

Redeemer's Charter Change: Why Did It Take So Long?

When we reached the end of the process that led to Redeemer College's revised and expanded charter, a sense of inevitability seemed to set in. The feeling that what was actually happening was *bound* to happen sooner or later also pops up in other such situations, and there is something regrettable about it, for it can rob past accomplishments of their glory.

For example, it may seem inevitable, in retrospect, that the World War II allies would triumph over Hitler and Nazism. Yet it was far from inevitable in the darkest days of the year 1940, when there was not much more than the brave oratory of Winston Churchill holding the German forces back from a successful invasion of Great Britain. When we think in terms of historical inevitability, we take away from Churchill's magnificent accomplishment.

Redeemer College's recent accomplishment was not inevitable either -- at least, not in human terms. It owed a great deal to careful political and diplomatic work, especially on the part of Dr. Justin Cooper, Redeemer's second president, who has been continuously and intensively involved in this process all the way back to the granting of the original charter in 1980, the charter that made it legally possible for Redeemer College to commence operations. In our reflection on the charter change, we should not make the mistake of belittling the accomplishment of Dr. Cooper and his associates by declaring that it was bound to happen anyway.

Yet it remains true that toward the end of the process people began to say, "This seems right -- why wasn't it done a long time ago?" Even people on the government side uttered such sentiments. And it is worth noting that by the time the bill authorizing the charter change came up for final approval in the legislature, all three political parties had agreed to it.

So why wasn't it done sooner? There is an answer to this question, and I propose to explore it in this article. The answer is that there were some long-standing objections to Redeemer's charter change, its request to grant the degrees of Bachelor of Arts or Bachelor of Science to students who completed its undergraduate program of studies. Those objections are worth reviewing.

The one we heard fairly often in the final stages of the charter change process had to do with academic freedom. Some people who work in higher education seem to believe that professors in secular and state-funded institutions enjoy academic freedom -- period. No ifs, ands or buts. On the other hand, professors in religiously-grounded institutions do not. If such beliefs could stand up to careful scrutiny, they would count as a solid argument against Redeemer College.

But let's think it over. A person who lives in *complete isolation*, having no contact with any other human being for years at a time, may indeed enjoy a high degree of freedom. Yet anyone who lives in society must admit that his freedom is limited to some degree by his obligations toward others and also by the rights of others. Therefore the notion that a professor in a secular institution may do and say whatever he likes must be challenged.

Let's not forget that we live in the age of feminism and political correctness. What we read in newsmagazines nowadays is that professors are walking on eggs, so to speak. Many institutions have speech codes, which amount to lists of words and phrases which people may no longer use, for fear of offending some supposedly aggrieved minority group. Certain topics are in effect off limits, like the differences between racial and ethnic groups when it comes to performance on certain carefully defined tests. Moreover, professors must be especially careful around feminists, who are quick to declare that certain behaviors or statements amount to sexual harassment and must therefore be brought before some university tribunal with an eye to discipline. Does that sound like full and complete freedom to you?

As Christians we may chuckle over some of these extremes in the secular university system, but we should recognize that no large-scale collective enterprise can long continue without limits and ground-rules. We may not agree with the specific ground-rules established to limit the words and deeds of professors in secular institutions, but we know that there must be limits and ground rules *of some sort*. They do exist in secular universities, and they also exist at Redeemer. Thus it should not embarrass us to admit to the public that Redeemer College professors are not free to engage in blasphemy in the classroom. Such a limitation does not mean that there is no academic freedom

at Redeemer; what it means instead is that there are limits on our academic freedom.

The discussion of academic freedom during the charter change process entered the area of disputes. The question was: how would disputes over academic freedom be dealt with at Redeemer? Those who "inspected" the college at a late stage in the process seemed satisfied that our mechanisms and policies for resolving such disputes were reasonable and were sincerely intended to safeguard academic freedom. Therefore the academic freedom argument was not allowed to block Redeemer's request for a charter change.

But there are two other issues to be dealt with. These issues are twenty-one years old -- roughly the age of full maturity in our society. It happens that Redeemer was born as a public organization in 1976, when a group of Christians gathered in Waterloo to consider the possibility of establishing a Christian liberal arts college in Ontario. I was among them. A board was established, and a provisional name for the association formed that day was chosen: Ontario Christian College Association. (The name "Redeemer College" was not adopted until 1980.)

The board then sought a "Director of College Development" to begin the work on a staff level. I was appointed to the position on a part-time basis (I was also working for Paideia Press at the time). In 1977 I made the very first contact with the government of Ontario to let officialdom know what we were about.

In those days we often formed delegations for important meetings, but this first contact with the government I carried out on my own. It was our position that I was presenting the government with information: I was not seeking *permission* to do this or that. And so it happened that I met with an official of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and informed him of our plan.

He did not take the business all that seriously; he even seemed to me a bit disdainful. He explained to me that about once a month someone drops by with a plan to start a new university. But nothing ever seems to come of it. He then let me in on the government's thinking on this matter.

Now, we were already aware of the basic outlines of the government's thinking; I was not surprised by what I heard that day. Nevertheless, I listened carefully and reported what I was told to the board of the association. On departing I promised the official that we would keep the government informed regarding our doings. I was careful to avoid any impression of asking permission, as

though education somehow "belongs" to the state. We don't believe any such thing.

The discussion that day had a good deal to do with the so-called "Robarts policy," that is, the policy that there should be no more "free-standing" universities in Ontario. At that time the Premier of Ontario was William G. Davis, a Progressive Conservative. His predecessor as premier was John Robarts. Mr. Davis had taken care of education during much of the Robarts era. Under Mr. Robarts there had been a considerable expansion of the Ontario university system -- perhaps too much, perhaps too quickly. At a certain point the brakes were applied, and it was decreed that there should be no more new universities. Because Mr. Robarts was then premier, this decision came to be referred to as the "Robarts policy." Of course Mr. Davis had a great deal to do with that policy as well. And Mr. Davis, as premier during the period of Redeemer's emergence, could appeal to the Robarts policy as the position of his government as well.

The Robarts policy meant that any new initiative in higher education would have to be part of an existing institution. Thus "affiliation" was urged upon us. The idea was that a new Christian college would be part of an existing secular institution and would have to deal with that institution when it came to faculty appointments, decisions about curriculum, and so forth. Several Ontario universities included affiliated colleges with a church background or connection of some sort.

Now, I did not believe that affiliation could leave enough room for a genuinely Christian institution to go about its work properly. Some members of the association's board were of the same mind. Other members of the board believed that an affiliation could work for us. And then there were many board members in between.

We did discuss affiliation possibilities for quite a while, and we dealt with a number of universities in the process. But in the end the association's board came to the conclusion that affiliation would not work: we would have to go it alone. However, establishing an independent college would amount to flying in the face of the Robarts policy.

Years slipped by as we worked on the affiliation angle. Board members came and went, and I also departed the scene, having accepted a teaching position at Calvin College. Justin Cooper (not then *Dr.* Cooper, but a graduate student in political science at the University of Toronto) succeeded me in the academic side of my staff work, also serving on a part-time basis, at first.

The year 1980 brought the threat of legislation that would, in effect, put the association out of business. A crisis was upon us. But a crisis is also an opportunity. What happened in 1980 is a long story, but by the end of the year the association board found itself in possession of a charter on the basis of which it operated the college from 1982 through 1998.

I was off the scene at this point, and so my knowledge of developments is second hand. The negotiations about the 1980 charter kept running into the problem of the Robarts policy. Eventually a fruitful compromise was arrived at -- a compromise that made it possible for the college to begin operating. To understand the 1980 arrangement between Redeemer and the government, we need to consider the second objection that was placed before me back in 1977.

It had to do with our liberal arts objectives. When I explained initially that I was representing a Christian organization, the official I talked with was quick to assume that what we had in mind was to teach "theology," as though we were a seminary or a Bible college. But I was quite specific about the range of liberal arts disciplines in which we meant to offer instruction. Then an all-too-familiar objection emerged: a Christian emphasis or orientation has nothing to do with those disciplines. To be self-consciously Christian while reflecting on the subject-matter of biology, for example, would be to offer a "theology" of biology. But students who study theology of biology should not receive credit toward a university arts or science degree.

I did not pursue this point at great length; my objective was simply to inform the government concerning our intentions. And so I let the disagreement stand. Well, by 1980 it had not gone away either, and it proved a major sticking point. The government's position was that Redeemer proposed to offer "denominational" or "sectarian" instruction and therefore could only offer religious or theological degrees. Redeemer should aim to operate as a Christian Reformed college, teaching the Christian Reformed theology in its bearing on various matters.

The agreement which was finally reached and which was incorporated in the 1980 charter was that Redeemer was not a Christian Reformed college ("Christian Reformed," it must be remembered, is the name of a denomination) but a *Reformed Christian* college. Many denominations and people can identify with the label "Reformed Christian." Even more important, it was understood that Redeemer would teach courses in a wide range of arts and sciences, but the price the government exacted for this concession on its part was that the college would be limited to offering a "religiously-designated" degree: the Bachelor of Christian Studies.

To the government, "Christian studies" could only mean theology: Redeemer was essentially a theological college. But to us, the term "Christian studies" covered the entire spectrum. *All* of the arts and sciences are able to be pursued within a Christian framework of reference.

There was much talk about precedents in connection with the prospect of Redeemer's charter change. After the days of Premier Davis, the Liberal Party came to power under Premier David Peterson. Then the New Democratic Party took a turn under Premier Bob Rae. The latest election restored the Progressive Conservatives to power under Premier Mike Harris. The current government seemed to want to hang on to the Robarts policy, as had the Liberal and New Democratic governments before it. Would granting Redeemer's request have the effect of nullifying the Robarts policy? Or could it be decreed that the Redeemer case was *not* to be regarded as a precedent to which future emerging institutions could point?

It is my personal judgment that one cannot make firm rules about such things. There is no way to prevent people in the future from pointing to the case of Redeemer as a precedent when they are arguing a case on their own behalf. But it is also possible that the government of that day will say that the Redeemer case does *not* count as a precedent, that is was somehow different. (Of course Redeemer is very different in one important respect in that it does not receive, and has never requested, government operating grants.)

When I reflect on what just happened, it seems to me that there is a much more important and encouraging precedent in the Redeemer situation, namely, an implicit recognition that it is possible, after all, to relate the arts and sciences (not just "theology") to religious concerns and commitments, and even to divine revelation. In other words, the recognition afforded Redeemer College through the charter change is an important step in the direction away from secularism. Whether it will soon be followed by other such steps I do not know. But the one step is important by itself. The two objections placed before me twenty-one years ago have both fallen away.

To understand the magnitude of the second precedent (the recognition of the legitimacy of relating religious commitments to academic work), think for a moment about the presence on Redeemer's campus of the Pascal Centre. It has been the Centre's objective, all through its years of operation, to relate faith and religious preconceptions to the *natural sciences* in particular. Those who would like to keep faith and revelation far removed from scholarship usually emphasize that in the natural sciences, in particular, there is no place for religious beliefs. The Pascal Centre has openly championed the opposite point

of view for many years. The position of its director, Prof. Jitse Vander Meer, is well known in this regard.

Thus it cannot be said that Redeemer "got by," so to speak, with its talk of integrating faith and learning mainly because it turned out, on close inspection, that the integration doesn't amount to much. Instead I would affirm that such integration has been a distinguishing characteristic of the college all along. And the idea of such integration has now been accepted as legitimate. In other words, a fine precedent has been set for the new millennium: there is a place for such integration in higher education here in Ontario. I maintain that this major precedent should give great encouragement to other institutions in our province, and that it should also function as a beacon of hope for the many Christian elementary schools and high schools that have received unfair treatment from the government.

So why did people change their minds about a Christian approach to higher education? Skillful argumentation on the part of Dr. Cooper and his associates had something to do with it, but in the end there remains an element of mystery about what happened. All through the process, including the many disappointments in years past, I felt that *spiritual forces* had something to do with the frustrations we encountered. But I was also convinced that the greatest spiritual force of all was with us.

We know that such events as the Redeemer charter change do not take place by chance. In other words, this new development is also, in a very deep sense, the Lord's own doing. We give him thanks for the change, and for the new opportunity which it places before Redeemer College. May we prove worthy of the challenge before us, fully equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:17).

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