

# Challenging equality Britain

**Mike Ovey, the  
Principal of Oak Hill,  
looks at the challenges and  
contradictions of equality Britain  
and asks: what has broken, and  
how do we begin to fix it?**



George Orwell's famous allegory, *Animal Farm*, gave us the wry phrase, 'All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others'. It brought out the way that you could have all the talk about equality and rights, but that it actually worked out with inequalities and with favoured groups. In *Animal Farm*, you remember, it was the pigs who ended up more equal than others.

I suspect that is how many Christians are coming to think about equality Britain. It's a Britain where comedians are feted for their 'daring' in taking on the Christian religion on national TV, while never quite having the bottle to dish out equal satire to the equally fervent Richard Dawkins. It's a Britain where major human rights abuses against Christians in countries such as North Korea or Syria are not reported as such.

It's a Britain where you pray with someone in hospital at your peril, in case some third party takes offence. It's a Britain where a prime minister appears to be under the impression that he can change what constitutes marriage. I suspect many of us find ourselves both frustrated and bewildered. How did it come to this?

It is worth spending a little while examining what has caused our bewilderment, not least because if we do not know what has broken, we do not know how to fix it.

To begin with, there is our culture's affection for equality. Now, 'equality' is a motherhood and apple pie thing. No one wants to talk down equality because of the fear of being portrayed as totalitarian. In any case, equality is deeply embedded in the Bible's teaching. Obviously this puts Christians in a real quandary over issues such as the redefinition of marriage: are we being un-Christian by denying equality?

Part of the solution (but obviously, I fear, only a part) is realising that biblical equality does not equal secularist equality, if you will excuse the play on words. When we talk about biblical equality between humans, we need to include an equality arising from the way all humans bear the image and likeness of our Creator, despite the fall marring it. It is for that reason that I am forbidden to despise the poor, or treat other humans as my prey (either literally or figuratively). I cannot treat myself or mine as better than other humans made in God's image.



This is a value that is independent of majority recognition and does not have to be earned by wealth, beauty or Twitter ratings. Biblical equality as human creatures further includes the point that a human being belongs to the God who made him or her, and is created to glorify that God. As such I am not to behave in ways which steal that human being away from God, either by violence, as in slavery, or by other means such as tempting, flattering, manipulating or seducing them.

Further, biblical equality between humans includes their equal guilt and helplessness in sin, an equal rebellion against God, even if manifested in different ways. It is not that some are less guilty than others, or less trapped in sin. By nature this is our equal plight. I am no better than others, but equally their sin is not somehow lighter because it happens to appeal more to current western tastes.

We obscure that equality at our peril, and certainly to the peril of those who are led to believe that they are not in sin. With this goes another equality in salvation, that all are saved by Christ alone, not Christ plus something coming from us. Again, I cannot elevate myself on the grounds that saving me was less hard than saving, say, the ex-slaver John Newton.

That gives three dimensions to our equality: as human creatures of God; as addicted rebels against God; and, for those with faith, as those redeemed by grace alone by God.

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Put this way, we can see why our account of equality looks so different to the politically correct equality of our current ruling elites. If you look at, say, section 3 of the Equality Act 2006, which sets out the general duty for the Commission for Equality and Human Rights, you find some pretty noble sentiments: we're aiming for a society with 'respect for and protection of each individual's human rights' and 'each individual has an equal opportunity to participate in society'.

This is far-reaching, and the latter provision takes further than ever an old and in itself valuable idea. That idea is that before the law, a person is simply a person, not treated differently before the law in terms of class, race, religion, wealth or gender. Thus a victim of robbery is entitled to redress, no matter that he or she is poor and foreign. So far, so good. As it happens, it's very Magna Carta: 'To no one will we deny or delay justice.' And it echoes the divine judge, who shows no partiality.

So what's happened? What counts as 'before the law' has got wider and wider. Wherever the law runs, this kind of equality gets called in and the law runs into more and more areas of life. Put another way, the 'public square' gets bigger and bigger, and therefore so does 'public regulation'.

Forty years ago, who you made a contract with was a private matter (with a very few ancient exceptions). Now it's a matter of the public square, regulated by public law. In biblical terms, when it comes to 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's', Caesar is taking it on himself to work out which things belong to him and which belong to God. Not surprisingly, Caesar wants more and more. That's very different from the Bible's teaching that the state has a role delegated from God, and for which it is answerable to him. There God has defined what belongs to Caesar.

This means the big debate is not between egalitarian secularists and equality-denying Christians. The debate is between two different conceptions of equality, and what lies at the centre of that equality. Look back at the three dimensions of Christian equality. The triune creator-redeemer God is at the centre of each one, and vitally that

gives an absolute, transcendent, foundation for equality that does not depend on well-intentioned but flawed human opinion or consensus.

Ultimately, of course, you cannot have a scheme of human rights and equality without making appeals to absolutes and to something that transcends temporary human opinion. The tragedy of secular egalitarianism is that it has no God to appeal to for this absolute, and so it has to invent one: itself. I think this is normally clouded from us by the appeal to democratic majorities and what 'most people' find acceptable. And therein lies the heart of the problem at the moment: we Christians do believe profoundly in equality (it comes from the Great Commission, apart from anything else). What we don't believe is that a democratic majority can either properly or successfully play the part of God in sustaining and defining what that equality consists of. When these issues are not clear, it's no wonder we find ourselves frustrated and confused. We're being perpetually wrong-footed.

What then? It means challenging secular assumptions at two fairly fundamental levels. First, clarifying for secularists around us that we do believe in equality. At the moment, we sometimes look and sound as though we don't. Secondly, and more importantly, we need to keep on asking why secularist majorities think they have the right to tell us what equality means. That is a right that's been assumed and to be honest it sounds as though they think they're better than us poor benighted Christians. It's a bit elitist, and not exactly egalitarian.

Even more significantly, we frankly need to talk more openly and unashamedly about the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and his rights. On reflection, isn't it staggering that any debate about rights can be carried on without seriously mentioning God's rights? If you systematically excluded mention of a human group's rights in a discussion on rights, you'd rightly be suspected of the worst kind of racism.

All this will, I think, lead us into long discussions over whether God exists. So it should. Because you might say that whether and who God is, is precisely the question.