

Calvin College, September 23, 2009

Thoughts on Academic Freedom: Tony Diekema, George Marsden, and Nicholas Wolterstoff

Tony Diekema

Academic freedom is, contrary to public impression, NOT “anything goes.” But academic freedom is fundamental and foundational to the academic enterprise everywhere; in all colleges and universities. It is an indisputable anchor to intellectual life and our free society (Diekema 2000, 144).

Academic freedom is a PUBLIC TRUST granted only to scholars/professors and members of the academic community. It is the centerpiece of our academic mission. It is a necessary condition for the unencumbered search for, and teaching of, truth. Without it, higher education cannot carry out its mission.

Academic freedom is not fully protected anywhere. There are orthodoxies everywhere. In Christian higher education it is a unique and special extension of the Biblical concept of Christian Freedom.....the seeking of “God’s truth” in every arena of human endeavor. “The world belongs to God” (Diekema 2000, 74) and our task is to understand it and claim it in the name, and for the sake, of Jesus Christ. Consequently, at a place like Calvin College, academic freedom is a responsible freedom requiring both individual and communal dedication to the mission, sensitivity to the community and moral order, vigilance for the threats, and prudence in adjudication. It is our common task. It is necessary for the fulfillment of our allegiance to Jesus Christ and his call to service in the academic enterprise. In the Reformed tradition, academic freedom is consistent with a high calling of self-denial and self-sacrifice for the cause of truth.....God’s truth (See Socratic Covenant, Diekema 2000, 99).

What are the distinguishing characteristics of Calvin College that lead to the enhancement of academic freedom, the envy of many other Christian institutions of higher education?

The first characteristic is a solid and sound Reformed theological framework. This framework provides guidance for the communal task of searching for truth--God’s truth. This framework also provides a rich heritage of high value on intellectual pursuit and educational endeavor—the roots of an ethos of freedom. Finally, a Reformed theological framework provides the foundational concept of “always reforming” in the tradition of the Reformation, thus supporting the revisability of all knowledge claims based upon new evidence and scholarship.

A second characteristic is the clearly differentiated roles of the College and the Church in protecting academic freedom. This differentiation is supported by the governance structures of each and the composition of their Boards of Trustees. These structures acknowledge the interdependence of different roles for mutual benefit. Both Church and College have accepted the Kuyperian notion of “spheres” of influence and control. Both recognize the existence of mutual trust and value of complementary roles in the search for and proclamation of God’s truth- Ecclesiastical and Educational (See Van Till case, Diekema 2000, 29).

The third distinguishing characteristic that supports academic freedom at Calvin College centers around the significance of Covenant over Contract in College/Faculty relations and in College/Church/Constituency Relationships. The college mission is shared by board, faculty, and church. The entire community embraces a Reformed

theological worldview and framework. This covenantal commitment supports mutual trust and the striving toward foundational consensus among a diversity of ideas and opinions.

The final characteristic is the essential pursuit of an ethos of freedom within the Campus Community. This ethos is undergirded by the constant integration of fundamental beliefs, standards, values and ideals. This dynamic of integration sets the tone and style and character of the Calvin community's life together.

These four distinguishing characteristic (and there are others) have provided Calvin College with an extraordinary gift of academic freedom over many years. Academic freedom has been foundational to the life of the mind and the spirit. It has enhanced Calvin's academic stature and its covenantal spirit. It has been challenged, but has protected the unstinting pursuit of God's truth and the courage to tell it. It has engendered statesmanship and scholarship which speaks to the heart of things with integrity and conviction. It has nurtured an ever-growing ethos of freedom which is a sacred trust in the service of Jesus Christ (Diekema, 2000).

George Marsden

Academic freedom is not an absolute, but is relative to particular academic communities. All academic communities, whether secular or religious have their bounds—there are always many things that may not be said or advocated—as rules regarding political correctness and speech codes of a couple decades ago illustrate. Some secularists have argued that religiously defined colleges and universities are automatically deficient with respect to academic freedom because of their religious boundaries. I heard a very distinguished historian say that he would not lecture at a school that had religious tests for faculty hiring, since that was equivalent to racial discrimination. That is nonsense, since even state schools that are defined as serving the “common good” or protecting “respect for diversity” or the like have some ideological limits regarding whom they will hire. In the history of the AAUP there used to be considerable such secularist sentiment that religiously based schools were automatically in a second-class category. But my impression that view has become more rare and that it is generally recognized that the issues of academic freedom at religious school should be judged in terms of the stated standards of that school.

So, as long as a school does not violate civil law, it is free, as I understand it, even by AAUP standards, to maintain any religious standard it wants and to restrict what may be advocated to any degree it wants, so long as it states the rules clearly when faculty are hired and follows due process.

Looking at the issue from the other side—from the point of view of the religious groups that support a school—it is very important for them to define the school by the standards of their religious heritage. Historically there have been many instances of church related schools, particularly from mainline Protestant denominations, that assumed that the standards for serving the public and serving the church would be more or less co-extensive. So they only informally guarded the theological distinctives of their religious heritage. Eventually in such mainline church schools their theological standards faded away since the pressures to serve the increasingly secular standards of the public culture overwhelmed the church heritage.

More conservative Protestant colleges that do not identify with the Protestant mainline almost all have long had substantial theological and behavior standards for their faculty. Practically speaking I do not see a lot of difference between schools that use historical confessions and those that do not in this regard—though I think there are some difference worth talking about. Wheaton, for instance, has a confessional standard, it is just that it is more contemporary than ours and traditionally it has been supplemented by enumerations of behavioral prohibitions.

Looking at the issue historically and comparatively, it seems to me that the exact nature of the confession and other requirements does not seem as important a variable for these religiously bounded schools as is the following: what does the church or supporting community see as the function of higher education?

One of the most prominent answers to that question among American conservative Protestant schools is that the school is a direct extension of the church and its intellectual function is dominated by a “defender of the faith ethos.” Since church and school are not clearly differentiated, higher education is like advanced Sunday school. So it has a relatively high degree of indoctrination and a relatively low degree of intellectual exploration. A large part of the spirit of the place is to define and defend what “we” believe in contrast to what the outside world believes. Wheaton used to be such a fundamentalist defender of the faith school, but it no longer is. Liberty U. would be a better example today. (For insight into Liberty and its curriculum see Kevin Roose, *The Unlikely Disciple*).

The other model, which I’ll call the covenantal academic model, makes a clear distinction between the functions of the church as an institution and those of an *academic* institution that serves the church. In this model, higher education plays a unique role in the Body of Christ as a place where intellectual inquiry and creativity are central to the ethos. Calvin College has been in my experience long been such a place. I think its unique leadership in American evangelical education, so that it has been a model that has reshaped the Wheaton’s of the world,—and many other schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and universities—-is very much related to this respect for unique ethos demanded to be a thriving *academic* community. No one can possibly miss the commitment of Calvin to the church—and I think Tony wonderfully captures it by speaking of it in terms of covenant. We are a covenantal community and common confessional commitment defines us as a part of a tradition that is deeply concerned with maintaining our tradition. Yet our function as an *academic* community involves cultivating an ethos of trust in which, in the context of worshipful commitment we can be thinking deeply, candidly, and creatively about how our faith relates not only to every inch of creation but also to every new moment of each new era we find ourselves in.

How does this all relate to academic freedom? Since academic freedom is not an absolute, it is of course not an absolute here either. But in the covenantal academic model of Christian higher education, the ethos of the school should be to *maximize* academic freedom and due process within the bounds of that covenantal commitment. There are limits, of course, as there are everywhere, but the presumption should be in favor of freedom unless someone is violating the covenantal commitment in some basic way. That is in contrast to the more fundamentalistic defender of the faith outlook where the ethos is that “academic freedom” is only the freedom to say those things that are not proscribed-

and here is a list of the things proscribed. In my view it would change the ethos of Calvin to and be a great mistake for Calvin to start making such a list.

Finally, and very briefly: what about the slippery slope concern that if the freedom we grant means that the boundaries may be breeched somewhere, eventually we will lose our distinctive identity? What is the best way to maintain our confessional identity? One lesson of history is at schools that have not been *traditionally* defender of the faith sorts, attempts to control controversial opinions by methods that appear autocratic or lacking in due process may work in the short run, but they also run the risk of creating a backlash and over-reaction that results in subsequent loosening of standards more rapidly than they might have been otherwise. In my view trying to maximize an ethos of freedom and of trust within an ethos of strong covenantal commitment defined by a confession is more likely to keep a school off the slippery slope.

The best way to preserve real boundaries is to maintain them with some flexibility. If they are made too tight and restricting, they may burst.

Nicholas Wolterstorff

1. I understand our topic here today to be academic freedom at Calvin College, not academic freedom in general. And for reasons that everyone here is aware of, our focus is mainly on academic freedom for faculty. Academic freedom for students is an important topic; but it's not our main topic today.
2. Every college and university places limits on what it allows its faculty to say and do. Some of these limits are widely shared. No American college or university today would keep a Holocaust-denier on its staff; nor, so I guess, would any American college or university keep on its staff someone who insisted that the abolition of slavery was a great mistake. Other limits are peculiar to a given institution, or type of institution. St. John's was founded for the purpose of placing the so-called Great Books at the center of its curriculum. St. John's would not hire someone who vocally insisted that a Great Books education was a lot of nonsense; Calvin College and Yale University, by contrast, would have no problem with that. I do not know what St. John's would do with someone who, when he was hired, was a Great Books devotee, but who then, over the years, changed his mind and became a Great Books denier.
3. The three of us have been firmly instructed to be brief. So I will do no more than characterize academic freedom at Calvin as I have known and experienced it over the past 60 years, and explain why, in my judgment, it has taken the form it has. I enrolled as a student here in 1949, I taught here from 1959-1989, and I have kept in close contact even when not on the scene. That's why I can speak about 60 years. I know something about what academic freedom at Calvin was like before I showed up; my showing up as a student did not represent any wrenching change. But I will confine myself to what I know personally.
4. Let me highlight five factors that have shaped the form academic freedom has taken here at Calvin.

First, Calvin is a confessional Christian college in the following sense: it is officially owned and operated by the Christian Reformed Church; the CRC is a confessional church in the Reformed tradition; the CRC requires that its office holders affirm three historic Reformed confessions; and the college treats its permanent faculty members on this point in the same way that the CRC treats its office-holders. It requires them to sign the three historic continental Reformed confessions: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dordt. The point of this requirement is that the college wants its faculty members to conduct their scholarship within the Reformed tradition of Christianity. Note: a faculty member does not sign allegiance to the CRC; he or she signs allegiance to the Reformed tradition. The difference is important.

Second, academic freedom at Calvin has been heavily influenced by Abraham Kuyper's idea of *sphere sovereignty*. The college, though officially owned and operated by the CRC, has never been understood as an arm of the church. Collegiate education is a distinct enterprise with its own goals, standards, etc.; it constitutes a distinct "sphere." It is not catechetical training. A Kuyperian would say that, in an ideal situation, the church would also not own and operate the college.

Third: Suppose we distinguish between the rule of law and the rule of persons. Deep in the Reformed tradition is an aversion to rule by persons and a strong preference for rule by law and due procedure. This was very much strengthened here at Calvin during my tenure here – George Monsma being our great leader on the matter.

Fourth, historically the board of Calvin College was constituted by a representative of each of the classes of the CRC. Usually these were ministers – though this was a matter of practice, not of requirement. The boards of almost all Christian colleges in the U.S., indeed, of almost all private institutions of higher education, are constituted dominantly of well-to-do donors to the college. And let's face it: money has power.

Fifth: historically the dominant ethos of Calvin has been powerfully egalitarian. This has had many manifestations, one of them being that the faculty as a whole has had a great deal of power. Unlike many Christian colleges, Calvin has never been the fiefdom of its president. Contrast this – to cite just one of many examples -- with Jerry Falwell and Liberty University.

5. Those are the factors that have shaped academic freedom here at Calvin. Now to the thing itself. Let me be rather autobiographical.

When I was teaching here, the outcome of these factors for a person like myself who identifies with the Reformed tradition was a quite astonishing freedom. It meant total freedom for me in what I did within my own field of philosophy. It also meant total freedom for me in what I said publicly about society and politics. I was a vocal critic of the VietNam War. Though I received angry anonymous calls at my home in the middle of the night, nobody in the administration or on the board of Calvin ever so much as suggested to me that I should tone it down. I was and remain a vocal supporter of the cause of the Palestinians. Nobody in the administration or on the board ever suggested that I should tone it down. And so it goes for every other social or political cause on which I spoke out. I'm sure the president and members of the board often wished that I

would tone it down; their life would have been easier. But none of them ever said that to me.

It also meant total freedom for me in what I said about the CRC. I was a vocal critic of the refusal of the CRC to ordain women – a policy that has now been changed. No one in the administration or on the board ever suggested that I should tone it down. I did on various occasions have some rather loud disagreements with one or another official of the denomination; but not even they suggested that I did not have a right to say what I said.

Actually there is nothing peculiar here about the relation of college professors to the CRC: every employee of the CRC has always been free to criticize positions of the church. The CRC has never seen itself as a magisterium.

Criticism of those three confessions is a different matter. The reason Howard Van Til was attacked was because it was charged that he was violating the confessions. That charge did not stand. It must at once be added that a member of the CRC is even free to challenge the confessions, provided he or she does it according to prescribed rules. A faculty member is free to do so as well. t

It goes without saying, but let me say it anyway: a faculty member's exercise of this freedom must be a *responsible* exercise.

6. Academic freedom at Calvin is a unique and precious heritage. It has been and remains the envy of every other conservative Christian college in the land; I have often heard the envy expressed. We at Calvin have not been blown about by every wind of social and theological fashion. But our heritage of academic freedom is a fragile heritage, easily destroyed, not readily understood, not to be taken for granted. It is for you who are here now to treasure it, to understand it, to defend it, to use it responsibly in the devoted pursuit of what is good and true and beautiful, having the courage to say "Yes" when "Yes" should be said and to say "No" when "No" should be said.

It is Jesus Christ as revealed in Holy Scripture whom you and I ultimately serve, not American society, not the American state, not any political party, not our academic guilds, not the Christian Reformed Church, not the Heidelberg Catechism, not even the Reformed tradition – Jesus Christ as revealed in Holy Scripture. Your freedom, as scholars and teachers at Calvin College, is fidelity in his service.