

Christian progress, Christian regress

The stakes of *Obergefell* aren't abstract. Hanging in the balance are the basic rights of living, breathing, beloved people.

From the Editors

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Century illustration (Source images: Douglas Rissing and tolgart / Getty)

The September 2022 issue of the *Century* introduced a redesign of the magazine, which included a new tagline: “Thoughtful, Independent, Progressive.” This was also the title of editor/publisher Peter Marty’s column, in which he explicated each of those three words. Our use of *progressive*, he wrote, does not map onto any political identity or partisan allegiance. The *Century*’s progressive Christianity is instead a faith that is broadminded, forward looking, and “interested in giving voice to those

who yearn for a world where everyone has a seat at the table.”

Too many people—too many Christians—are attempting to take seats away from the table. Kim Davis is a case in point. Davis, a former county clerk in Kentucky who became a conservative darling in 2015 when she refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, is now asking the Supreme Court to overturn *Obergefell v. Hodges*. At press time, the court had not announced whether it will consider Davis’s petition to eliminate federal protections for same-sex marriages—whether it will set aside progress and choose regress, a move toward narrower mindsets, backward-looking vision, and fewer people at the table.

Davis has consistently cited her Christian belief as motivation. The high view of marriage held by Davis—who conceived twins with the man who would become her third husband while still married to her first—is apparently incompatible with same-sex unions. But the issue is not one person’s hypocrisy; it is the moral choice facing our society. And so this nation’s and this magazine’s history seems to repeat a cycle. As in the days of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, there are strains of Christianity that opt for progress and others that choose regress.

*Progress* and *regress* are abstract words. They attempt to capture the overall direction of values, trends, policies, and norms. But moments like this—the court deciding whether to hear Davis’s case—matter for concrete reasons: hanging in the balance are the rights of living, breathing, beloved people. What’s at stake is not just which side of the culture war gets a *W* in its column. It is people’s marriages, health insurance, parental rights, hospital visitations, survivor benefits, and—running beneath it all—their psychological wellness. A Johns Hopkins study found that states that legalized same-sex marriage before *Obergefell* saw an average 14 percent reduction in suicide attempts among lesbian, gay, and bisexual high school students.

Progress—and the concrete gains it procures for those once denied a seat at the table—does not happen on its own. The *Century*’s founders built an expectant optimism right into the magazine’s name, only to realize through the struggles of the 20th century that theological triumphalism is no way to promote human rights and dignity. Our name remains, but any triumphalism has given way to the urgent need for solidarity, action, and hope. These are not new priorities. In 1909, newly ordained Episcopal priest Walter Russell Bowie penned “O Holy City, Seen of John,” a hymn we may now need to sing at the steps of the Supreme Court: “Give us, O God,

the strength to build / The City that has stood / Too long a dream, whose laws are  
love, / Whose ways, the common good.”

As ever, it is time to build.