

EDITORIAL

The Church's Challenge and Opportunity

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On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Royal Dutch Academic of Sciences and Humanities in 1958, Herman Dooyeweerd gave a speech on “The Criteria of Progressive and Reactionary Tendencies in History.” As was often the case, he put his finger on the pulse of modern culture.¹ Progress can hide regression and a loss of moral compass.

Progress is the rhetorical button politicians press. Not doing so would endanger political credibility and survival. I do not think I’ve ever heard any of their breed warn of its dangers, apart from perhaps Enoch Powell in the pre-Thatcher UK. Ordinary people can be more critical of progress, or more fearful of it, in a way the élites aren’t, because it often threatens their livelihood, and they are not “normies” strung along by media narratives.

The Christian church has often stood against progress in the past, sometimes wrongly and with sad consequences. To do so now is considered bigoted and reactionary. Consequently, clerics adopt the progressive rhetoric of politicians on all subjects, from gender issues to globalization. The present archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, is a front-runner, with Pope Francis a close second. Both seem to have lost critical distance from current ideologies. They adopt progressive rhetoric on any social justice subject. Passed through progressive filters, the Christian faith comes out as watered-down wokeism.

¹ Herman Dooyeweerd, “The Criteria of Progressive and Reactionary Tendencies in History,” 1958, Internet Archive, <https://web.archive.org/web/20221113042439/https://reformationaldl.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/the-criteria-of-progressive-and-reactionary-tendencies-in-history.pdf>.

The Christian church is challenged by a trinity of liberty, equality, and tolerance, which are the drivers of progress. The equality advocated by social progressivism is an idea, and facts are made to fit in with it.

Nobody has ever pinned down what equality means, and it is simply taken for granted. Nearly all of Dooyeweerd's modal aspects serve to indicate the rich diversity of reality, but for the sake of social progress, the illusion that all things are equal has to be believed and promoted in all realms. It is one of the notions deconstructionists use to undermine authority structures, including the Christian tradition and the family.

An unspoken dynamic is at play: freedom opposes vested privilege and injustices by promoting the acceptance of everything, with the interest of equality as the end. When freedom sets aside considerations based on race, class, religion, and tradition, equality is thought to be the outcome.

However, nature is the reef on which egalitarianism is shipwrecked because the natural world, as God created, ordered, and structured it, is an ocean of diversity. It is hard to erase the fact that male and female are complementary ways of being human, differing from each other in physical capacity, mental and psychological makeup, and bodily attributes from head to toe! Adults and children, the healthy and those suffering from terrible infirmities or illnesses, are not equal. Human beings, like animals and inanimate objects, are vastly unequal. This is not unique to Judeo-Christianity. All religions and cultures seem to have recognized it. As a system of thought, Taoism even made diversity fundamental by proposing that reality is ultimately not unipolar but bipolar, as different as mountains and valleys.

In some areas, real equality should and does exist, but in a precise way. Equality of opportunity is recognized in public spaces, education, and the workplace, which is a good thing. Yet, who would want to promote equality by putting a top footballer in charge of a nuclear power plant? Equality before the law is also a fundamental right, as everyone, including the privileged and the powerful, is subject to the requirements of the law.

However, apart from these precise and widely recognized spheres, equality is, above all, a mathematical concept of weights and measures for which precision is essential. One Euro is worth 0.85 pound sterling at a given moment, but not necessarily a week later. An apple is not an orange, a person with an IQ of 90 is not equal to a person with one of 150, and a baggage handler is not equal to an airline pilot. Applying equality outside the areas where it is evidently justified is a mistake at best, ideology at worst. And yet, it is spoken of as if it were self-evident in many spheres where it is not. Even feminists like Germaine Greer have become critical of its incoherencies and its dangers for women.

In Western society, we are becoming aware that we have reached a watershed where programs are promoted because of hidden agendas and not because they are morally justified. At bottom, the postmodern pursuit of equality is an attempt to solve the problems of sin and injustice without God. This is perhaps why debates on questions of equality quickly become poisonous. Those who promote them have a pseudoreligious motivation that arouses bitter zeal against those who do not agree. In the final analysis, the desire for equality is an illusion. Equality has never been, never is, and never will be something belonging to created reality, except in a limited technical sense. However, businesses strut their global certifications for gender equality and parade their diversity and inclusion awards. Christians can be justifiably critical of the utopic dreams of the social justice warriors and wary of the virtue signaling of global corporations that adopt their agendas to promote their own interests.

The Christian faith is founded on the fact that God and man are profoundly different and unequal. No idea is more unpalatable to the natural individual than God's sovereignty and kingship. Yet three fundamental forms of equality do exist in Christianity: the first is in God in the perfect Trinitarian communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: "The three Persons [of the Trinity are] not confused, but distinct, and yet not separate, but of the same essence, equal in eternity and power."²

A second strange form of equality arises from the rebellion of human beings who idolatrously crave equality with the Creator. "God created man" to "live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him," but by "the fall ... our nature became so corrupt that we are *all* conceived and born in sin," and "by nature we are prone to hate God and [our] neighbor."³ Sinners are one in their rebellion and hatred of God; born in sin, they live and die in it as a consequence of their rebellion (cf. Rom 5:12). They are equal in injustice; all will be justly judged as such by divine justice. The fate of all is death, which knows no discrimination.

The third form of equality exists in the spiritual unity of believers who, united with Christ, are one in him: "There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:22b–24 ESV). True equality is restored for human beings through regeneration in Jesus

² The French Confession of Faith (1559) 1.6, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3: *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, revised by David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 363.

³ Heidelberg Catechism (1563) 5–7, in Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:309–10 (emphasis added).

Christ, who “create[s] in himself one new man ... so making peace, and ... reconcil[es] to God all in one body through the cross,” for “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:15–16; Gal 3:28). The restoration of equality in the body of Christ is the work of his Spirit, respecting human nature as created nature, the first glimmer of the dawn of the coming kingdom of God.

These three biblical forms of equality are *spiritual*, not material, but they are more coherent than the utopianism of humanly engineered social equality. It is these spiritual values that the church is called to promote in the gospel because they lay the foundation in the struggle for true equality against inequality and injustice among human beings. This is the real issue in the West, and everywhere where intersectional ideologies of equality seek to promote it globally through freedom and progress.

This is no easy task, particularly as the postmodern deconstruction of formerly accepted values reaches its endgame, which will make professing the Christian faith dangerous, with jobs and even basic human freedoms under threat. This is part of the ongoing spiritual conflict for the Christian faith that Abraham Kuyper highlighted in his 1898 Stone Lectures at Princeton:

Voltaire’s mad cry, “Down with the scoundrel [*A bas l’infâme*; lit., Down with the infamous],” was aimed at Christ himself, but this cry was merely the expression of the most hidden thought from which the French Revolution sprang. The fanatic outcry of another philosopher, “We no more need a God,” and the odious shibboleth, “No God, no Master [*Ni Dieu, ni Maître*],” of the Convention;—these were the sacrilegious watchwords which at that time heralded the liberation of man as an emancipation from all Divine Authority. And if, in His impenetrable wisdom, God employed the Revolution as a means to overthrow the royal tyranny of the Bourbons, and to bring a judgment on the princes who abused *His* nations as *their* footstool, nevertheless the principle of that Revolution remains thoroughly *anti-Christian*, and has since spread like a cancer, dissolving and undermining all that stood firm and consistent before our Christian faith.

There is no doubt that Christianity is imperilled by great and serious danger. Two *life systems* are wrestling with one another, in mortal combat. Modernism is bound to build a world of its own from the data of the natural man, and to construct man himself from the data of nature; while, on the other hand, all those who reverently bend the knee to Christ and worship Him as the Son of the living God, and God himself, are bent upon saving the “Christian Heritage.” This is *the* struggle in Europe, this is *the* struggle in America.⁴

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (1898) (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 10–11. When Kuyper speaks of America and Europe, he is referring to the places where he lectured, Princeton, and where he came from, the Netherlands.