

Views from the Pews - Freedom of Speech

To the extent that the Crucifixion was a political event, we may argue that Jesus was executed largely to keep Him quiet, given the threat He was thought to pose to the Jewish establishment. If that is correct, then Christians need to be very careful about restrictions upon speech.

Are we then to recognize any restrictions at all? Jesus was also a boundary-setter; does this pose questions? How do we approach free speech in this world of mass social media, this world where 'alternative facts' are a badge of honour for some?

One distinction we should make is that between fact and opinion. Given economic pressure on traditional news media, facts have become expensive, whereas opinion is free and easy to come by. People's feelings about supposed facts seem to have overtaken the facts themselves.

In the Ten Commandments, the injunction against 'false witness' (i.e. lying) is very plain. We are surely not free to lie about facts. I would suggest that Christians should oppose untruth, even when that untruth suits us at the time.

Opinion however is a different matter. We should be free to express unpopular opinions; indeed, suppression of opinion is a reliable hallmark of dictatorship.

But we are still not free of constraint. We retain choice over the manner in which we express ourselves, and we can begin by avoiding the assumption that ours is the only (correct) opinion. We are all familiar with opinion that may be correct in itself but which is expressed in ways that imply superiority, or monopoly. This has become a difficult area for Christianity to navigate. Many of us are old enough to remember a time when alternative faiths were practically invisible, where Christianity – especially the Protestant, Anglophone version – was part of the established order of things. Times have changed.

Secondly, we can test opinion by asking about the person expressing it. Is there a power imbalance? Is the person complaining about a lack of free speech in fact the more powerful of the parties to a dialogue? One political trend we may have noticed is for powerful parties to pretend that free speech is being restricted.

As Christians, we have enormous good fortune, because we can turn immediately to the Gospels. At Matthew 22:39, Jesus boils it down. If your 'free speech' is going to hurt your neighbour, it is no longer free.

Richard Swarbrick