

Academic Freedom— Liberty or License?

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Galatians 5:9—“A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

Galatians 5:13—“For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another.”

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Academic Freedom—Liberty or License?

Academic freedom, like the priesthood of the believer, is an idea which has almost surpassed confessional status among some modern Southern Baptists. These two tenets of our faith have oddly evolved an almost creedal sanctity among some Southern Baptists ostensibly seeking to flee from the shackles of creedalism, which they fear may be imposed upon them by conservative Southern Baptists. The paucity of available information in either confession or systematic theology is apparently no deterrent to advocating devotion to these concepts as the *sine qua non* of what it means to be Southern Baptist.

The purpose of this essay is to focus on the question of academic freedom in an attempt to discover its essence, its dangers, and its limitations. The methodology will employ commentary on the superb statement in Article XII of *The Baptist Faith and Message*.

What is Academic Freedom?

Article XII. Education

The cause of education in the Kingdom of Christ is coordinate with the causes of missions and general benevolence, and should receive along with these the liberal support of the churches. An adequate system of Christian schools is necessary to a complete spiritual program for Christ's people.

In Christian education there should be a proper balance between academic freedom and academic responsibility. Freedom in any orderly relationship of human life is always limited and never absolute. The freedom of a teacher in a Christian school, college, or seminary is limited by the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ, by the authoritative nature of the Scriptures, and by the distinct purpose for which the school exists.¹

For all of its excellence, Article XII does not define academic freedom. Much more is said about the constraints or parameters of that freedom. But clearly, the discussion centers around the classroom and the scholastic enterprise in general. Therefore, the salient questions revolve around the extent of research allowable and what may be proposed, taught, and written in that scholastic milieu.

¹EDITOR'S NOTE: The 1963 version of the Baptist Faith and Message was used in the original preparation of this document during the critical period of the Conservative Resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention. The 2000 version of Article XII is more extensive and should be consulted.

1. Academic freedom presupposes the right to unencumbered research. Even this free research has its limits. Genetic and biological research, for example, must proceed without inflicting unnecessary pain or loss of human life and must ply its trade in humility before God. But generally all aspects of life and history and all of the theories of the social, religious, psychological, philosophical, and historical orders are open to scholarly examination and investigation.

2. Academic freedom protects the right to teach and publish all discovered truth. Truth must remain our intellectual as well as spiritual commitment. Perhaps, however, we must designate “true truth,” as Francis Schaeffer suggested, in order to stress that we do not mean subjectivized “existential truth” of the variety that negates, ignores, or considers unimportant either verifiable facts and/or the revealed word of God. Nevertheless, truth is the objective. If the truth discovered violates our most cherished conclusions, we must still maintain truth. Responsible limitations discussed below will govern the extent to which various theories may be advocated in classroom or monograph.

3. Academic freedom suggests the right and the responsibility of the academy to acquaint the student with all of the options. It is at this point that conservatives have sometimes erred, and a few may even part company with me. A student is not receiving preparation for the real world if he is not acquainted with its philosophies. A graduate of Baptist schools should be able to discuss Freud and Skinner in psychology, Marx in sociology, liberation and process in theology, the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis in Old Testament, the synoptic problem in New Testament, et cetera, ad infinitum. But it should also be recognized that a graduate of the University of Texas or an Ivy League university should have that same post-graduate ability. What then makes the Baptist school distinctive? At a Baptist institution one should be clearly instructed as to the weaknesses of unbiblical proposals and should hear from the professor a challenging, persuasive, evangelical alternative. There is no compelling reason for existence unless Baptist institutions communicate to student the “Baptist perspective” on all issues discussed.

4. Academic freedom supposes the right, through classroom lecture and writing, to advocate and test theories within certain boundaries. What are these limits? An academician has no right to advocate a theory which contradicts the clear teachings of the Scriptures, the statement of faith, purpose and philosophy of the institution by whom he is employed, or the generally accepted tenets of the institution’s supporting constituency. The exception to this is the recognition that there are times when institutions or constituencies can be wrong. Furthermore, the majority is often in error. But majorities do have their rights, too—an idea conveniently obscured these days. One of those rights is to determine what the majority wishes to support and what it does not wish to support. Unless the progenitor of a theory which contradicts the democratically expressed will of the institution and its constituency can establish the superiority of his own position beyond reasonable doubt, he is bound not to advocate a theory which violates “the pre-eminence of Jesus Christ,” “the authoritative nature of the Scriptures,” or the “the distinct purpose for which the school exists.” If, however, this proves unsatisfactory, a professor has one other guaranteed option.

5. Academic freedom guarantees the right of a demurring professor to resign and seek employment within a context hospitable to his/her thinking. This time-honored expedient is both just and noble and results in maximum harmony for all, thus fulfilling a biblical idea, “if it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18).

The Limits of Academic Freedom

In discussing the fourth item above we have already alluded to the limits of academic freedom. Article XII recognized that “freedom in any orderly relationship of human life is always limited and never absolute.” Therefore, we are not left to discuss whether or not there are limits. Our task is only to define what those limits may be! Article XII provides three such limitations suggesting a triangular pasture within which we may, like contented sheep, do our intellectual grazing to our hearts’ content. They are as follows:

1. The pre-eminence of Jesus Christ is the first limitation. Jesus is Lord! If Jesus said something, we embrace and obey it. If Jesus believed something to be the case, then so do we. Our academic freedoms terminate at the feet of the God-man, Jesus. The popular appeal to the authority of Jesus, while downplaying the role of the Bible, must be recognized as a vacuous expedient. We know almost nothing at all about Jesus—His essence, His person, His words, His work, or His authority—outside the pages of the New Testament. To acknowledge the authority of Jesus is to acknowledge the authority of the Scriptures. After all, it was Jesus himself who denominated those who failed to believe “all” of the Scriptures as “fools” and “slow of heart” (Luke 24:25).

2. The authoritative nature of the Scriptures binds us two ways. First, we may not in our academic pursuits contradict the Scriptures by calling into question their accuracy or alleging error in biblical history, philosophy, science, theology, etc. As the six presidents of our Southern Baptist seminaries declared in their Glorieta Statement, “The Bible is not errant in any area of reality.”

Second, we are also bound to pattern our behavior after the holiness of life enjoined on the pages of Holy Scripture and to teach the whole counsel of God as revealed within its pages. “Plenary inspiration” means that all of the Bible is fully inspired of God and essential, though it is recognized that some aspects are more critical than others.

3. The distinct purpose for which the school exists focuses on the purposes of the founding fathers of an institution and the statements of philosophy, purpose, and faith of an institution, which in turn should be informed by the purposes and faith of the supporting constituency. To teach contrary to these canons is to stretch academic freedom to the point that it becomes immoral license.

License Disguised as Liberty—A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing

In 1925 Kirsopp Lake released a prophetic masterpiece entitled *The Religion of Yesterday and Tomorrow*. Lake was not a fundamentalist and criticized conservatives for what he termed “obscurantism.” However, he was more critical of another contingency on the 1925 horizon.

Nevertheless in all or almost all churches, there is a large party which holds a mediating position. I shall call it, for reasons which will appear, the Institutionalists. In the first place, it endeavours to reduce to a minimum the amount of “opinion” which must be accepted; in books belonging to this school, this is sometimes called “dropping unessentials,” and the unessentials prove to be as a rule those things which the writer in question has come to doubt. In the second place, it endeavours to use the old language to express new meanings, feeling that though it be dangerous to put new wine into old bottles, it is at least

always advantageous to keep the old labels. In many ways this school has a long and distinguished history. Often illogical and well adapted to human needs, it changes its ground from day to day, yielding now a little to the Fundamentalist, and now to the Experimentalist, but always remembering the practical necessities of the churches regarded as “going concerns.”

Are there indications that Lake’s fears were justified? The following are some of the more popular disguises for the wolf of license frolicking with the free sheep of the Lord’s fold.

1. Accreditation. The American educational scene has invested exaggerated confidence in “voluntary” accrediting associations. To what extent these associations actually facilitate educational advancement is moot, since anyone seriously trying to compete for students in the modern market will find that such entities as regional accrediting bodies have been virtually deified by everyone from industry to contributing foundations. While this fact alone poses a threat of sorts to the doctrinal, philosophical, and pedagogical autonomy of private institutions, the real danger is the propensity of school administrators to shirk responsibility to supporting constituencies by hiding behind the skirts of accrediting associations. “If I take action, we will lose our accreditation” is a common referral.

The facts are otherwise. Whatever the virtues of peer-evaluative groups, they will not lift accreditation as long as administrators show evenhandedness in handling faculty and student problems. The key here is to have written policies and live by those policies religiously. Accrediting associations do not tell you how to run a school. These associations insist only that an institution state clearly how it intends to proceed and that it fulfill that purpose faithfully. In any case, boards and supporters ought not to be induced to panic by crafty administrators who appeal to the mythical dangers of imminent foreclosure. Such evasive measures are another method of turning liberty to license.

2. Tenure. Does your pastor have tenure? Do most workers or business persons you know have tenure? Tenure is a system presently in vogue in most institutions of higher learning which assigns virtually unassailable status to a faculty member who achieves certain longevity and/or other contributions to the school. As such it establishes an elitism which the educational establishment abhors in the rest of the social order. Often tenure perpetuates mediocrity since it renders those who cease to be productive virtually immune to dismissal. Furthermore, tenure provides safe harbor for those whose perspectives and commitments run counter to those of the institution and its supporters.

An appropriate system of reward and recognition for both length of service and productivity needs to exist. Baptists need to pioneer such systems even while they jettison the ill-conceived, detrimental, and harmful system of tenure. Those already tenured should be able to trust the commitment of the school, but there is no reason why professors with objectionable agendas cannot be reassigned elsewhere in the institution. The school does not employ individuals only to be classroom teachers.

3. Faculty Veto. The practice in many institutions, particularly seminaries, of allowing faculty review and veto of prospective faculty has the potential for creating faculties which exclude unwanted viewpoints and perspectives. A wise administrator will counsel with faculty and welcome their recommendations. But the hiring of faculty should ultimately be the province of the trustees, following the careful screening and recommendation of the administration. The problem here is not the incompetence of individual faculty members, but rather the strong tendency to have a closed shop—and that in the name of academic freedom!

4. Privileged Information. Two tragic practices are common in educational institutions today. One is to hear a professor teach one way in class and then go preach an entirely different way in the churches. More common is the refusal to allow the tape recording of lectures. Consider the peculiarity of this last phenomenon. Ostensibly, students have enrolled in class to learn. Taping the lecture provides opportunity to hear the lecture again and reflect upon it. But what if an offended student mails a copy to a dreaded grand inquisitor who in turn publishes what the professor has said? One might wonder aloud why a professor dealing with a subject honestly and in keeping with his institutional commitments would object! John Silber, president of Boston University wondered the same thing.

Teaching is oral publication. Anybody who wants to turn teaching into a mystery religion or into sacred communication between a lawyer and his client, or a priest and his penitent, is talking nonsense. What the professor decides to talk to the student about in the privacy of his office is one thing. What he professes in class is a matter for public knowledge and he has no more right to prevent the public from knowing what he said in class than he does to prevent the public from reading one of his books.

Academic freedom becomes license whenever there is privileged classroom information from which the general non-elitist public is excluded.

5. Censorship of conservatives or censorship by omission. Nothing is quite so enigmatic as censorship in the name of academic freedom. Until now, several Southern Baptist seminaries have operated with only one or two inerrantists on their faculties. This condition prevails despite the abundant evidence demonstrating the preponderance of inerrantists among Southern Baptists. Testimony to this effect was recently supplied by Morris Ashcraft, moderate professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Since 1950 I have also taught at Midwestern Seminary and Southeastern Seminary. I have never studied under, nor served as a colleague with a professor who identified himself or herself as an inerrantist with reference to the Scripture (*Faith and Mission*, Volume IV/Number 2, Spring, 1987, p. 16).

In 1985, the president of Baylor University reacted angrily to student complaints about the showing of lewd films on campus by calling the complainers “a religious KGB.” If I do not miss my guess, he will be unhappy with me for reporting the incident here. In the name of academic freedom, he maintains on the faculty a Mormon who does not believe that Jesus is the eternal God, while at the same time suppressing student sentiment against immoral movies!

6. Agnosticism. Harold Fickett’s article “Academia and The Church Militant” appeared in December 1986 in *Eternity*. Fickett points to a strange phenomenon in academia.

Also, the healthy skepticism of all ideas as a working principle is now more and more substituted for the traditional end of that working principle, knowledge and wisdom. As a result, agnosticism on every score had acquired a weird reputation for nobility in institutions of learning, of knowing. In the end the idea of knowledge had become suspect: Higher learning, in its philosophic outlook, is largely self-contradictory. The transposition of style into substance has come about to heart may be an unjustifiable enterprise. Yet man is a religious creature:

He must worship something. What the university community has chosen to do is worship its own attitudes.

Fickett is right. The time has come for a responsible change. A new assessment of what Christian colleges and seminaries are supposed to be is in order. Quality education must once again be assessed on the basis of what graduates know rather than what they doubt. And wisdom must be placed back on the throne at the right hand of knowledge.

Conclusion

Three features are essential to the proper exercise of academic freedom. First, we must identify precisely what that freedom is and describe its limitations. Second, we must understand that we do not face a friendly world when it comes to Christian truths. As Fickett also said,

For truly in this Dark Age we can no longer pretend that Christians and non-Christians can agree that the most important thing is to be a gentleman. The time has long passed when we can afford this aesthetic dilution of our calling. For in this age of genocide, in this time of the slaughter of the innocent, one thing is abundantly clear: It's Christ or the barbarians.

Finally, we must recover the strategic mission of the Christian academy. Denton Lotz places it all in perspective in an address printed in *The Southern Baptist Educator* in September 1987.

A Baptist college has no right to exist as an institution of Christian higher education if it is not a servant of and responsible to the community of faith that nurtured and founded it.