

VI. Progressive Christianity in Biblical Perspective
Historic Biblical Christianity and Contemporary Progressive Christianity
“The Marks of Progressive Christianity in Christ’s Church”

Revelation 2:1–7

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I want to start by looking in I John 4. While it has been with us since the Garden, we have an intensification, acceptance and embracing of a culture of self today. It is the modern self as one writer has called it for it triumphs in our midst and now triumphs over everything – it’s all about me, all depends on me, all for me and any religion that is out there has to be about me. Therefore because of the progressive culture of self in the secular world, there is matching to it a progressive religion – a progressive Christianity – that is very much accommodated to and reflecting this focus upon the self. With that in mind, when you look at church history about every 500 years comes a significant shaking in the Kingdom of God and in the church, itself.

Secondly in the normal course there seems to be every 40 to 80 years, local churches, denominations and ministries face their demise after their existence and unless Godly leadership steps in they almost always dissipate and disappear.

Thirdly, we are warned in the Bible that there is the beast of the sea which represents the authoritarian government and the culture it produces and it is supported by the beast of the land which is the false religion of the day and exists using the terms of true religion. The picture of that beast has a lamb with horns but in reality it is a beast that is subservient to the beast of the sea in order to support it and be accepted by it.

With all of those things in mind, what we face today should not be unusual, as well as the warning of Scripture, we are always to be aware of wolves in sheep’s clothing and the doctrine of demons that will intensify in the last days. All of that deserves its own treatment but with that backdrop and because of all of that we are in a season of sifting, shifting and sorting. Christians are there. I think the testing of who is in Christ and who isn’t in Christ is becoming more and more evident. It seems almost every day you read in the paper about a “Christian celebrity” who has now said they think they don’t believe this evangelical Christianity anymore. This is happening with great rapidity.

I realize I’m talking in broad brush strokes here, but if you read those “confessions of apostasy” it’s not a traditional apostasy that they now say they deny the faith, it’s that they are re-evaluating the faith, reconsidering what they have been told was true. Another way to say that is I’m deconstructing my Christianity to reconstruct it in something different. Remember the word, deconstruction. The reason we’re seeing that in the “celebrities” which may reveal they never knew Christ or they are in a difficult time in their walk with Christ and need to be challenge or it may reveal various things, is because most of them are found in churches that are deconstructing the faith. Thus the pupil becomes like the teacher and they begin to deconstruct the faith as well.

John also joins this chorus to give us warning of not only in the last days but throughout the days from Christ’s ascension, we need to be aware of this, therefore as believers we are to be discerning – what church we’re a part of, what teachers we listen to. Here is the way John puts it in I John 4:1–6; [1] *Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. [2] By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from*

God, [3] and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. [4] Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. [5] They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. [6] We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

John basically says in verse 1, in your teachableness do not be gullible and in your learning posture be discerning. When someone stands up to speak, what is it that is guiding them, empowering them, leading them – what is the spirit of their ministry? Is this the Holy Spirit or the spirit of demonic doctrine that is being taught? This isn't a unique or novel issue but a regular issue for there are many false prophets and false teachers who have gone out into the world. So, how do you know when the Spirit of God is motivating and guiding the individual into what they are saying that is faithful to the God of glory? They will be Christ-centered and will affirm Christ's Incarnation and its purpose.

Why was Jesus born? We are told in I John 3:8b, *[8b] The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.* Paul says in I Timothy 1:15, *[15] The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* In other words, if the Spirit of God is leading the individual who is preaching and teaching, they will be Christ-centered and Gospel saturated – where Jesus came to save us from our sins. If that is not there, and something else is animating their teaching then they are not of the Spirit of God. Is it at the core like Paul says in I Corinthians 2:2; *[2] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.* Does that match up with James who points us to the sufficiency of Christ in forgiveness, redemption and transformation? Does it match up with Peter where every one of us will suffer for Christ's sake to some form or fashion and to be ready to give an account of the hope that is within you that the Lord Himself is guiding you that you do this to honor Him?

When the Spirit of God is there, you don't look for a laughing revival or miracles, although God does miracles but what you look for is, are they making much of Jesus? Are they proclaiming the reason Jesus came in the flesh, which is to save us from our sins, rescue us from the power of the evil one and to build His church? Jesus said He came to build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it. That is the test you are examining. What you listen to is what you become for the pupil becomes like the teacher.

There are believers in a period of weakness who can get caught up in doctrinal statements of wolves clothing. Peter did that in Galatians 2 where he began to preach another gospel underneath the pressure of those who had come into his life, Paul confronts him and he repents which you can see from I and II Peter. It has to be confronted as the doctrine of demons but yet we're trying to rescue the person and find out where they are in which we begin with the judgment of charity yet as we doing that we have to realize in the overall framework of the preaching and teaching of God's Word, it's either for Christ or against Christ. If it's for Christ it will be faithful to the Word of God in text and context.

I have been challenged for 40 plus years in my preaching in the areas of introductions and reviews and the reason is this great fear I have that people do not hear God's Word in context. You can make the Bible through wrong interpretation and pretext, say what you want it to say but it doesn't mean the Bible says. It means the interpreter has, what the Bible calls, twisted the Scriptures. Every text has its context and must be rooted in it. That's why the Bible tells the teachers in II Timothy 2:15, *[15] Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a*

worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. When you preach a text, when you finish, it has to fit right back into its context, where you didn't expand it beyond its means or shrink it. When people give it out of context they either end up against Christ or end up proclaiming the preeminence of Christ. So the Spirit of God produces those who declare the preeminence of Christ in His Gospel work and those who are against the Lord preach against Christ.

People ask me if I think the antichrist is close and I say 'no' I think he is here already and I think he has been here. Is there a The Antichrist at the end? That's a wonderful Biblical discussion but Christ warned the people beginning in this generation there would be false prophets who are anti Christ-centered Gospel preaching. That will be with us all the way till the end. There are going to be those led by the demonic spirits of this age and they will preach against Christ until He comes again. So, you need to be aware of them.

In I John 4:4–6 we see the note of triumph, not triumphalism. We see the note that grace is greater than sin and we walk in the triumph of Christ. We put no confidence in the flesh but we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 3:3, Philippians 4:13). So, when that preaching is having its effect they put no confidence in the flesh but there is confidence in Christ. We cannot be separated from Him or the love of God in Christ and there are no charges against us. There is no condemnation that stands against us and Christ is at work in our life as He is doing His work. Not only has the Savior won the victory, but the Spirit of God is relentless and unstoppable in your life as He is at work in you. Philippians 1:6 says *[6] And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

The false teachers and preachers are from the world, not just in the world. You are in the world but you're not from the world. You are from the Lord. Ultimately a frightening statement is that the world listens to these false teachers and preachers. Not only who and what you listen to will ultimately form and frame you, but who and what you listen to, who and what you want to listen to reveals your heart.

Paul puts it this way in II Timothy 4:3–4, *[3] For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, [4] and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.* Those who are in the world are those who want false teachers. The believer has a hunger for the true preaching and teaching of God's Word. It doesn't mean they don't make mistakes. It doesn't mean a book doesn't capture them because it grabs hold of something for a season. I understand that for none of us are infallible in our growth in grace. Sometimes we make bad decisions but ultimately we realize this doesn't bear witness with the Spirit of God. This is not faithful to the Word of God.

When I read in I John those who are of God listen to us and those who are not of God do not listen to us, then you might be thinking no one ever gets saved – if people who are not of God don't listen to those sent by God but here's how they get saved. God doesn't get people to listen to true teaching in order to get them, for God gets people and when He gets them they start wanting to hear God's Word. I am such a living example of this. You have no idea the extent I went to, to never hear a sermon in my life. As soon as I got free from home I wasn't going to set foot into a worship/preaching service. Why? It was because my heart wasn't with the Lord. Then I got there, heard the Word of God, came to Christ and it wasn't the preacher that changed me for it was God who changed me through the preaching and teaching. Then I went home and read the entire New Testament the day I got saved. Then I started looking up who was going to

be preaching and asking others if I should listen to them. What changed? It wasn't that I had more time on my hands. It was my heart that changed – eyes to see and ears to hear. God gets a hold of His people and the evidence is they love to hear His Word preached faithfully, to the glory of the Father, in the preeminence of Christ, by the power of the Spirit of God.

When that happens, lots of other things happen. Let look at Matthew 7. This is the Sermon on the Mount. We know that this is a good sermon and One to listen to since it was Jesus doing the preaching. Why do Paul, James, Peter, the Prophets and Apostles warn us about false prophets? It is because Jesus warned us. Jesus also warns us in Matthew 24 but now He warns us in this opening sermon of His ministry in Matthew 7. Jesus says in Matthew 7:15, *[15] Beware of false prophets (they don't come in neon lights), who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

After reading this it's no surprise that Paul says this in Acts 20:28–30 which says *[28] Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with His own blood. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; [30] and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

That's exactly what happened to the church at Ephesus to the degree that Paul had to send his best, most trusted disciple on a ministry of church revitalization with a handbook on church revitalization called I Timothy. False prophets come with deceitful, disguised false ministries. Again, nothing has changed since the Garden. Satan came with deceptive words as God said. Then he came with deceptive lies and then disguised as a serpent. He comes to draw the people of God away through ravenous wolves who stand in sheep's clothing.

Jesus goes on to tell us how to recognize these false teachers/preacher in Matthew 7:16–20 which says *[16] You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? [17] So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. [18] A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. [19] Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. [20] Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.*

Whatever is in the root, will come up the shoot and be seen in the fruit. Jesus also says in Luke 7:35, *[35] Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.* The positive side to seeing someone preaching the wisdom of God from the Word of God, is that you will see the fruit. They won't have a perfect ministry, but there will be the fruit that is Christ-honoring, Christ-exalting, God-glorifying, and Spirit-honoring instead of Spirit grieving. Those are things you look for. It is not what tickles my ear but what is faithful to the Word of God and is feeding my heart, even when my heart is not ready for it – they still bring God's Word to my heart. They don't preach for my applause, therefore they don't stop when I frown. They are faithful to bring the truth of God's Word in love to my heart.

The negative side is false prophets produce bad fruit. If the root is not good, then the shoot won't be good and that means the fruit will be bad ultimately and finally. I want to try and illustrate this for you. Most of the time false preachers don't start anything, for they come in and live off what's there. So immediately, sometimes you don't see the bad fruit from their ministry because the church is still producing good fruit from the previous ministry. Business people would call this living off of borrowed capital – the church is living off of borrowed capital.

Thankfully, so many times when a church is getting a false ministry and still producing good fruit from the previous ministry, they begin to see that something is wrong and they attempt

to reach out and hopefully do so in a Biblical fashion, not like the world. We don't deal with issues like this in a worldly manner, but in the way the Bible prescribes it. We find this in Matthew 18. You go to the individual as you take one or two with you, then you tell it to the church and then the elders shepherd us through those issues. We are patient with the process. The fact is, there is a response there. Over a certain period of time, overall, this probably happens around three years and that's just my opinion and speculation on that. I tell me in the ministry not to give up in the first three to five years.

I have had the great privilege to follow Dr. Barker who founded Briarwood Presbyterian and to have ministered in the same flock, but I remember what he said when I came to Briarwood. He told me there would be a few challenges and there were. I'll never forget at the five year mark here, one of the elders here asked me to speak at a Boys Scout meeting and so I accepted. This elder picked me up and we went to this restaurant and I noticed one of my other elders hiding behind a bush. I thought 'what is he doing?' I walked into this restaurant and there were over 200 elders and deacons from this church and there was a big sign that said 'Alive After Five.' I realized this was a party. What I didn't know was whether it was a going away party or a home going party, but I try to tell young ministers to stay with it. That three to five to seven year mark is crucial.

I can also flip it to say that in three to five years you begin to get an accurate assessment of someone's ministry and the fruit of that ministry. I have no Bible verses to give you on this for I'm just telling you this from my own examination of church history and from my personal ministry which so far has spanned almost four decades. The fruits will begin to be evident and seen.

I have one more text of Scripture to lay the ground works of the seven marks of progressive Christianity, when a progressive Christian ministry is established in a local church. Each one of these have built on the other. Let's look at I Corinthians 3. This has been a misused text historically but it's a very helpful text when understood in its context. The church at Corinth had divisions within itself. As Paul is dealing with these divisions he gives some good insight, I believe at dealing with this issue of progressive Christianity as an adversarial gospel ultimately to Biblical Christianity.

I Corinthians 3:1 says *[1] But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.*

Paul starts off by telling the Corinthians that they ought to be spiritually mature but they are still carnal, like babes in Christ with a lot of the world still hanging on to them. When you become a Christian you don't become a person who has all the answers. One of the greatest mistakes we make in Christianity is a celebrity comes to Christ and we put them in positions to speak on the matters of the Kingdom before they ever have been matured. In other words, their platform is based upon their notoriety apart from Christ, and not their progress in Christ. I am all for such testimonies but ultimately the positions of influence, instruction and leadership need to be reserved for maturity and not based upon what someone was before they became a Christian, but what you are becoming in Christ. So, Paul is saying that this church is still acting like babes due to all this worldly behavior.

Let's not let that happen here. Don't let the worldly approach to polarization, chaos, confusion and man's anger find root here. Don't let worldly behavior cling to us. That can't be there. This is what was happening at Corinth so they were having divisions, not those that Paul would expect because of the truth, but these were divisions based upon personality and

preferences. “I’m a Paul or I’m an Apollos or Peter.” A party spirit of divisiveness was there and let’s continue in the text to see how Paul handles this.

I Corinthians 3:2–9 says [2] *I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? [4] For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?*

[5] What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. [6] I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. [7] So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. [8] He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. [9] For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

Each one of us has their God-given ministry there to mature you, but who do you line up for? It is the God of glory, not the servants. We’re the servants and each have been gifted to do a certain thing in life so as we have function that doesn’t mean you choose your allegiance and affections for us, but you choose your allegiance and affections for Christ, while you give thanks to God for us, but you don’t give what belongs to God to us.

According to what Paul has just said, the true workers, the true builders of God whom He sent are constructing. They are being built up, they are growing. I will not be giving you the seven mark of progressive Christianity in this study for this is an introduction to them but I am going to give you a word that you will find in all seven marks of progressive Christianity. Let’s continue in the text.

I Corinthians 3:10–15 says [10] *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. [11] For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. [12] Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— [13] each one's work will become manifest, for the Day (of Judgment) will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. [14] If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. [15] If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.*

As seen at the beginning of this text, Paul is part of the Apostles so he is laying the foundation work, built upon the foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets. Over here Paul is planting while Apollos waters and over here Paul is laying a foundation where Apollos is going to build on it. Paul is talking about ministers here in this text where on the Day of Judgment they will give an account for their ministries and their ministries were either wood, hay and stubble or gold, silver and precious jewels. They either built up or they were a façade and the Day will reveal it – Christ will reveal what kind of ministry we had. Verse 15 tells us that there are those who are saved but are bad ministers, they are not all wolves. Some of them, though, have not been faithful in ministry. Some are wolves. Some are saved (Christians) but their ministries have no reward. Why? It is because their ministry was wood, hay and stubble, instead of building up, edifying and equipping.

Ephesians 4:11–12 says [11] *And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, [12] to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. God’s ministries overall in terms of assessment are constructive, building up God’s glory through His people. Those ministries against Him are deconstructive.*

Deconstructive is the word I want to give that is identifying in all seven marks of progressive Christianity. False Christianity, whether liberal Christianity in the previous century or progressive Christianity, may be conducted by wolves or misguided ministers, but the way you identify false Christianity or false ministries, is it will be deconstructive, not constructive. In the next study I will give you seven marks of deconstruction.

There are two more studies left. The last study is the constructive mission, message and ministry of Biblical Christianity, but this study is laying the ground work and foundation for the next two studies and gives you the three texts of Scripture that tells you that you need to test what is being preached and taught – is it of the Spirit of God to the preeminence of Christ, saturated with the Gospel to the glory of the Father, faithful to the Word of God and if it is you will see it in the fruit. The fruit will be the overall assessment that Paul calls gold, silver and precious jewels. When the fire is put to gold, silver and precious jewels it just makes it shine brighter. When you put the fire of judgment against wood, hay and stubble, it's gone for it all burns up.

You have no idea how many phone calls and emails I get every week where progressive Christianity is following the same pattern as liberal Christianity. That's why I don't even like to call it progressive because it's regressive and I think it's liberal Christianity with the same motivation and same mission. Its theological aberrations are different but they are still there because the motivation and the mission will eventually adulterate the message. When the message gets adulterated there will be the fruit of unfaithfulness in the teaching. Just like Godly ministry leaves tracks of people coming to Christ and growing in grace, unfaithful ministry leaves tracks of wood, hay and stubble – deconstruction.

Right now, every Lord's Day there are three different locations that are populated by scores and scores of people that are streaming our services, trying to find a pastor. They were all in churches – 400 to 500 were healthy and growing – and pastors came in embracing progressive Christianity and three to five years later there is just a remnant and those who love the Lord, their voice has been shut down and their out. They didn't want to go out but they had to go out, actually asked to go out, in all three cases. I can multiply that for this progressive Christianity is not a matter of just personality differences. I believe it is deconstructing the mission, the message and the ministries of the church. I will give you the seven marks of it in the next study so you can look at it and understand it.

This is something that is not new. I believe the sifting and shifting is more intense than any time I have ever encountered in my Christian life and in my ministry, but it's not new. The Bible gives us the markers to look for, for those who are led by the Spirit, those whom God has sent and it also gives us what the fruit of their ministry to varying degrees – some 30, some 60, some 100 fold – that will be constructive. You will see people coming to Christ, missionaries being sent out, churches being planted, small groups being developed, people growing in grace, which are some of the fruits you will see from Godly ministries. The only thing getting torn down is sin and every false speculation raised up against the obedience to Christ and His Word.

In progressive Christianity, like in liberal Christianity, which has utterly decimated the mainline Protestant church, now is decimating evangelical churches. It is one parasitic for it starts nothing but lives off of things until it destroys them. Secondly, it deconstructs and thirdly, it diminishes all the ministries of the church it infiltrates. It also diminishes the joy of the people. Please read the next two studies that will give you the seven marks of progressive Christianity and the constructive mission, message and ministry of Biblical Christianity. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for Your Word and the privilege to be in that Word. Thank You Father for the opportunity to serve You. I pray God that You would continue to give Your people here at Briarwood not a critical spirit, but a discerning spirit. Give them the Berean life – eager to learn but examining the Scriptures to see if these things are so. Father, then help us understand the marks of the current framework and form of unbiblical Christianity masquerading as Biblical Christianity yet give us hearts that realize not all who have embraced it are wolves for some are misguided ministers who in their frustration or down time have been drawn to something that seems as if it has the vitality they have looked for. Please help those who are being misguided to be discerning and stay the course. Help us to win them and then Father, those who are wolves, help us expose them. O God our God, be exalted, I pray, in Your church, Your radiant bride, for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.