

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Freedoms and Liberties: What if your freedom hurts me?

Freedom is a good thing. Nobody wants less freedom. Freedom of expression, freedom of speech, freedom of association, freedom of the press: very few people openly argue that these things should be abolished or curtailed. The opposites of freedom are slavery, repression, imprisonment and tyranny. Nobody openly promotes those things. And yet total freedom is not possible in a world that contains two or more people! If I have total freedom of action, and choose to assault you, you have lost your freedom to live in peace. If you exercise your freedom to cut down every tree in the country, I lose my freedom to enjoy a walk in the woods! Every day life is full of examples of conflicting freedoms. One man wants the freedom to extend and modify his own house in the way he pleases. His neighbour wants the freedom to enjoy his peace and privacy without the first man building a hideous extension that blocks out all his daylight and ruins his view of the nearby hills. One woman wants the freedom to drive faster to get to her appointment on time. Another wants speeds restricted to 10 mph to protect her children who play in the street. Throughout human history there have been struggles to balance freedoms, as well as efforts by the powerful to maximise their freedom at the expense of others. The laws of ownership set out in the Old Testament, in passage such as Leviticus 25, were designed to prevent the rich from using their freedom to buy up land in ways that would restrict the freedom of each Israelite to enjoy his own inheritance. Exodus 21:24-25 sounds very harsh to modern ears: "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe". But it balanced the need for the avenger to extract punishment with the need of the guilty party to be protected from disproportionate harm. In other words, the avenger was forbidden from taking a life to punish the loss of an eye. It was a balancing of freedoms.

In recent years, changes have occurred that have made this competition of freedoms more pronounced and more contentious. A significant part of this change has been the growing tendency to express laws in terms of the rights of an individual. Instead of outlawing unwanted behaviour or setting out the responsibilities of individuals and organisations, many recent laws establish rights to which all people are entitled. This is not inherently bad. A right to be free from enslavement aligns well with God's concern for justice and has no obvious downside. The problem with multiplying rights is that the freedoms they create are often mutually exclusive, as we have already noticed. You then need to have some kind of hierarchy of rights, and a complex set of rules to determine which is the most important right in any given situation. At one level this has always been necessary. Freedom of speech has historically been limited by the laws of libel and abuse. Freedom of information has been restricted by national security requirements. What is more recent is the absolutizing of rights, that is, the granting of an **absolute** right to some benefit such as education. There are several problems with absolute rights. Perhaps the two principal ones are that they are not balanced by responsibilities, and they will often conflict with the rights of others. If a person, regularly and severely abuses those who deliver education, do they ever forfeit the right to education? If it is an absolute right they cannot. It is perhaps this conflict of rights that is most contentious for Christians in the UK today. Is it within the rights of a Christian guest house owner to refuse accommodation to those whose behaviour he finds morally unacceptable? What happens when a Christian preacher condemns a homosexual lifestyle as sinful and this offends a person listening? Situations like these have been tested in the courts in recent months and years, and we need to think through a Biblical, Christian response.

Simply complaining that the laws of our land have moved away from the basis of God's commandments is not an adequate stance. This is certainly true, and we may be right to warn of the consequences of this, but what basis do we have for expecting non-believers to legislate for Christian ethics and behaviour? Even if they did, would such laws be able to produce Christian character? We preach that attempting to keep God's law can never produce salvation, and that a new life and new heart are required. We should be very wary of trying to create human laws and then expecting unregenerate people to obey them without the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians know that living rightly comes from a changed heart and a new desire to do what is good that only God can produce.

Human laws can really only be enforced in one of two ways. Either the majority of people must believe that the law is reasonable and just, or at least just enough not to openly flout it, or brutal repression has to be used. In a western democracy the second is not an option. This means that laws have to be based on the consent of the majority. No police force could enforce a law that the majority of people actively oppose. Since the majority of people in this country are not Christians it is not reasonable to expect that the laws reflect a Christian world view.

If the current legal situation tends to produce a hierarchy of rights, Christians can easily fall into the trap of creating a hierarchy of sins. At one level this is proper. Murder is more serious than lying; domestic violence deserves greater punishment than petty theft does. This is supported by Scripture. The legal provisions given through Moses clearly prescribed more severe penalties for some transgressions than for others. Just read through a section like Exodus 21 and 22 and see the different penalties set out for different infringements of the law. The teaching of Jesus shows that this gradation of punishment will apply in the final judgements as well. Listen to Luke 12:47-48. They come at the end of a parable about the judgements of good and evil servants. "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few."

"Many stripes" and "few" stripes clearly implies different levels of punishment for different levels of wrongdoing. But there is another side to this coin. The Bible clearly teaches that *all* sin is morally repugnant to God. James 2:10-11 says, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery', also said, 'Do not murder'. Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law." Part of the reason for distinctions in punishment in the Law of Moses is because the severity of the punishment reflects the level of damage a transgression causes to other people. This is because the law was intended to regulate civil society. Also, the law obviously addresses outward behaviour, not thoughts and attitudes. The absence of laws against pride, greed or lust, do not show that God does not find these things abhorrent. Rather, the law addresses some of the external behaviours that these attitudes produce. It had to be this way because judges could only base their decisions on the evidence of actual behaviour. They could not see into peoples' hearts and minds.

A problem arises when we create hierarchies of sins based on our own prejudices. When we do this we create a small number of sins that we regard as particularly bad. They are often sexual sins, although some people might focus on issues like drink and drugs. Once we have focused on this list, we target our condemnation on people who commit these particular sins, and tend to downplay other sins. We must be very careful that we do not define our Christian freedom in terms controlled by our personal hierarchy of sins. Take the controversy over whether Christian bed and breakfast owners should be allowed to refuse accommodation to those whose behaviour they find unacceptable. The case for 'Christian liberty' is that the guest is staying in the home of a believer, and therefore that believer has a right to forbid behaviour in their home that they find morally unacceptable. The case for 'civil liberty' is that this discriminates against groups such as homosexuals. Strong emotions are stirred on both sides. A weakness in the case for 'Christian liberty' is that we seem to be applying a hierarchy of sins that places homosexual practice at the top of the list. Would we also exclude unmarried and adulterous couples? What about people who blaspheme or drink; where can we draw the line? If the answer is given that a Christian must avoid actions that offend his own conscience (on the grounds of Romans 14:21-23), we face again the problem of how this can be done in a way that does not compromise another person's freedoms. This creates a serious dilemma for those with a conscience about these issues whose business is directly affected, but it has always been the case that Christians have had to avoid some businesses, professions and activities because of the moral difficulties they raise. I am not claiming that there are simple ways to work out the 'right answer' from Scripture for moral dilemmas like this. I am saying that we cannot simply assert a Christian freedom to act as we see fit, without consideration of the impact on others and the laws of the state.

There are also applications to how we preach. There have certainly been cases where the police and local authorities have exceeded their powers in preventing people from preaching and distributing Christian literature in public places. Organisations such as the *Christian Institute* provide important legal advice and support to people in these situations, and we are quite justified in adopting the approach of the apostle Paul when he appealed to Roman laws that forbade his beating without trial, or gave him the right to appeal to Caesar. However, there have also been cases where the content of street preaching has been wilfully offensive. The preacher has a legitimate need to highlight human rebellion and sinfulness; that is an integral part of the gospel. He may want to mention some specific sins in order to bring the point home. But exclusively condemning particular sins, or groups of people is not part of the preacher's role. Paul wrote about "the offence of the cross" (Galatians 5:11), not the offensiveness of the preacher! Let us be very careful to speak with grace when we condemn sin, remembering that when we do so, we are also condemning ourselves.

I have tried to set out how we should restrain our own liberties for the sake of others and avoid giving unnecessary offence when addressing the subject of sin. However, the Gospel does cut right across human independence and pride, and people have always wanted to suppress it. Jesus and the Apostles clearly warned that resistance to the Gospel, and persecution of those who live and preach it, would be constant. I have been endeavouring to separate out some non-central areas where we have enjoyed unusual liberties in this country for several generations, but there are non-negotiable Gospel elements that we *must* insist on at all costs. What then are some of these non-negotiable elements?

Telling others the good news of the Gospel

The actions of the Apostles recorded in the book of Acts make it completely clear that they regarded spreading the Gospel as absolutely fundamental. This is a clear case where obedience to God comes before obedience to men (Acts 5:29). If the authorities forbade preaching and private witness, the Apostles ignored them and carried on, quite willing to bear the consequences, even if that meant execution. We simply cannot accept the position that says religion is a private thing; that we can believe for ourselves but must not try and convert others. Exhorting others to repent and believe is at the very heart of the Gospel.

Compelling worship of other gods or forbidding worship of the One True God

Whether we consider the example of Daniel and his three friends in Daniel 3:1-30, or the refusal of Christians in the first century to worship the Roman emperor as a god or to refrain from worshipping together as Christians, all true believers have rejected the right of any authority to force or forbid worship. In more recent times, Christians in Communist and Islamic countries have resisted efforts to enforce worship of other gods, and quietly ignored restrictions on gathering for Christian worship.

Condemnation of sin

The prophets of Israel in the Old Testament often condemned the disobedience of the people. Many were persecuted and some were killed. John the Baptist condemned Herod's marriage arrangements and paid with his life. Jesus regularly condemned the attitudes and actions of others, often those in authority. Powerful people were so incensed they plotted to kill Him. I'm not reversing what I said earlier about not deliberately being offensive. If we faithfully call wrong **everything** that God calls wrong, even if we do it in a proper manner, we will inevitably provoke opposition. This must not prevent us from speaking out. We must be prepared to face the possible consequences.

The conditions that have prevailed for many years in the UK, where society has broadly accepted Christian values and been shaped by them, are very much an aberration in wider historical terms. For most of her history, the church has lived in a world where societies have been shaped by other religions and philosophies and have been hostile to the church. This is certainly the world that the apostles and Christians of the New Testament era lived in. For better or for worse, possibly for both, we appear to be moving in that direction again. This means we must give fresh heed to Paul's exhortation, in 1 Timothy 2:2, to pray "for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence."

We have identified four different elements to a Christian approach to the issue of competing freedoms.

1. When our freedom is not central to the Gospel we should be ready to give up our freedom.
2. We should pray for those in authority and ask God to direct them in ways that allow us to live Christian lives without fear.
3. We may insist that existing laws be properly applied, and point out the dangers of proposed new laws.
4. We must be prepared to obey God's clear commands in Scripture even if other people believe that this restricts their freedoms.

In the final analysis, we are not trying to defend our own freedoms but insisting on the priority of the freedom of God to act and command as He chooses. It is God who condemns sin. It is God who insists that only He is worshipped. It is Christ (who is God) who insists that Christians must meet together and must share the good news of salvation. It is not surprising that human beings want to implement laws that give priority to human freedoms. After all, the fall began with the assertion of human independence from God (Genesis 2:15-3:7). Those of us who have chosen to obey God and surrender to Him should not be motivated by maintaining our personal liberties, but by being free to do what He directs us to do.

This is sure to lead us into conflict with those who continue to assert their freedom to act according to their own will, without reference to God's claims. Our challenge is to do that faithfully and graciously. If we harbour a sense that other people have hijacked our Christian country and are 'stealing our birthright', we will not help ourselves think about the issues in a Scriptural way.

A Christian country was never a reality, or even a possibility, and we simply do not have any right to expect society to be organised to our standards, even if those standards are based on God's own. If we can learn to accept what the Bible plainly teaches, that rejection and persecution are what the Christian should regard as normal, we can begin to

respond to them more rationally. We will start to recognise which of our freedoms really are worth cherishing and defending, and be ourselves set free from some of the worries over lesser things that so easily take hold of us.

Heavenly Father, thank You for the marvellous freedom from sin and judgement that Your Son bought for us on the cross. Teach us to love other people in ways that uphold the central, Gospel freedoms, while being ready to serve in ways that may restrict our personal freedoms. Amen.

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