

"ACADEMIC FREEDOM: Innocence or Virtue"

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The problems with this topic are legion. How can we discuss it in thirty minutes without simply developing "a catalog of obviosities?" This is not the right time to discuss it, although I must give you one important piece of information. All of the topics for this Conference were agreed to and assigned by the committee on April 5. There has been some water over the dam since that time relating very directly to two of our papers, but the assignments are in no sense a reaction to those developments. Another problem lies in the simple fact that some of you would, perhaps, rather not discuss this topic while others of you may be over anxious. Whatever the problems, I am convinced that the subject, academic freedom, is long overdue for discussion among church executives, college administrators, and faculty. And, the time probably will never be right.

Historical Perspective

The 1915 "General Report on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure" prepared for the newly founded American Association of University Professors took aim at the arbitrariness of the "boss" and attempted to increase the security of the faculty member. This came at a time when there were fewer examples of institutional neutrality than institutional commitment. It was in large part the strictures of church sponsorship which prompted their brief for institutional neutrality--an intellectual experiment station. The statement attacked the premises "that truth is something to be possessed rather than endlessly discovered; that truth-questions yield to the edicts of institutions

rather than to the competitive play of minds."¹

The ideal has been elaborated ad infinitum. For example:

Academic man is a special kind of professional man, a type characterized by a particularly high need for autonomy. To be innovative, to be critical of established ways, these are the commitments of the academy and the impulses of scientific and scholarly roles that press for unusual autonomy.²

The claim for autonomy rests on the service ideal which characterizes the profession. The realm of ideas is a free, competitive market with survival of the fittest implied. Ignoring the facts which disturb is dangerous to any institution or to the society at large. Nevertheless, those who exercise free speech and free press in a responsible way are likely to annoy some highly placed people. How can vigorous self-study and renewal be carried on without some special guarantees to those whose expert knowledge must prevail over folklore and prejudice? After all, is not freedom the good way of life? Its alternatives would seem always to have someone else choosing for me. Is it not always dangerous to assume that any man or group of men can ever choose well for any other mature man?

The report on academic freedom was in part directed against committed colleges, or, as the authors might have said, "proselytizing" colleges. Teaching and research were professional activities and the profession had an obligation to escape its servant role. To blunt the impact of "truth" or camouflage the newest research finding in

¹Walter P. Metzger, et. al., Dimensions of Academic Freedom (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1969), p. 4.

²Ibid., p. 47n.

deference to the sponsoring denomination was to betray the profession and one's students. Critical examination of everything came to be the assumed role of the university. Freedom of inquiry became the "right" of the professor under this line of approach. The institution was to be neutral and objective, protecting these freedoms of the professor.

We all know of more extreme claims in recent years, even including demands that the institution abandon its neutrality and, for example, use its resources for activist programs in the community. Professors demand protection for their activities beyond classroom and research assignments and even beyond their area of special competence. Academic freedom and tenure can be abused to defeat academic reforms as well as offend external publics. But we dare not get into all of these bypaths.

Even the basic ideal has been under constant attack and we should never assume that only church colleges and seminaries struggle with it. But, it is our topic for this hour. Accrediting associations have probably been more responsible than far-sighted leadership within the Nazarene educational community for the protections which presently exist. In fairness, it must be said that leadership has fended off attacks, protected individuals, arranged transfers of personnel and, thus assumed responsibility for some vulnerable professors. Our legal provisions, however, would tend toward the minimal protection of the individual and the maximum safeguards for the institution which will pass the accrediting bodies.

We are "affirming" colleges. We do not admit that secular scholarship is superior nor that our product is inferior. How to safeguard the mission, the institution,

and the individual while continuing to deliver a quality product--that is our assignment.

These are the glorious risks in which we have been, are now, and will be involved.

Freedom and Responsibility

The customary discussion of academic freedom includes the development of a companion theme, "academic responsibility." If freedom is good, responsibility in its use is equally good and necessary. The problem here is the extreme vagueness, almost subjective quality, of "irresponsibility." Almost all forceful statements could be called by someone "irresponsible." But, we must look into the application of the ideal to Nazarene higher education and we should do it now in spite of the difficulties.

In 1644, John Milton wrote Areopagitica, a pamphlet "to deliver the press from the restraints with which it was encumbered; that the power of determining what was true and what was false, what ought to be published and what ought to be suppressed, might no longer be entrusted to a few illiterate and illiberal individuals, who refused their sanction to any work which contained views or sentiments at all above the level of vulgar superstition." Here a great Christian, in revolutionary times, addressed his Parliament in behalf of freedom.

His arguments are very interesting. Without considering the alternatives of good and evil, "a man may be innocent but he can never be truly virtuous."³ "A man who knows nothing beyond his creed has not really chosen that creed." Unreasoned faith

³Merritt Y. Hughes, ed., John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose (2nd Edition, N. Y., Odyssey, 1957), p. 728.

rapidly becomes a kind of heresy because it is held for the wrong reasons. The one who gravitates toward some heresy or immorality encountered in his education does so because of sinful desire. "A wise man will make better use of an idle pamphlet than a fool will do of sacred scripture."⁴ "Because no one man can possibly grasp all truth, because every man sees through a glass darkly, it is dangerous to close the mind against possible clarification and new insights."⁵ And there is more.

Milton is speaking to us. Christian professors, and Nazarene colleges, need a measure of autonomy if they are to produce for the church. Attacks from those who do not understand mission or method have threatened and weakened our institutions at one time or another. Within the bounds of complete loyalty to the church, the issue may very well be innocence or virtue. If ever we could isolate our students from the heretical and misleading by shielding them from books or ideas, that time is past. While we have a "depositum" of truth, is not "the search for truth," its implications and applications, a continuing necessity?

Ought we not to press the point? What does a responsible Nazarene professor of sociology do? What does the responsible ethicist do? How does the church historian show responsibility in the use of his special knowledge and skills? What does a Nazarene theologian do with regard to Wesley or Wiley when he is being most responsible?

⁴Ibid., p. 731.

⁵Ibid., p. 742.

One has said, "If Nazarenes want to have influence in the larger Christian world, they will have to talk to somebody besides themselves." Could we encourage publication and speaking to the larger church and society? If the Herald wants an article on social issues could we at least assume that our scholars know of the interest? Should we not encourage these gifted members to contribute to the life of the church at all appropriate levels? I believe that many of them do not see an open door. Could we not publicly open the channels for innovative suggestions and, thus, confirm to them that we need their explanations and insights to get the attention and forge the loyalties of new members and our youth.

I believe we also need to develop better and more open ways to reject proposals without permitting the proposer to feel rejected. Good human relations takes hours of time but such an acknowledgement only requires a careful account of what actually claims my time.

Faculty and Administrator Mobility

Freedom is a frame of mind. We all know of restraints, channels, limitations. But we function better if we believe ourselves to be free. No one incurs the hidden expenses of a move unless he really wants to move. Some of our professors probably serve ten years in one place with no hint of an offer from another Nazarene college. When the offer comes its effect is electric. "I am wanted!" "I could go elsewhere!" It helps clear the cob-webs from one's thinking about his lot in life and the pastures greener. Would our administrators allow a coded list of openings in Nazarene colleges to be

mailed from the Department to every faculty member? Why not? And why have there not been more faculty exchange programs for a summer or a year? A decision to serve in one place may wear thin after 15 years and it may be wholesome that it be renewed through a deliberate choice once in a while. And why should we not notify the Department when we lose a good man to a public institution? Maybe another college could catch him on the rebound in two or three years. Mobility within the system is one form of demonstrated freedom.

The Citizenship of a Faculty Member

While I would hold no brief for a man who serves a Nazarene college and is unable to give more than lip service to our Articles of Faith, I would argue for the freedom of a professor who is a loyal member of the church to work for constructive change according to his own special training and experience. Full-time service to the church in the college or seminary should not disbar a man from his citizenship in the congregation or the state. When this seems to cause "trouble" because someone disagrees, we must remember that the professor's conscience and sense of responsibility may well be just as compelling as that of other constituents. When did lesser service justify a better hearing than greater service? The professor, as well as the administrator must surely be concerned to love the brethren while he loves the truth. Could we not say that the inability to meet our problems with candor only betrays the lack of love in the "body of Christ?"

Confident Freedom or Cautious Conservation?

I want to be understood. The tradition of academic freedom has gained acceptance not because it results always in right action or functions without tensions. Freedom is good because the alternatives are bad. I could argue that a benevolent, enlightened monarchy is the best kind of government. But, I cannot guarantee its continued benevolence nor its enlightenment. This world is a dangerous place to live and to bring up my children. But my paternalism is not helpful beyond the early years and certain limited experience and advice I may share. Advice when it is sought, an exemplary life, and a challenge to high living are about all I can successfully pass to a young adult. And his conception of freedom and responsibility are hard to account for logically. But I still believe the challenge of freedom brings out the best of responsibility and that expressions of trust and confidence are better strategy than are carping criticisms.

Of course, we have the finest of doctrine, organization and fellowship in the Church of the Nazarene. I am concerned that we maintain our heritage and develop the maximum thrust of the Gospel into our needy world. Orthodoxy is in danger. Conferences like this are intended to offer opportunity for those engaged in scholarly pursuits to share dialog with church executives. The spirit of such gatherings must be one of mutual helpfulness and support. We could also do with articles now and then written by our most able scholars and teachers to attack difficult issues and develop interpretations in harmony with our Articles of Faith. We certainly do not wish to disappear into the cultural landscape.

But, on balance, we must recognize the true hazards of troublesome times. The tendency when trouble besets a college is that those who stay will "clam up", cover themselves, protect against career complications and await retirement. No more reaching out to tackle big problems. No taking of risks. No open sharing of problems, self-studies or reaching out for new solutions.

What early leaders of AAUP put their finger on is a genuine paradox. "To be a college is to be free, to be Christian is to be bound to Christ and His answers."

The mind-set of the academic world-at-large is secular, relativistic, prejudiced toward science, closed to revealed truth, and believes the Scriptures to be untrustworthy. These biases of academia become confused with freedom. Our professors who must be schooled in this atmosphere have little help to sift, sort, and adapt the brilliance with which they are surrounded. Our concern should be that this effort continues and, with apologies to Eisenhower, that we as colleagues in the church be liberal in our attitudes and dealings with individuals while we are purposely conservative in theology and Biblical interpretation. Concern and compassion for a brother are Christian also, and these traits do not conflict in the slightest with academic freedom.

We are all lost without models as are the students. We could get lost in the paradoxes of the Christian College were it not for those few giants among us to assure us that the task we have started can be accomplished. To many of us Bertha Munro has epitomized the model. She said, "We want to be like other colleges in the best things." "We want no exemptions. We have been trusted by the educational world; we want to keep faith with them." She identified "the implications of the Cross. a

sure frame of reference for understanding ourselves and our fellows, for making basic decisions." "Why not the best in education combined with the best in religion (holiness)?" However, "There can be no snobbishness within the church. The church's Master made himself of no reputation and became a servant. The elite can be saved; but they become humble first."⁶

We need more such models.

⁶Samuel Young, "Dean Bertha Munro - Builder and Symbol of E.N.C." (1968). pp. 4, 7-9.