

How Do We Measure 'Progressives?'

The term *progressive* has become prevalent since *liberal* lost its cultural appeal years ago. To be “progressive” conveys support for greater freedom, greater justice, etc., even if those who identify themselves as “progressives” have difficulty defining what is meant by the term.

Hillary Clinton has identified herself as a “progressive” because, she says, liberalism has come to be identified with “big government.” Given the latter’s apparent unpopularity, changing her political modifier seems prudent (even though the “progressive” administration of **Barack Obama** has expanded and consolidated federal power dramatically). While under whichever rubric, Mrs. Clinton indisputably is a woman of the left; the larger question is not the precise definition of the term. It is against what standard progress, however one defines it, is measured.

Theologian David Wells, in his sweeping analysis of church and culture, *No Place for Truth*, notes that in American society, we have abandoned the idea that there is “truth by which one can judge whether a culture is moving forward or backward.”

In other words, since in our relativistic, define-your-own-truth culture, neither right nor goodness can be defined with certainty, how can we determine if something we advocate is progress or regress?

This question goes well beyond a rarified philosophical debate. It goes to the heart of who we are: We claim to be a just and free society governed by certain “self-evident truths,” but there is a profound unwillingness of everyone from President Obama (who famously said, “that’s above my pay grade” when asked about **personhood** before birth) to our

neighbors and fellow congregants to reaffirm what those truths are and how they apply to our personal and public lives.

As a result, our sense of “progress” becomes so subjective as to be a matter of sentiment, the rush we get from defiance more than the inner assurance we receive from the conscience. In other words, if it involves a change from the status quo and gives me a good feeling, it must be progress. This is the moral equivalent of dishwashing liquid with “new and improved” slapped on it.

Such feelings come and go, but they are grounded in the relentless Adamic quest for radical autonomy: I can define truth, virtue, achievement, family and anything else I want as I want. Those who would restrict such redefinitions (which themselves can change with little notice or reason), namely persons of traditional biblical faith, are adversaries who need squashing, if not worse. As one bumper sticker amiably puts it, “So many Christians. So few lions.”

Genuine progress means greater adherence to a set of moral goods and their implications for the various aspects of life. For example, our union became “more perfect” when slavery was abolished and when Jim Crow laws became the stuff of painful but increasingly distant memory. When measures were enacted protecting young children from abusive working conditions, our country’s allegiance to human dignity was re-burnished. And when President Reagan signed a law apologizing to Japanese-Americans for their internment during World War II, he said eloquently, “Here we admit a wrong. Here we reaffirm our commitment as a nation to equal justice under the law.” This apology, long overdue but welcome in coming, further ennobled our nation.

But what makes these things good is that fact that good and bad themselves exist as objective qualities. Both the natural law (reason and conscience entwined) and divine self-revelation (the Bible) concur that right exists, that evil is

real, and that the two are incompatible and unweldable. Standards exist, and therefore we can know if something is progress or mere retrograde acceleration.

Is it progress to make the definition of family so amorphous as to be practically and legally meaningless? Is it progress to dehumanize the unborn child and assert that its value is based on nothing more than the judgment call of her mother? Is it progress to diminish **religious liberty** and the exercise of the conscience, to use the courts to invalidate legitimate legislation and public policies, or to employ science as a pretext for endangering women and girls through ready access to dangerous contraceptives?

Our descent into moral anarchy, once almost imperceptible, is picking up speed. But speed, while temporarily exhilarating, is fatal when the steering wheel and brakes don't answer and a high cliff appears. Such "progress" we can live without.

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