

Christian Freedom

What is freedom? In our secular society freedom is thought of almost exclusively in terms of exemption from restraint, absence of commitment. Most secular scholars pride themselves as being liberated. For them it means liberated from any entanglement with economic, social or religious views. They see as their greatest enemy of freedom – faith, dogma and commitment. But this position confuses freedom with license. No man has the license to do whatever he pleases. Freedom knows how to limit itself. It is restrained by law. We have the freedom to obey the norms that give structure to our human existence. We may use our freedom to drive on the left side of the road. But this is an irresponsible and deadly use of freedom. Reformed faith – like the Gospels – always championed freedom, but freedom as subject to responsibility. There is no freedom without responsibility. We are free to serve God. We are free to submit to the will of God (Rom. 3:28, 31). We have the freedom to do our duty. We are freed from man's whims and wishes, to submit to each truth derived from God's Word. Thus no academic freedom at all?

Academic freedom may not be confused with license. It means that you should be able to teach your subject matter within the confessional basis of the college or university. All research and teaching express the prior views and positions of the teacher. For the Christian the Bible is the point of departure for his reflections on modern man, society and the world. His research must be rooted in the Word of God, located within the fellowship of the community of saints, and ordered to the confession of faith. Each college should have the freedom to do its research in line with its confessional position. It should let no one else play boss in its own house.

Neutrality Impossible

Neutrality in education and scientific research is impossible. We live in a fallen world. Sin has not only affected our personal relationship with God, but also every sphere of life. Alongside actual falsehood, we have mistakes in observation, memory, as well as in process of thought. In our sinful world, every man has his own faith position, looks at the world from his own perspective. The man who does not believe does not exist. Faith is a unique function of our inner life, implanted in human nature at creation. Of course, this statement is also a declaration of faith. Man is religious by nature. He is driven by a faith commitment. This does not mean that he necessarily believes in God or gods. Too often the definition of faith has been confined to the adherence to a major religious faith – such as Christianity or Islam. Faith is much broader. It is to hold something to be true, to confide in something and to obey something. This faith then is possessed by and motivates all mankind. From this standpoint of faith, whatever that faith be, the scientist approaches his own particular field of study. This faith provides him with a starting-point for his observation. This subjective factor is a given. That's why science cannot be purely objective. In teaching or scientific research your own personality, background and faith commitment have a vital bearing. For the Christian his faith seeks its ground not in feeling or mood but in the infallible Word of God alone.

Every man from his own point of view claims the truth for himself and applies the heading "untrue" to everything that opposes it. A Roman Catholic has an entirely different idea of the history of the Reformation from a Protestant, not because he purposely violates the truth but simply because without his knowing it his church's interests lead him into an opposite direction. "Nobody writes a scientific thesis," said Abraham Kuyper, "with the purpose of propagating falsehood; the purpose of all scientific labor is to champion the truth." With all this in mind, we can readily see why a Christian applies himself differently in his teaching and research than a Buddhist, a secular-humanist, or a Marxist. When I taught World Religions at Redeemer College, I spent considerable time explaining the various approaches to the subject and my own Christian methodology. So in the naturalistic sciences too no one can advance without a faith commitment.

Confessional Integrity

Charles Wesley wrote:
To serve the present age,
My calling to fulfil
O may it all my pow'rs engage
To do my Master's will!
– "A Charge to Keep I have."

How does a Christian scholar serve in the present and fulfil his calling? He confesses Christ or not at all. Each Christian has a personal confessional commitment. Yet he has also a corporate responsibility. Though an individual he still is part of the Christian community (Ephesians 4:15, 15). As a Christian researcher and instructor he has a responsibility towards his fellow believers. And he has a commitment to be loyal to the institution he has chosen to serve. As a Christian he keeps his faith community in mind in his research. He does not immediately publish his findings. A Christian scholar is free, but within limits. Jacques Ellul made a wise comment when he wrote about the research work of a Christian:

His freedom is that of knowing the relative character of his discipline, of taking his own slow and painful course with all its doubts and difficulties, for why publish non-existent results or alarm humble Christians who can neither understand what he is doing nor follow his path but will get a wrong impression of what he is up to. His freedom is that of keeping quiet except for sharing his work with other intellectuals in the church. Taking any other course means vanity, passion, or idolatry.

Of course, a Christian may publish, share his convictions and insights in the market place of ideas. But too often publications have appeared which were not thoroughly discussed within the college community.

Confessional integrity? Yes! But the church community must not be afraid to investigate. The confessions are not on the same level as Scripture. They do not compete with

Scripture for our loyalty. Each plays a different and complementary role. "The Bible is the Word of God to man, Philip Schaff reminded us, while "the Creed is man's answer to God." A professor in a confessional college is bound by his commitment made to its program and charter. Does this not restrict academic freedom after all? No! The professors are free from the relativism and the nihilism of this age. They are free to explore God's world. The truth of God has set them free (John 8:32). At a Christian college they can teach and think out of a living faith. They do research and teach in the light of God's revelation in Scripture. But what if a professor starts to question the confessional stance of the college? He must take the risk of his convictions. No board of trustees can deny him free speech or the right to publish. In his personal convictions the man of science must be respected. But a board may decide, after proper investigation, that his views are incompatible with the confession of the college and the supporting faith community. Abraham Kuyper wrote: ". . . that a board of trustees should dismiss a professor, who, according to their view, does not serve the end for which he was appointed has nothing whatever to do with this liberty of studies."

Love and Understanding

Are we placing undue restraints upon our Christian colleges? Groen Van Prinsterer (1801-1876) believed that a church must oppose false teaching, but woe to the church that does no more than that. Love gets lost, and when love gets lost, then the Christian faith is in spiritual danger. He was right. We must speak the truth in love.

If changes must be made, they should be done in the spirit of the ninth commandment. Our professors should have the room to maneuver, to discuss and to share ideas. Give them breathing space. Don't constantly peer over their shoulders. We need to be watchful, but this must be a watchfulness of a brother who is there to help, to encourage and to rebuke – if necessary. We are our brother's keeper. Dr. Francis Schaeffer contended for the truth. He stood for his convictions. Dr. Schaeffer repeatedly wrote that the world is watching how Christians handle their differences. He was a defender of the faith until the end of his life. But one truth he stressed over and over again. The mark of a Christian is love. He concluded his last book with this memorable exhortation:

. . . We are to love all true Christian brothers in a way that the world may observe. This means showing love to our brothers in the midst of our differences—great or small—loving our brothers when it costs us something, loving them even under times of tremendous emotional tension, loving them in a way the world can see. In short, we are to practice and exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God, for without this we grieve the Holy Spirit. Stand for the truth. Don't grieve the Spirit, lest we ourselves fall into mortal danger.

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