

## LIBERTY IN THE CHURCH

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 4.10-16, RSV

Last week I said that in a society like ours, there was no such thing as absolute freedom—not even freedom of speech. You can't stand up in a crowded auditorium and yell "Fire!" as a joke because of the possible injuries which might be inflicted as people attempted to rush out of the building. I did say that I thought we should draw a line as far away as possible from curbing human freedoms.

There should be no restraints on the voice of opinions, no matter how radical or heretical they might seem to be, no matter how wrong they might be in the light of the community who believes it "knows" with certainty, for we can "never be sure that the opinion we are endeavouring to stifle is a false opinion." Even if we were sure that it was false, "stifling it would be an evil still." (John Stuart Mill *On Liberty*, Chapter 2.)

One must listen to the alternatives. They will either reinforce what one believes or seriously challenge it. Either way the search for truth is advanced. When a person's life or the property of others is threatened, however, then a curbing of liberty may be necessary. The right to life must precede the right to liberty, in that sense.

These considerations guide us somewhat in the church. At what point and for what beliefs should a Seventh-day Adventist Christian be disciplined, if at all, by his fellow believers for voicing his opinions, even those considered heresy? When is "fire" being yelled in a crowded auditorium? Is it possible for those whose citizenship is in heaven with Jesus Christ to be as free in their religious beliefs as are those whose citizenship is with Uncle Sam? How much agreement will we require among ourselves and on which issues allow a dissident to belong?

For example: When the issue of ordaining women as local elders came up in Sligo several years ago, members on both sides believed they had the Bible supporting them. Officially the General Conference leaders of the church, while they urged caution, agreed with those who argued it is consistent with the Scriptures. Should those who believed it was wrong (and that the leaders were wrong) have been disciplined as heretics? Should they have been denied the right to speak to the church about their convictions? Evangelists of this denomination published articles in their private papers to their constituencies warning their readers that the devil was involved in this movement for women's rights in the church. Should they be silenced? (Theirs was the more conservative position. Usually when we call someone a "heretic," we imply he or she is too "liberal." Technically it could also imply one is so conservative he or she is in error.)

I have believed that the most prominent Adventist to be disciplined by his church for heresy was J. H. Kellogg. Prior to his being disfellowshipped [eds: dropped from membership] from his local church, there had been numerous personal and public discussions about his beliefs. Rather interestingly or surprisingly, however, no formal trial on his theology was ever held. The list of charges at the local church hearing, in fact, included things like nonattendance at church (a peculiar one since we do not discipline members today for that reason), lack of financial support (another strange charge in the light of our present practices not to discipline those who do not pay a faithful tithe) and giving comfort to those who were antagonistic to the gifts in the church (an obvious reference to the gift of prophecy). There was no reference to a schism or disunity or heresy. Technically he was not

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disfellowshipped for “heresy.”

In the New Testament church the Greek word for heresies indicated something quite serious. It stood for that which affected “the foundation of the Church in doctrine, and that they do so in such a fundamental way as to give rise to a new society alongside the *ecclesia*. This the Church cannot accept.”<sup>1</sup>

I would like to refer to 2 Peter 2:1 in connection with the quotation:

But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction (RSV).

In the post New Testament church, when the early fathers hammered out theological responses to the challenges of strange doctrines, a number of views about the nature of Christ and the atonement were officially declared “heretical.” These were the formative years. When looking back, however, it must also be admitted that the great heretics like Arius and Nestorius were sincere and able men. These debates were not trivial nor were they suppressed by the church authorities. High theological debate took place.

When the Reformation era dawned Luther originally wanted to avoid chasing down heretics and especially opposed their brutal persecution, “insisting that every one should be allowed to believe according to his conscience; that the most that might be done to a ‘false teacher’ was to banish him.”<sup>2</sup> By 1536, however, he agreed that in extreme cases of blasphemy and treason, the death penalty might be imposed. Later on Calvin would burn heretics at the stake in the city of Geneva.

Even today some of the deepest, most hostile emotions are evoked by that term “heretic.” It now stands for an evil so heinous, it has become so pejorative in connotation, that many contemporary Christian leaders want it banished from the church’s vocabulary. They believe it is an anachronism now and that other terms should be found to describe a truly serious threat to the very survival of the church.

As with every issue, there are two sides to this one. On the side is the need for freedom in the church. The church is to be a community of free people. When there is no freedom the Spirit of the Lord is not present. That is the Scripture. This freedom is not limited to individuals but “must have its effect on the formation of the community, on its institutions and constitutions, so that these can never have an oppressive or repressive character.”<sup>3</sup> Frankness in free speech should characterize the church, as long as it is done in love for the church. From this perspective the church is to give the “maximum possible freedom—both in the conditions and security which it affords to its thinkers...and in its refusal to suppress voices however uncomfortable or embarrassing...”

As one churchman puts it,

All exploration, whether in the theological or the social field, involves the risk, indeed the certainty, of mistakes. But it is at least arguable, from the study of church history, that more damage has almost always been done in the long run by the suppression of opinion than by an

error given rein by freedom.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand a living body of believers, the community of Christ, must guard its own wholeness of life—its balanced integrity, its ability to maintain its own nature. Rejecting certain kinds of teaching is necessary not because they are verbally wrong in comparison to some written statement of beliefs but because they clearly threaten the life of the church itself. To accept Madalyn Murray O'Hare's atheism would cut the throat of our life together as Christians. One writer said this:

It should be recognized, perhaps, not as heresy at all but as unacknowledged apostasy; it is not a deviant way of understanding an "article of faith"; it is a denial of faith itself and a betrayal of the Church as the community of faith.<sup>5</sup>

How may we decide which issues are truly this critical? Some would distinguish between adventurous answers which may well be mistaken and hardened positions which deserve to be called errors.<sup>6</sup> Such hardened positions mean one has lost the good will and humility the Christian ought to possess in the light of man's always relative understanding of the truth. In the view of a special commission of the Anglican Church set up to investigate this whole issue of liberty in the church,

When Christians are moved to turn to judicial remedies, to trials and punishment, they must do so only when there is, clearly and finally, no alternative left except the death of the community itself...the prime characteristic of the church as of any living organism [is] that it must fight to the end to hold in its own balanced life every element, every person, which belongs to its fullness. Where the organic unity of the Church is broken, the first search must be not for a legal remedy but for that failure within the community itself which permitted the breach to happen. Until every possible step in reconciling love has been taken, we have no right to admit defeat and adopt defeat's harsh weapons.<sup>7</sup>

Further the church must not confuse honest exploration and experimentation with sin. Few deliberately set out to wreck the church which has given them identity and nurtured them all their lives. Those who do intend harm may need to be controlled or disciplined by extreme measures, but it should not be easy for the community or its leaders to use such measures. Some go so far as to say that mere opinions should never be the basis for church discipline, only actions. (It should be remembered that when we talk about beliefs, we are talking about those that are both liberal and conservative as was suggested in the beginning of the sermon.) Such people feel that whatever risks are run by encouraging a climate of genuine freedom are minor compared to the dangers of attempts at suppression and censorship. "The Church can command the respect of modern man only if it has the confidence, courage and honesty to test its faith in the free market place of ideas."<sup>8</sup>

In our probing for some guidance in this area, we must remember a number of things:

1. It is difficult to know who should decide truth. Church authorities down through the ages have often been wrong and, on occasion, poorly qualified to judge the issues. It has been known to happen that today's heresy becomes tomorrow's orthodoxy. I have seen that repeatedly in my own lifetime.
2. All theological or doctrinal beliefs fall short of the perfect reality they seek to describe,

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whether it be the atonement or the Second Advent. They are never complete and finished.

3. Heresy, properly defined, is extremely rare. I mean by heresy those views that truly offer a serious threat to the faith. Even these must be heard, especially if their advocates insist they can show from the Scriptures that what they are teaching is sound. If they are right it may require the church to change what it has regarded as a basic teaching. BUT--and this is a big but--any time the church becomes convinced that what it teaches is not Scriptural, or truly God-given, even if it has believed it historically, it can only be to the strength of the church to follow the Scriptures. It can never ultimately be a threat to the faith. It is, on the contrary, making the faith even more secure.

If it were shown that someone's opinions were unscriptural and destructive of the faith, only when he has persisted in his effort after having been clearly shown their destructive character, can he be disciplined. (Many false ideas are not destructive!) Clearly these are rare occurrences in the church.

4. Theological freedom carries with it an element of risk to the church which must be tolerated. University and seminary teachers and scholars have a responsibility to the church—to the believers—to use their gifts for the edifying of the church as Paul reminds us in Ephesians 4. However, they must also have reasonable freedom to do their work. Mistakes are bound to be made. If we do not take these risks, however, we are going to be bound by past understandings which sometimes are inadequate to meet the challenges of today's world.
5. "Heresy" —or suspected heresy—is best combated by a clear, positive statement of the church's position. Bad theology is not corrected by punishment but by better theology.

The way to better theology is by more participation of more of the members in the theological studies and controversies of the church. Freedom to inquire also presupposes information. That means that whatever is being taught anywhere in the church that seems to be a departure needs to be investigated by the whole body of believers, or at least those believers willing enough to take the time to investigate. These are administrative matters. Church leadership must provide opportunities, carefully planned, to be sure, to engage in serious study of the Bible and other relevant sources on controversial questions. Everyone—laypeople and pastors—should be involved. Whether they are seminars, institutes or certain kinds of publishing, discussion and prayer in these areas is essential for the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

Lay members need to be better prepared to be involved in this kind of experience. This is a task of depth and seriousness. Pastors need better continuing education after finishing their seminary training—updating on exegesis and doctrines. This will help them guide their churches into clearer understanding and better action for Christ. There is a critical need for church leaders and administrators to be more theologically sophisticated. They have a special responsibility for guarding the church's teachings, but they cannot meet that responsibility without continual contact with theologians and teachers who are competent in some of the critical areas of theology.

How much liberty should there be in the church? As much liberty as the church can stand without doing destructive damage to its own life in Christ. Sometimes even the truth can be a problem—even

the disciples were unable to bear all of the truths Jesus could have revealed to them. I think he was talking about two dimensions of teaching: (1) He was talking about issues which they had never thought about, and (2) He was talking about things that are true but which they would be unable to grapple with in that time and in that place, given their experience and understanding. But if a new “truth” becomes an issue, we must face it. We must be careful that we don’t use the dangers that are involved in this kind of investigation to justify the stifling of the freedom in the church which we must always encourage and seek to preserve.

George Bernard Shaw once said: “All great truths begin as blasphemies.” (I think this is an exaggeration but it is something to think about.)

As Ellen White reminds us in *Gospel Workers*, p. 310,

We must not for a moment think that there is no more light, no more truth, to be given us. We are in danger, of becoming careless, by our indifference losing the sanctifying power of truth, and composing ourselves with the thought, “I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing.” While we must hold fast to the truths which we have already received, we must not look with suspicions upon any new light that God may send.

May God help us all to be able to maintain that delicate balance between liberty in the church and the need to protect the church from those forces that would destroy it. It seems to me that this is the message from the Word of the Lord this morning.

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<sup>1</sup>*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, I, p. 183.

<sup>2</sup>Harold J. Grimm, *The Reformation Era* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1954), p. 230.

<sup>3</sup>Hans Kung, *On Being A Christian*, trans. by Edward Quinn (New York Doubleday & Co., 1976), p. 482.

<sup>4</sup>Stephen F. Bayne, Jr., *Theological Freedom and Social Responsibility* (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 24, 25.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26, 27.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 31, 32.