jesus as “Lord and Savior” is all the proof they need to show the world they are on the right path.

Is this what you believe? Welcome! We have no interest in shaking that belief! Your faith is your core and we honor diverse beliefs. Where we differ from those who believe Jesus is their savior, and the only savior worthy of the title, is in the realm of biblical prophecy. If you regularly travel down Sinaloa Avenue towards Los Angeles Blvd, you will often see signs announcing classes in Biblical prophecy. These signs are all around Simi Valley and in other towns and cities where Bible based churches, and four square gospel churches reside. Those who attend these classes are taught to look for the signs of Jesus’ coming which foretell the end times. They are also taught to fear those who think or believe differently.

In progressive churches the word “prophecy” is used differently; the same is true for churches that are fixated on the present, not the future. When these religious leaders look to Scripture they look to the prophetic writings of prophets like Jeremiah, Amos, Isaiah, Hosea and Micah, to name only a few. In every instance, the focus of these prophetic words involves justice, the right relations that define human community.

As Micah says, what does God require of you, O human ones? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God. Micah does not say watch for signs of the end. He would not be hyping the movie “2012” as the end of the world, just because the Mayan calendar ended there. Micah stands in a long tradition of Jewish teachers who believe God cares for justice.

Listen to this sampling of Biblical references, references *neglected* by those who proclaim to know Biblical Prophecy.

Do not pervert *justice* or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous (Deut 16:19)

Follow *justice* and *justice* alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you. (Deut. 16:20)

Do not deprive the alien or the fatherless of *justice*, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. (Deut 24)

The book of Job asks: Does God pervert *justice*? Does the Almighty pervert what is right?

The psalmist declares: Righteousness and *justice* are the foundation of your throne, O God; love and faithfulness go before you. The LORD works righteousness and *justice* for all the oppressed. Evil people do not understand *justice*, but those who seek the LORD understand it fully.

Isaiah proclaims: Learn to do right! Seek *justice*, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring *justice* to the nations. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth *justice*; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes *justice* on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.

Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: The law will go out from me; my *justice* will become a light to the nations.

These prophetic words are not concerned with who will go to heaven and who will go to hell; they are concerned with how human beings live together and practice their belief in a just God. I can guarantee you that if you worry more about where you will go if you die today, you have much to learn about the Bible.

In the book of Revelations, the perversion of justice in the name of Biblical Prophecy triumphs with these words: “I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With *justice* he judges and makes war.”

Biblical Prophecy perverts peace and justice in the name of violence and war. The one who comes to judge the living and the dead is not the one who once walked humbly with his God, who practice kindness and bestowed forgiveness, who welcomed sinners and strangers alike, who taught that to love God and one’s neighbor as oneself is to be faithful to God’s realm.

I titled this sermon “Thank God for Progressives!” not because I think a progressive faith is better than an orthodox faith. I say; “Thank God for Progressives” because they try to make Micah’s call to do justice a core value and a life practice. Like every Christian, progressives don’t practice perfection, they practice their beliefs and sometimes those beliefs need to be questioned to be sure they are following the teachings of Jesus. Jesus is the one who perfects our faith. Alone, without the insights of his life, we all falter one time or another, but together, seeking a more excellent way, progressive Christians living in community can show the world a faith worthy of God’s justice.

I pray that together, you and I will come to seek and do the justice we all deserve and God demands. The road is rocky but if we keep the faith, *justice*, not Biblical Prophecy, will prevail.

I close this sermon today with a brief summary of progressive beliefs and a short video which speaks of the justice work being done by this church and many other people of faith in Ventura County. You’ll recognize several of the faces, but most of all I hope you see justice at work and progressives to be thanked. Amen.



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