

Blessings and Demands: Reflecting on Progressive Christianity

Amanda Udis-Kessler, talk for St Albans Group, Progressive Christianity Network Britain, November 24, 2022

Thanks for having me back with you today. In the US, today is Thanksgiving, a day in which many people will think about gratitude however briefly before eating turkey and watching football. Today is also the National Day of Mourning for Native Americans, a day in which many people will grieve for the harm done to America's and the world's Indigenous people by imperialist colonizers. That pairing makes it feel especially appropriate for me to ask two types of questions of this group today, one question connected to gratitude and two questions connected to obligations. Our questions of the day are, first, what does progressive Christianity offer those of us who choose it? And second, what demands does it make on us? Particularly, what does it call us to be and to do? I will start with the first question, talk for a few minutes, then invite us into a conversation for about half an hour. I'll then briefly address the second and third of these questions for about ten minutes, open up the conversation for about 25 minutes, and we will wrap up for the night.

When I use the phrase "progressive Christianity," I'm thinking about PCN Britain's eight points, in which members of PCN Britain affirm that you are people who:

1. Seek God, however understood, guided by the life and teachings of Jesus
2. Affirm that there are many ways to experience the Sacred and that we can draw on diverse sources of wisdom on our spiritual journeys.
3. Recognize that following Jesus leads us to act with compassion and to confront evil.
4. Place hospitality at the center of our communal and worshipping life and see the sharing of bread and wine as an expression of our common humanity.
5. Seek to build communities that accept all who wish to share companionship without insisting on conformity.
6. Know that the way we behave towards others is the fullest expression of our faith.
7. Gain more insights in the search for understanding than we do in certainty.
8. Work together within and beyond the Church to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world.

What does progressive Christianity offer those of us who choose it? Here's how I would answer that question.

First, progressive Christianity offers me a path of spiritual and emotional development and growth. It provides me with guidelines that help me work to become my best self, my most moral self, my most joyous and grateful self, my kindest self, my most loving self. Early Christians were called people of the Way, and it is indeed a way I find in progressive Christianity, a way to become ever more connected with the sacred spirit and ever more able to love myself and my neighbors. I'm not too good at loving my enemies yet, but I am working on it.

Second, progressive Christianity offers me a larger story to connect to, a source of comfort and hope, a narrative that is still being written in my life and in many other lives and in which the

ending has not been sealed. This is a story from which I can learn, a story to which I can contribute. It is a story of pain and amazement, sorrow and delight, struggle and redemption.

Third, progressive Christianity offers me the opportunity to be part of something larger than myself, a community of people who may or may not be exactly like-minded but who are frequently like-hearted. This community existed in the past, exists in the present, and will exist in the future. It looks different across space and time but it is lit by a common flame. Decades ago, when I lived in the Boston area of the US, I went to concerts given by a progressive Christian singer/songwriter named Bob Franke. One of his songs, “A Healing in This Night,” honors his chosen religious community; in it, Franke sings, “there are friends to hear if I should cry, to pray if I should die...there are men and women on this path, to laugh if I should laugh, to find me if I stray.” As someone who came to progressive Christianity fairly recently, I am deeply thankful for the people with whom I listen, pray, laugh, and seek.

Fourth, progressive Christianity invites me to play a role in healing a broken and beautiful world and striving to make my society more just, kinder, and humbler. This invitation is also a demand, but I will get to that part of it later. For now, it’s worth understanding it as an invitation, a call, the idea at the very heart of Jesus’s life and ministry and for which he was willing to die. Progressive Christianity, in inviting me to be part of the solution, signals to me that I have something of value to offer to people and societies who ought to get to flourish and who, too often, are made to suffer. It is a sobering invitation and one that I wish I could take up more consistently and with more strength and power – but that’s part of the value of the path of spiritual and emotional development with which I began to answer this question.

So – a way of growth, a story, a community, and an invitation to co-create Love’s Domain on earth. Progressive Christianity offers me a lot, for which I am profoundly grateful.

Now, it’s your turn. How would you answer the question, what does progressive Christianity offer those of us who choose it? What does it offer you? Why do you remain connected with it? How does it bless you?

Now to the second part of the discussion. What demands does progressive Christianity make on us? Particularly, what does it call us to be and to do? Here’s how I would answer those questions.

First, progressive Christianity calls me to grow spiritually and emotionally, becoming ever more loving, every more compassionate, ever more generous, ever more hospitable. This is hard work and I falter in it often, but the demand, the call to follow Jesus by becoming more like him, never falters. It is always there waiting for me to struggle towards the best self I can be now and the best self that I can become over time. I’m completely free to determine the specific actions I take to aid in my processes of growth and healing, and I personally find wisdom to help me in this work within and beyond progressive Christianity, including in other religious traditions and in therapeutic contexts. Wherever I find the wisdom, it comes down to the call to transform myself so that I can be part of the movement to transform the world – a movement that includes but goes well beyond progressive Christians.

Second, progressive Christianity demands that I engage with the complexities of the larger story with which I have chosen to connect myself. This means acknowledging what is ugliest about historic and current Christianity as well as what is most beautiful, the harm it has caused and continues to cause as well as the good it does. For me as a Jew by heritage, this means wrestling with Christian anti-Semitism. And as a woman and queer person, this means wrestling with Christian sexism and homophobia. As a white person, this means wrestling with Christian racism and as someone whose family immigrated to the US some generations back, it means wrestling with Christian colonialism. As an intellectually minded person trained as a sociologist, this means wrestling with Christianity's past and present anti-intellectual temptations.

Acknowledging the harsher and more harmful sides of Christianity doesn't force me to abandon it, though of course plenty of people have done so in order to maintain their integrity, and I don't blame them a bit. But for me and I suspect for many who choose to join or stay, we must have the tenacity and resilience to acknowledge the harms of Christianity and to work against them in the present specifically in memory of Jesus.

Third, progressive Christianity demands that I be part of this larger religious community in ways that have integrity for me, that support me in treating others in the community with respect, and that ensure that I treat people outside of Christianity with the exact same level of respect and value I offer to those within the community. Being part of something larger than oneself always involves these three types of obligations. Jesus would, I think, have been very surprised to discover that his followers founded a new religion and he would, I'm quite sure, have been horrified to see how the followers of his followers treated both people outside the tradition and dissidents within it. I must do better than that, simply because loving our neighbors within and outside the church means working for their well-being rather than judging them.

Fourth, progressive Christianity demands that I play a role in healing this broken and beautiful world and striving to make my society more just, kinder, and humbler. I framed this above as an invitation, but of course, it's really both an invitation and a demand. Progressive Christianity is not just about our beliefs or our words, it's about our deeds, as the letter of James reminds us. Co-creating the Kin-dom of God takes concrete action, sweat, and sacrifice in our lives on a regular basis. Fortunately, there an abundant range of ways to do this work, from where I spend or donate my money to how I spend my time, how I share my expertise, and where I show up in protest.

So – the work of growth, honest engagement with a complicated and often tragic story, the work of community-building with integrity and without exclusion, and a demand to co-create Love's Domain on earth. Progressive Christianity asks a lot of me, for which on my best days I am profoundly grateful.

Now it's your turn. How would you answer the question, what demands does progressive Christianity make on you? Particularly, what does it call you to be and to do?