

Session Four – A church that affirms freedom

You may have noticed the part in that section where we talk of the Church being ‘both Catholic and reformed’. We have already seen (in earlier sessions) that the United Reformed belongs to the whole catholic Church. The catholic Church is all those in heaven and on earth who have been called by the Holy Spirit to be Christ’s friends and followers. The local congregations to which we all belong are the whole Church in microcosm. When we are received into membership within a congregation we are received as members of the universal Church in one of its local expressions. The ‘reformed’ part of our title refers to our particular roots in the period called the Reformation and especially our links with the communities who, like John Calvin’s church in Geneva, came to call themselves Reformed. It’s worth remembering that we come from those who never wanted to set up a separate ‘Reformed’ church, but who wanted to reform the whole (catholic) Church. You might say that the Reformers did not want to be anything but good catholic Christians. Of course we also believe that reformation is a continual process and that we do not reach a point of being ‘reformed’. (Perhaps those who call us the United Reform Church make a good point, through their mistake!). God’s Spirit is continually reaching out to change us and to make us more like Christ.

Because of our particular inheritance through our history, the United Reformed Church has things to say about freedom. We say boldly that we are ready to take up the freedom to state the faith in new ways, to change the way we structure our life and to seek new ways of living in obedience to Christ. We also affirm the rights of personal conviction and conscience, and the right of the church, in things that affect obedience to God, to be independent (‘free’) of the state. Both these freedoms, of conscience and from the state, are anchored in the gospel.

This valuing of freedom, in these different ways, we have learned through sometimes bitter experience. We also shouldn’t be deceived into thinking that we have always lived up to our aspirations and proclaimed the importance of freedom, allowed it to others or lived it to the glory of God. Through the turbulent years of the Reformation there were those amongst the Reformed who had no qualms about compelling everyone in a nation to share their views. There are Reformed churches which do have a close relationship with the state, and respect for freedom of conscience has sometimes been hard won. Equally, there are those who would argue that although we make much noise about the freedom we have in Christ, it proves very difficult indeed to persuade us to stand up and exercise it!

We need to be careful not to idealise our own history in retrospect. However, it remains true that ‘we’ have known what it means to face persecution. In the reign of Elizabeth I, some whom we can number among our predecessors were executed for believing that it was not in the power of the monarch or parliament to tell the church what to pray, how to worship, or how to order its life. In 1660-62, when the Church of England ‘ejected’ those they called Dissenters (some others of our forebears), ‘we’ were nearly wiped out through various forms of social exclusion. We were excluded from the universities and the professions and not able to worship in the ways of our choosing in the parish churches. We learned over centuries the harsh lessons of coming out on the losing side of history. This experience has taught us the importance of certain freedoms and the desirability of a society that allows more than one form of faith expression. When we acquired the name ‘nonconformist’ (in England and Wales) we turned this often to positive value as a label that suggests the kind of courage required sometimes to resist or to question the status quo. We also had considerable political impact as those who spoke from somewhere else than the ‘ruling’ class. As many of the freedoms for which we have stood are now commonly accepted, and since many in the Church of England now question the rightness of an ‘established’ church, these stances are not ours alone. However, in a culture which is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-faith they have new force and importance. We have experience of weighing in the balance questions of freedom of speech with the need to be careful of causing offence. We have experience of living in a society where we are not the dominant voice. We have experience of thinking about the proper relationship between church and state. As we think today about such things as blasphemy laws, faith schools and ‘defender of faith’ versus ‘defender of faiths’, we have something to offer into the discussion.

Questions for discussion

- If it were your decision alone, how would you use your freedom to change the local church you belong to? What restraints are there, or should there be, on your own individual freedom?
- Is there anything that your local church (or the whole United Reformed Church) might decide to declare or do that would mean you would personally feel compelled to leave?
- Think further about the origins of our freedom. P T Forsyth said that ours is a “founded freedom” – what do you think he meant? Are there limits to ‘freedom of speech’?
- How does your local church handle conflict? How do you think churches should hold together different views – and how can we know when it might be right to separate?
- Do you think that the Church of England should be separate from the state? What arguments might there be in favour of a state church?
- What do you think are the particular obligations of a Christian politician?