

In praise of precise language

Most of us are guilty of using words like *progressive* and *conservative* to divide between us and them. Can we do better?

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I have been known, on exceedingly rare occasions, to exasperate my children (and my wife ... and, um, other people ...) with my insistence that language be used with as much precision and accuracy as possible. Many a pleasant mealtime has been rudely interrupted by a certain irritating someone insisting that a word was being used incorrectly. An unwelcome rupture in the proceedings, if ever there was one, and invariably followed by withering glares and the measured rolling of eyes. Still, I bravely soldier on. We all have our crosses to bear.

There is a deep conviction behind this annoying tendency of mine: words and how we use them matter. They matter a great deal. Of this I am absolutely convinced, particularly in our cultural moment, characterized as it is by so much polarizing and unreflective language, so much sloppy and reactive discourse. Words are flung around casually and carelessly, as if we all know what they mean and why they function the way that they do in public discourse. Words like *liberal* and *conservative* , or *progressive* and *traditional*, to take a few of my favorite examples at present.

I regularly find myself in discursive circles where someone will simply assume that using one of these words is sufficient to settle an argument or reinforce a boundary or identity marker or whatever. *You know, good conservative folks ... You know, they're a progressive church in so many ways ...* The people who use these words in conversation often seem to assume that they are stand-alones that require no further explanation or qualification, that they say something like, "You know, they're *one of us!*" I somehow seem to have positioned myself in such a way that liberals and conservatives and progressives and traditionalists all consider me to be an ally. This either makes me laudably dexterous and theologically adept, or a weak-

kneed coward.

What bothers me about how these words are employed is that people seem to assume that their preferred choice is always and without exception synonymous with “what right-thinking people ought always to think.” Liberal people should always align themselves with the causes and ideologies of the liberal intelligentsia. Progress is always good. Or, conservative people should always align themselves with the causes and ideologies of the conservative spokespeople. Traditional ideas must not be challenged or altered in any way. You line up with your team and you play by the rules.

But if we actually pay attention to these words and what they mean, we quite quickly ought to be reminded that there are good and vital aspects of each one of them. *Liberal* has at its root the Latin *liber*, which means to set free. And the gospel of Jesus Christ means nothing if not glorious freedom—freedom *from* and freedom *for*. Similarly, the origins of the word *conservative* mean “aiming to preserve.” And how could any faith that has as its central claim that the God of the universe has acted in history in specific times and places, has revealed God's character through specific actions and events that were witnessed by named people, imagine that a central part of their task was not to conserve these vital truths? We could pull apart words like *progressive* and *traditional* in similar ways. It seems self-evident to me that both must be true and necessary in different ways at different times and places in response to different pressures and opportunities. But to suggest that progress is always good (or bad) or that to be conservative always means to be restrictive (or faithful) seems facile at best.

John Stackhouse [recently wrote about these matters](#) and rightly cast a critical gaze on the assumption that progress is necessarily good, pointing to examples of when moving forward has led to a worse state of affairs. We could look in the other direction as well. Are there things that previous generations understood better than we do? Ways in which previous Christians were more faithful than we are? I was thinking this morning about how suffering in the Christian life has historically been understood and lived through. I tend to assume that suffering is always bad and I tend to pray with people for little besides its speedy elimination. But if I cast a glance in the rearview mirror of history, I wonder how faithful I am being. Might suffering also be Christianly understood as discipline or one of the ways in which our souls could be cured of their diseased attachments to the self? Could it be a way in which Christ draws us to himself and conforms us to his image? The New

Testament certainly seems to assume so. At the very least this ought to be part of the conversation. Right?

Or I think about the existential and moral urgency that animated writers like Augustine and Kierkegaard and countless others. When I read these thinkers, I get the sense that matters of faith were of absolutely vital importance. They believed that what they did and how they thought mattered deeply, that their very souls hung in the balance. Could the same be said for our day? There are laudable examples, no doubt, but it seems to me that the language of faith often serves as a thin and anemic veneer over what basically amount to political or therapeutic concerns. In these areas of faith and discipleship (and others), I wonder if we could do with a bit of regression. I wonder if *I* could, at any rate.

The gospel asks something much more demanding and life giving of us than to reflexively go along with the herd, whether it's liberal or conservative or progressive or traditional. It asks us to be liberal about some things, conservative about others, progressive in some ways, and traditional in others. It asks us to do this dance in the present between the past and the future, convinced that all times are potential theaters for divine disclosure. There has never been a time when God has not been speaking life. As Christians, we are permitted to neither write off nor idolize the past or the future.

Speaking of regress, recently I embarked on a trip with a van full of teenagers and young adults to attend an, ahem, Toby Mac concert. Or tobyMac. One should strive for precision, I suppose, even if said precision seems lexically confused. Could there be anything more regressive than rocking out with a fading light from the halcyon days of American contemporary Christian music? I can almost feel myself becoming less progressive. But my kids wanted to go, so I was basically powerless. Even trying to appear appropriately progressive must take a backseat to the whims of teenagers.

At any rate, I spent a bit of time listening to tobyMac's new album. It was as I expected. A few catchy songs along with some fairly predictable lyrics. I remarked to another eminently progressive soul like myself that tobyMac's lyrics haven't "evolved much" over the last 30 years. Still singing about how God has changed his heart and shining his light for the world to see and all that.

And then I stopped and wondered if I might have a bit of regressing to do.

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