

Progression or Transgression

From time to time, we hear someone say, "That's progress." They may be referring to the discovery of a new cancer drug, or they may be talking about the development of a new subdivision. Often times people will refer to changes in a culture or lifestyle or system of values as being a sign of progress.

The word, "progress," has its roots in Latin, meaning, literally, to walk (gress) forward (pro). Progress, then, can be thought of as walking/going forward. There are other words that also contain the "gress" part of the word. Regress is the opposite of progress and means, "to go/walk backward." Retrogress is similar to regress but it means "to go back to something that was before." Egress (a way to go out) is the opposite of ingress (a way to go in). Digress means "to deviate from where one was going." Congress is a gathering of people who have a common purpose or, as we could say, are going in the same direction. Aggress means to "to go against." And transgress is to go or cross over to the other side. All of these are English words, some of which we use regularly and some which we may never use. But they all come from the same root which means "to walk or go or take a step."

When we hear or use the phrase, "That's progress," we have to ask ourselves if what we have observed is really a step forward. Could we be observing regression or even transgression? Or perhaps what is happening is digression or retrogression. Just because something has happened does not make it progress. It may be just the opposite. Pushing back the topsoil on some of the best farmland in the world (in the areas surrounding nearly every major Canadian city, for example), to build subdivisions is called progress, but is it? I suspect that future generations will judge the people of our time for building big houses on tiny lots, thereby destroying environments uniquely suited for producing food. What we define as progress today may actually be considered as regression in the future.

This is just one example, but it does lead us to ask this question: how do we distinguish between progress (walking forward) and some other kind of walking/going? What standard do we use? This question is especially important when it comes to how we not only interact with the world around us but also how we relate to each other. We are told over and over that many of the changes in cultural values and practice (in our day and age, changes in understanding of human sexuality) are a sign of human progress and to speak against these changes is an act of aggression. Because opposition to what is labelled as "progress" is labelled as aggression, voicing one's beliefs about human behaviour is seen as a transgression, and in every culture, transgressors are worthy of some sort of punishment.

And that brings us to that word, transgress (or transgression). With the exception of the above example (and parallel situations), we rarely hear anyone speak of transgression. To transgress means that we cross over to the other side, and to speak in that way is to admit that another side actually exists. Contemporary thought denies that there are two sides (good and evil), but Scripture speaks of two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of darkness. Adam and Eve, being tempted by the devil, the ruler of the kingdom of darkness, transgressed, meaning they gave into temptation and crossed over to the other side, leaving God's kingdom and joining themselves to the kingdom of darkness. As transgressors they led the

human race into becoming aggressors, so that under the leadership of the devil we, their descendants, actually go against (aggress) God and seek to destroy his work. Our transgression and the resulting aggression are worthy of some sort of punishment. Paul, Romans 6:23, writes that the wages (results) of sin (transgression) is death.

As we well know, once we have transgressed and have become aggressors, it becomes impossible to cross over again to the other side. Just as no general in any army would welcome back someone who went over to the enemy and took up arms against those he own people, so we cannot expect God to welcome back those who went over to the kingdom of his adversary. (Satan means “adversary.”) Once we have transgressed, we cannot regress or retrogress or even egress. That is why the Bible is so adamant when it teaches that it is only because of God’s grace in Jesus who came to this world, the world of darkness but, unlike us, became neither transgressor nor aggressor, yet bore the punishment for being a transgressor, that we can be brought over again to the kingdom of God.

Because there are two sides (kingdom of God, kingdom of the devil), we would have to say that anything that does not belong to the kingdom of God is transgression and therefore cannot be called progress. (The kingdom of God is identified as existing in any place where the reign of God is known, and where his reign is known we will also see obedience and trust.) Progress occurs only when God’s reign is restored on this earth. In Galatians 5:16 (paralleled in many other places in Scripture), Paul exhorts us to “walk by the Spirit,” meaning that we align ourselves to “congress” with the Holy Spirit, thus walking/going in the direction God desires us to go. Through the powerful working of the Spirit, we develop into faithful citizens of the kingdom of God, and that is true progress.

Understanding that there are two sides, two kingdoms, helps us understand our current cultural climate. Those who belong to the kingdom of darkness label what they believe as “progress,” even if it is contrary to God’s will, but progress in the kingdom of darkness is transgression from the reign of God and aggression against his kingdom. The devil’s work is to make everyone believe that transgression against God is progress, and if anyone stands in the way of progress, they are an aggressor and should be silenced. Thus, those who stand up for the kingdom of God are labelled as transgressors in our world and transgressors are subject to punishment. Labelling transgression against God as “progress” and opposition to “progress” as aggression has been a very effective tool in the devil’s hands, at least for the past few decades.

So, what is our response? First, we must be careful to distinguish between progress and transgression and identify it correctly. Progress is not progress if it transgresses God’s will. We always need to ask, “Does it conform to God’s will and purposes for this world? To which kingdom does it belong?” Second, we do not shy away from true progress, recognizing that true progress is seen in obedience to God as we keep in step with the Spirit. We remain committed to true progress, building the kingdom of God, no matter what anyone else might say. Third, and most importantly, we do not become afraid, nor do we cave in or compromise. Let’s remember that the ruler of the kingdom of darkness has been defeated, that everything that he passes off as progress will be shown for what it is and destroyed and that, in the end, the kingdom of God will be victorious. Yes, at this time we may be labelled as aggressors by those who are promoting transgression as progress, but let’s remember that to be an aggressor against the kingdom of darkness is to be a servant in the kingdom of God.

True progress is that which is done in the name of Christ, for the sake of Christ and in obedience to Christ. If that means we are labelled as aggressors, so be it. It is better to be identified as an aggressor for Christ against the devil than to become a transgressor and therefore an aggressor against God.

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