

# How To Know Your Church Is Changing

**Introduction.** There have been well-meaning people over the years who visit their local evangelical, non-denominational church and love it. However, some have noticed that in time it began to go “off the rails” from what they expected. They had stumbled onto a “Progressive Christian Community.”

When we hear people talk about progressivism, it is usually in the realm of politics; yet it also appears in religion. Webster defines progressive as “making use of or interested in new ideas, findings, or opportunities.” The root word is progress and this necessarily suggests change. In fact, a preacher at a community church, in a lesson on “Progressive Christianity,” said, “To not move forward is to resist God.”

“Progressive Christianity” is difficult to pin down because of the diversity of beliefs that fall under that designation. However, there are signs — certain phrases and ideas — that seem to be consistent in progressive circles. Here are five danger signs to watch for in this congregation.

## ***I. There Is A Lowered View Of The Bible***

- A. One of the main differences between “Progressive Christianity” and the New Testament church is its view of the Bible. Historically, Christians have viewed the Bible as the word of God and authoritative for our lives. “Progressive Christianity” generally abandons these terms, emphasizing personal belief over biblical mandate.
- B. Comments you might hear:
  - 1. “The Bible is a human book.”
  - 2. “I disagree with the Apostle Paul on that issue.”
  - 3. “The Bible condones immorality, so we are obligated to reject what it says in certain places.”
- C. The Bible is the infallible, verbally inspired word of God (1 Corinthians 2:9-13; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). The proofs of its inspiration have been around and widely regarded for centuries: unity, historical accuracy, scientific accuracy, impartiality, and fulfilled prophecy. “Personal belief,” of course, has also existed for centuries, but it is no more authoritative now than when time began!

## ***II. Feelings Are Emphasized Over Facts***

- A. In progressive churches, personal experiences, feelings, and opinions tend to be valued above objective truth. As the Bible ceases to be viewed as God’s definitive word, what a person feels to be true becomes the ultimate authority for faith and practice.
- B. Comments you might hear:
  - 1. “That Bible verse doesn’t resonate with me.”
  - 2. “I thought homosexuality was a sin until I met and befriended some gay people.”
  - 3. “I just can’t believe Jesus would send good people to Hell.”
- C. Feelings can’t be depended on when it comes to revealed truth (Proverbs 28:26; Jeremiah 17:9). Paul was a good example of this (Acts 23:1; 24:16; cp. 22:1-5). The elders watch over souls (Hebrews 13:17). Sometimes we feel fearful of

making people mad or running them off so we leave them in sin (Galatians 6:1). Members talk a lot about them, but they are not talking to them. This is where good leadership is such a benefit to a local flock.

### **III. Essential Doctrines Are Open For Reinterpretation**

- A. Progressive author John Pavlovitz wrote, “There are no sacred cows [in Progressive Christianity] ... Tradition, dogma, and doctrine are all fair game, because all pass through the hands of flawed humanity.” Progressive Christians are often open to reinterpreting the Bible on hot-button moral issues like homosexuality and abortion, and also cardinal doctrines such as the virgin conception and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The only sacred cow is “no sacred cows.”
- B. Comments you might hear:
  - 1. “The resurrection of Jesus doesn’t have to be factual to speak truth.”
  - 2. “The church’s historic position on sexuality is archaic and needs to be updated within a modern framework.”
  - 3. “The idea of a literal hell is offensive to non-Christians and needs to be re-interpreted.”
- C. The scriptures were “once for all” delivered to the saints (Jude 3) and are not to be altered (Deuteronomy 4:2; Joshua 1:7-8; Galatians 1:8-9; Revelation 22:18-19). The Bible was written for our understanding into the mystery of Christ (Ephesians 3:3-5), not for us to deconstruct and use for our own selfish interpretations and lusts (cp. James 4:3), and because we want to compromise with the world.

### **IV. Historic Terms Are Redefined**

- A. There are some progressive Christians who say they affirm doctrines like biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and authority, but they have to do linguistic gymnastics to make those words mean what they want them to mean.
  - 1. You might ask a denominational preacher, “Do you believe the Bible is divinely inspired?” He answered confidently, “Yes, of course!”
    - a) However, you mistakenly assume that when using the word “inspired,” you both have in mind the same meaning.
    - b) In reality, a lot of denominational preachers mean that the Bible is inspired in the same way and on the same level as many other books, songs, and sermons that are based on the gospel. This, of course, is not how the Bible presents the doctrine of divine inspiration.
  - 2. Another word that tends to get a progressive make-over is the word “love” (1 John 4:8). When plucked out of its biblical context, it becomes a catch-all term for everything non-confrontative, pleasant, and affirming.
- B. Comments you might hear:
  - 1. “Sure, the Bible is authoritative — but we’ve misunderstood it for the first 2,000 years of church history.”
  - 2. “God wouldn’t punish sinners — He is love.”
  - 3. “It’s not our job to talk to anyone about sin — it’s our job to just love them.”

- C. The Bible is clear about modifying conduct and impressing on people their need for holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:16; 2 Peter 3:11). God does not want people to redefine sin and love, He wants them to repent and be converted to Him (Acts 3:19; 17:30).

#### ***V. The Gospel Shifts From Sin And Redemption To Social Justice***

- A. Many progressive Christians today find the concept of God willing His Son to die on the cross to be embarrassing or even appalling. Sometimes referred to as “cosmic child abuse,” the idea of blood atonement is de-emphasized or denied altogether, with social justice and good works enthroned in its place.
- B. Comments you might hear:
1. “Sin doesn’t separate us from God — we are made in His image and He called us good.”
  2. “God didn’t actually require a sacrifice for our sins — the first Christians picked up on the pagan practice of animal sacrifice and told the Jesus story in similar terms.”
  3. “We don’t really need to preach the gospel — we just need to show love by bringing justice to the oppressed and provision to the needy.”
- C. There is no doubt that the Bible commands us to take care of the unfortunate and defend those who are oppressed. This is a very real and profoundly important part of what it means to live out our faith. However, the core message of the gospel is that Jesus died for our sins, was buried and resurrected, and thereby reconciled us to God (1 Corinthians 15:1-4; Colossians 1:21-22). This is the message that will truly bring freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19; Acts 26:16-18).

**Conclusion.** Identifying the signs is not always obvious — sometimes they are subtle and mixed with a lot of truth. “Progressive Christianity” can be persuasive and enticing, but carried out to its logical end, it is an assault on the foundational framework of the gospel, leaving it disarmed of its saving power.

We should not be surprised to find some of these ideas infiltrating our churches. Jesus warned us, “Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matthew 7:15). So if you spot any of these danger signs, it might be time to raise your voice to make sure that you are worshiping in a biblically faithful congregation.