

# Introductory Thoughts on Equality

*Significant ambiguity stands behind the word equality, a crucial consideration in discussions of social issues such as those explored in the article following these introductory observations.*

Frederick Mark Gedicks

In Matthew 20, Jesus relates a perplexing parable. A farmer went down to the marketplace early one morning to hire day laborers for his vineyard. The farmer found some people willing to work and agreed to pay them each a penny for a day's labor. Later in the morning, the farmer noticed others milling about the marketplace, and hired them as well, promising that "whatsoever is right I will give you" (v. 4); he did the same at noon and at mid-afternoon, again promising the latecomers that he would pay them whatever is fair. Finally, "at the eleventh hour," he noticed that there still remained men loitering about the marketplace. "Why stand ye here all the day idle?" he asked (v. 6). "Because no man hath hired us," the laborers replied (v. 7). Upon hearing this, the farmer hired the men himself, even though there was only one hour left in the work day: "Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive" (v. 7).

When evening came and the work day had ended, the farmer called the laborers together to give them their pay. To each of those hired last, at the eleventh hour, he gave a penny. One can imagine that such a wage must have raised the spirits of those hired early in the morning; having just witnessed the farmer paying a penny to those hired last, who worked only the last hour of the day, those hired first expected to be paid more. But when it came their turn, "they likewise received each man a penny" (v. 10). Thinking they had been treated unfairly, they complained to the farmer, saying "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou

hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day" (v. 12). The farmer was unmoved:

Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? (vv. 13-15)

One can imagine these workers wandering off into the night, muttering about the injustice of it all.

This parable illustrates, among other things, the illusive character of equality. In one respect, equality seems to be merely a formal characteristic. It attempts to prescribe not how people must be treated, but only that, however they are treated, they all be treated the same. For example, equality cannot tell us what a fair wage should be; it states only that those who do the same amount of work should receive the same wages. What is problematic about the parable of the marketplace from the standpoint of equality—and what tends to trouble Latter-day Saints—is not that the first group of laborers may have received minuscule pay for twelve hours of hard labor (which may have been the going wage), but that those who worked only an hour received the same pay as those who worked the full day.

Yet, merely treating people the same is frequently insufficient to satisfy equality. What is necessary for equality is not merely that people be treated the same, but that they be treated the same with respect to some relevant factor, such as hours worked. Had the first-hired workers been paid \$.12 for their twelve hours of labor, and the last-hired workers \$.01 for their single hour of work, most modern people would agree that the workers had been treated equally even though they were paid different amounts. My intent is not to judge whether the farmer in the parable acted equitably or not—indeed, the smallest unit of time for a legal wage in the first century could have been a day, for all we know. Rather, my point is only this: when people are situated differently with respect to some relevant characteristic, then equality permits, and may demand, different treatment.

Although this principle is obvious in theory, many controversies over equality revolve around attempts to determine in practice the characteristics or situations by which equality should be



measured. For example, while U.S. law holds that it is virtually never legitimate for government to allocate scarce services or opportunities based upon a person's race, it is proper and permissible to ration these things on the basis of relevant intellectual or physical characteristics. Thus, a state university may not consider race in deciding whether to admit a group of applicants, but it may properly admit those applicants with the highest combination of grade point averages and entrance examination scores, and its basketball coach may accept onto the team only the most skilled players. Relevance is not always this obvious, however. Consider two possible applicants, one from a poverty-stricken home who attended a large, crime-ridden public high school and was the first in her family to graduate, and another from a wealthy family with a long tradition of educational excellence who has attended a prestigious private school? Is equality served if the latter student is preferred over the former because she has better grades and test scores? Is the fact that one has overcome considerable obstacles in earning her grades—or, conversely, that one has had few obstacles and many advantages—a factor relevant to university admissions decisions? How are these questions to be answered? The concept of equality alone cannot tell us which characteristics or factors or situations are relevant and thus justify differential treatment; equality can tell us only that once it has been established that a person is differently situated from others in some relevant way, differential treatment is permitted, if not required.

One consequence of this uncertainty about which characteristics or factors are relevant to an equality-driven decision is that one can always make a plausible case for equality or inequality, regardless of how the decision is made, by arguing that factors relevant to the decision were not considered or that irrelevant factors were. If the disadvantaged student is admitted over the advantaged one, it can be argued that academic indicators are the only relevant factors and thus the advantaged student was treated unequally. If the disadvantaged student is rejected in favor of the advantaged one, it can be argued that educational disadvantage is a relevant factor and thus the disadvantaged student was treated unequally.

Another problem is deciding when equality is the value or virtue that should drive the result. Other qualities may also prove

to be important and controlling. For instance, generosity may yield unequal results. A person may rightly give a gift to one friend without bestowing the same favor on all.

As if these perplexities were not already enough, considerations of equality in gospel contexts can become even more confusing. Although in gospel contexts the consistency of decisions or doctrines with the idea of equality must be evaluated according to spiritual criteria, our situation in a fallen world often leads us to think or speak in terms of worldly or secular criteria and rhetoric. Being aware of this circumstance can affect evaluations of equality in a religious setting in at least two ways. First, decisions that seem to violate equality according to worldly criteria may actually affirm equality when considered on the basis of spiritual criteria. Second, worldly criteria may sometimes be mistaken for spiritual criteria, so that inequalities that seem required by spiritual criteria, in fact, are not. Identifying worldly and spiritual criteria and distinguishing their respective effects on gospel decisions or doctrines is as difficult as it is unavoidable.

In the article that follows, Kent Harrison and Mary Stovall Richards consider feminism, which is a term with many meanings but which in all of its manifestations is pervasively about gender equality. They consider the core concerns of feminism “in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” In so doing, they undertake the difficult task of sorting out the mixture of worldly and spiritual criteria on which our judgments of equal treatment in gender issues so often rest. For example, they observe that the Savior often valued eternal perspectives over social conventions governing relations between men and women; from this section we might learn that the Savior desires more sensitivity on our part to the difference between social habits or political definitions and eternal spiritual imperatives. They persuasively argue that the assumptions long relied upon to deny women equal treatment in education and employment are derived from culture rather than scripture. Their attempt to disentangle the spirit from the flesh deserves careful attention from all who wish to ponder how equality figures as one of God’s attributes and a factor in contemporary Latter-day Saint circumstances.

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