

Academic Freedom and the Quest for Truth

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I

Freedom belongs to man on religious grounds. Freedom is the gift of God which man has through a right relationship to God and to the truth of God. To be a Christian is to have both the right to that freedom and the capacity for it. "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free. . . . If then the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free" (John 8:32,36 NEB). External coercion in religious matters is a denial of that freedom. If freedom is restricted, the power of truth must be limited.

The Christian faith, or any religion for that matter, must have the stabilizing power of sound ideas and of balanced emotions and willpower. Consequently, Christians should never decry diligent research of the truths of the Bible, but only intolerant, dogmatic perversion of research. There are few things more calamitous than the control of men's independent thinking by dogmatists who claim to have a monopoly on truth. We cannot copyright truth. Truth is larger than any man's conception of it.

Candor compels us to say that all too often through the centuries the Church has been characterized by intolerance, obscurantism, and intellectual dishonesty. Men have practiced every other kind of virtue but intellectual honesty. The truth of God is the mightiest power that can possess the mind of man; yet in the hands of some men it tends to become perverted and restricted — both by intolerant, ignorant religionists, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by the "liberal" who holds nothing sacrosanct and questions everything.

The mind of man as an essential part of the image of God in man, has its

rights. When those rights are denied or ignored, the results are destructive in every way. When religion is divorced from the diligent exercise of the mind, it tends to grovel in make-belief, in superstition, and in dangerous forms of demonic manifestation.

The place of academic freedom in Christian colleges has always been hard to determine. By it we mean both freedom from limitation or restraint as to the material to be studied, and freedom in the method used in communicating the various subjects taught and discussed. Conservative church-related colleges in particular are often accused of violating or restricting academic freedom, of being closed to certain ideas with which they disagree.

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Religion as a field of study is of unusual importance because it comes with the claim of divine authority. Freedom and authority are both Christian principles and Christian demands, and not one more than the other. Freedom is not the freedom of wild fanatics, religious subversives — but the liberty of the children of God. Authority and freedom together constitute the sound compendium of the Christian faith. This means that the church must not deny the right of teachers, students, and believers to think differently. At the same time, however, the church must assert the right of a conservative Christian college to be different within a secular culture and to defend its religious position and stand on the revealed word of God. No one should deny a church college the right to give an adequate and favorable presentation of the faith on which it is based.

This does not mean a one-sidedness on religious points of view. Where academic freedom exists, various sides of a religious question can be presented without compromise on matters of faith. This procedure holds true in the study of comparative religions, in the examination of Creation, and in the consideration of textual and higher criticism. Christian faith does not have to suffer thereby. The firmer one's faith is in God's truth, the less afraid he will be to examine other positions than his own. Someone has said, "The universe is fireproof, and it is safe to strike a match anywhere."

II

If freedom of thought and expression is to be preserved, then we all must be continually alert to the dangers that beset such dearly-bought liberty and must sacrifice time and energy to preserve it. There are certain qualities of mind essential to academic freedom.

The first is *intellectual integrity*. We should not ask men to choose between honesty and faith. Unfortunately, class and professional position de-

termine most of the thinking. If the status quo is essential to prestige, then men don't want any changes that threaten that. Men are prone to marshal their feelings and biases in support of that position. It is difficult for a person with favored place, standing, and frontage to get a true picture of himself. Many a man is tempted to think highly of himself by virtue of the position he holds. Keeping the mind ever open to new aspects of truth, especially when these cross one's personal opinions, is one of the hardest things to do. Consequently, people get confused as to the nature of freedom. They themselves demand freedom of thought and speech for their own position, but deny that freedom to others because it disagrees with that position.

To have intellectual integrity also means to face the question of the competence or incompetence of the human mind to arrive at ultimate truth. The Christian responsibility is to remind ourselves that we are sinners and yet children of our heavenly Father by the grace of God. That means that ultimate answers do not reside in us. The claim to total competence independent of divine revelation is sheer pride and folly. Appeal must be made to more than reason. Logic is not enough. We do not proclaim as ultimate truth the product of man's mind deteriorated by sin, but that which is the expression of God's mind. Only the truth which comes from God can be ultimate and final. The intellect must not be enthroned above the revelation of God. For when reason is enthroned, it sits in judgment on Jesus Christ and on revealed truth. Man is in peril when he himself becomes the ultimate court of appeal. Human pride and arrogance, agnosticism and cynicism flourish in such an atmosphere.

Intellectual integrity requires humility before the facts. No interpretation of truth is correct simply because it is so many years old, nor false because it is new and may contradict what has been previously held. At the same time, the deep features of truth remain the same. We believe in the eternal truth because we believe in divine revelation. Men who have the spirit of Christ will not be easily turned from biblical truth. But to say that one has to believe certain things in order to be loyal to the church can lead to rebellion and skepticism. Fairmindedness, a clear knowledge of all the facts, genuine spirituality, and sound scholarship should all complement one another.

The second quality of mind essential to academic freedom is *openminded diligence* in the search for truth. The most troublesome thing is suppressed truth. It will not stay suppressed. It is dangerous to believe that any one person or church has all the truth, and that is all there is to it. The Christian has no greater obligation than to search for the truth and to obey it.

The last thing Jesus sought to do was to fetter the intellect. The word of God puts no padlock on the mind. Revelation was given us not to suppress the mind but to assist it in learning what is true.

No Christian can afford to be arrogant as to the truth he holds, since it is the gift of God. One must not develop a theology of fear in the name of the God who dispels fear. One must not advocate a religion that suppresses freedom in the name of Christ who promised man freedom by means of truth. The discovery of truth is sometimes hindered by those who claim to be its defenders. Some men tend to feel that truth will not survive unless one be continually engaged in defending the truth of God. Truth has nothing to fear from investigation and scholarly research. There is still a vast range of truth beyond man's present knowledge. Sound discussion is to be desired. By it we may be able to see other facets of the truth without resorting to controversy in an un-Christian way. God has much more for man to know and learn.

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Religion that is afraid of investigation and scholarship tends toward superstition and emotionalism. One can but object to the paralyzing fear that if study were pushed any further faith would thereby be undermined. It is alarming indeed when one entertains the idea that a vague and shallow belief that cannot stand further study is superior to that which commands the believer to love God with his *whole mind* as well as with his heart, soul, and strength. Blind credulity as to the truth one holds is the refuge of sluggish minds. It relieves the individual from real study of God's word. It settles all differences by silencing all opposing voices and denying the right to ask questions. This takes all the meaning out of religion, leaving it ignorant, superficial, intolerant. Quite often young people are victimized by a failure to provide an adequate interpretation of religious authority. The authority exercised is too narrow to be trusted, too competitive to be redemptive, too self-centered to be saving, and too parochial to be creative and dynamic.

At the same time there is a positive side to the search for truth. One of the manifestations of our intellectual age is the fear of positive conclusions and convictions. Many men seem to be afraid that, if they commit themselves wholeheartedly to any belief, in some way they surrender their intellectual freedom and can no longer be objective about truth. From this misunderstanding, they come to resent the authority exercised by the church or the word of God. But thinking that fulfills men as sons of God must rest upon the assurance that divine truths are forever true.

Much of modern criticism of religion is negative in character. It takes

away and gives nothing in return. The habit of asking questions that raise only doubt is easy to acquire. It is a serious error to permit oneself to entertain doubts on everything, to give attention to the negative aspects rather than to the positive. Today men need to be nerved on affirmatives. These edify the mind and develop the character. To attack truth or error in any other way than by spreading positive understanding is hardly worthwhile. Much of man's problem in the search for truth arises out of the spirit of willful ignorance and failure to obey the truth. What a man is not living up to he finds easy to question and doubt.

The third essential quality of mind is *Christian tolerance*. Belief in God and truth, for most people, is so serious a matter that the believer must stand firmly and be an outspoken defender of the faith at all times. With a firm faith there comes the obligation to propagate one's creed. Consequently, many religionists often become militant in their faith. From this point it is but a step to intolerance.

One of the most curious of all the illusions that beset mankind is the tendency to suppose that we are mentally and morally superior to those who differ from us in opinion. The nature of the human heart is such that under the guise of defending the faith, the individual finds it easy to respond with varying degrees of intolerance to those who may differ with him. Men get angry and excommunicative in debate, not because they are defending the truth, but because they attach importance to themselves and to the positions they hold.

Christian tolerance is the ascendancy of unselfish goodwill over all differences of opinion. The Christian possesses both love of truth and love of his neighbor. As the man who is sure of his wife is free from jealousy, so the man who is sure of the truth he holds can afford to be courteous and tolerant with others who entertain the opposite convictions. When John complained about a man driving out devils in the name of Christ, Jesus said, "Do not stop him; no one who does a work of divine power in my name will be able in the same breath to speak evil of me. For he who is not against us is on our side" (Mark 9:38-40 NEB). It was not the failure of this unknown man to get right results that led to John's intolerance. Evidently the man was casting out devils, but not doing it the orthodox way.

Christians should learn to like other religious men, even if they cannot accept their theology. All too often the claim to know the truth has degenerated into calling names. We don't agree with what a man says; so we make disparaging remarks about him. It is easier to abuse a man by charging him with error and wrong motives than to take time to find out what he

actually does believe. There is far too much castigation of others in the name of Christianity. It denies the faith. It obscures the truth. It expresses a doubtful emotional response to one's fellowmen.

Unfortunately, under the name of amiability some have minds like a house where the doors are open to all kinds of religious opinions, one regarded as good as another. However, there is a clear distinction between religious tolerance and religious indifference. The claim to be broad-minded can be nothing more than shallow-mindedness. Sometimes men claim to be tolerant when they are simply indifferent. They simply do not care about truth at all. It is easy to be tolerant when nothing is at stake.

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To many people the phrase "academic freedom" is forbidding. It is confused with the pursuit of knowledge independent of God, a departure from the word of God. But true academic freedom is a right thing. It insists that we have a frame of mind of our own, and a life that corresponds with the revelation of divine truth. The truth of God presents so much to be investigated and studied that one is never content with secondhand information. Skepticism of the Bible grows more out of ignorance and indifference than out of clear knowledge.

III

But how tolerant should a conservative Christian college be towards divergent views? How far should teachers go to give students any or all ideas, no matter how divergent they may be? The purpose of the Christian college is to instruct and capture the life of the student for Christ without violating his freedom or bypassing his right to think for himself. There is a Christian type of control exercised by the church which seeks to maintain the faith on which the college is established, the unique beliefs and values not found anywhere else. These, the church maintains, are of prime importance for the fulfilling of the individual.

The teacher's teaching and personal beliefs are of great significance. By virtue of the influence he has on young lives, their importance cannot be exaggerated. The Christian college is founded for the purpose of restoring in men and women the image of God. The Christian influence of a college depends on the sound Christian character of the staff as well as of the student body. Unless that college takes a definite stand on the eternal gospel and the word of God, there is no reason for its continued existence. Any state college has the right to stay clear of religion, and that is its claim to academic freedom. Any Christian college has the right to teach the Christian faith, and that is its claim to academic freedom. Religion is not thrust down

people's throats simply because the school has built its program and curriculum on the Christian faith. That occurs only when clear thinking is bypassed and students are emotionally conditioned to one way of thinking. Academic freedom will cherish and defend truth. It will seek in the spirit of Christ to maintain and encourage a life of positive commitment to the everlasting gospel of Christ.

What marks academic freedom is not dissension, but mental and spiritual growth. This growth is not unlike man's discovery of atomic energy. The capacity to learn something new, to be corrected if in error, to consider the difference between what we really know and what we only assume and take for granted, to be considerate of those who do not agree with us — all this is an essential aspect of Christian living.

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Consequently, to be a Christian scholar is a marvelous thing. It is also a serious responsibility. For if one fails in his quest for mental and spiritual growth, he may become a bigot and a traitor to truth. However fervently we claim to possess the truth, we must ask it to do what is really needful for us: to clear our minds of fogginess, to increase our grasp of truth, to sanctify our personal relationships, to transform our whole life. To commit oneself to a faith and a church with a special mission in the world — a mission that can rightfully claim a support which few others could claim — requires deep spirituality and keen intellectuality. Ours is a time that has no precedent, a time that has come to the shining of a marvelous light from God. This means that we search for truth with a committed and orderly mind and also with a serious moral and spiritual purpose.

Academic freedom means diligence and industry, endurance and honesty, devotion and commitment, where all of life is caught up in the search for the truth given to us in Jesus Christ and in his word.