FREEDOM IN RELIGION - THE STYLE OF THE UCC

Pilgrim Congregational Church

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Nothing is so bothersome as trying to get hold of this slippery thing called the United Church of Christ. If only we had some peculiar characteristic, such as, wearing peaked hats, or not eating pickles on Saturday we would be so much easier to identify. But there seems to be no peculiarity on which we hold a monopoly.

It would help too if there was a more definite consensus on what we stood for. I have found the lack of that very hard to bear at times - and perhaps you have too.

But there is certain style about the Christian communion to which we belong. And if one is going to talk about that style it always seems that the word freedom enters in. We probably use that word too much and we undoubtedly abuse it, but it is a hard word to avoid when talking about the United Church of Christ or about the Congregational stream within that larger body. We are characterized by a certain dedication to freedom in religion. Note, I did not say, freedom of religion. That is important too, but it is not the same thing. You can have freedom of religion in the sense of freedom from outside control by the state. And yet there may still be a great deal of oppression in religion. I think that the United Church of Christ is devoted not only to freedom of religion, about which most religious groups agree today - but to this other thing which is still quite rare - and that is freedom in religion.

For example, it is our style to promote freedom in the religious institution. Within our churches each person is free in principle to share fully in the church's program, or for that matter, to inaugurate programs of his own. There is no distinction in principle between the sexes or between clergy and laity. We seek in the words of our forefathers to be "The Lord's free people" in the way we run the church. Not only do we seek freedom for individuals, but freedom for each basic unit of the institutional structure. Each local congregation is self-governed. It is not subject to control or intervention by outside officials. The same thing is true of most of our church agencies, our church-related colleges, mission boards, and the like. They may be responsible to some representative body, But we afford to them a maximum degree of autonomy in carrying on their own affairs.

In the United Church of Christ we believe that free institutions democratically organized are the best sort of institutions for channeling Christian community and Christian service.

Another aspect of our freedom in religion might be approached under the heading, freedom of the human spirit. We believe that a genuine faith develops in people when the whole person is encouraged to seek that faith for himself and to build it into his life. Our approach is not the method of indoctrination - that is to say, stuffing things into people - but rather of education, that is to say, leading out of people their own capacities for relationship with God and man. We believe that you cannot bully, browbeat or stampede people into Christianity without doing violence to the very character of Christianity. The truth that makes men free must

be freely accepted. That truth comes through a nurture of the human spirit which respects the integrity, the dignity and creativity of each person.

One implication of this freedom of the human spirit is a high regard for intellectual freedom. Negatively this means freedom from authoritarian indoctrination. But positively it means putting to work that part of the Great Commandment which calls upon us to love God with all our mind. The style of the United Church of Christ is to seek the truth wherever it is found in the confidence that all truth is God's truth. We are not afraid of what the geologist, the biologist, or the social philosopher may tell us even though what they say may force us to revise some of our traditional ways of thinking about God and his world. We believe that a living faith happens only when people's minds are open and engaged. It must be admitted that some of our Puritan forbears exercized a harsh brand of thought-control. Yet they did insist against the lunatic fringe of their day that reason and an inquiring mind should enter into the work of faith. They took inspiration from John Ball, who wrote:

"Faith is not a brutish captive which yields up her eyes to be put out."

It follows then that it has been our style for a long time - both in the Congregational side of the United Church and on the Evangelical and Reformed side - to respect differences of interpretation respecting the Christian message. We are fond of saying that our creeds or statements of faith are not tests, but testimonies. In other words, they are not verbal formulae to which our members subscribe. They are expressions of a consensus of what our members do believe.

But when I speak of freedom of the human spirit, I mean more than intellectual freedom. I also refer to emotional freedom. Positively that should mean the free expression of emotion - and that is where our Church may have fallen down in recent years. We are somewhat inhibited at that point. It might be a good thing is somebody would stand up and shout once in a while. If somebody wants to stand up and shout now they are free to do so. Only you can't shout past 11:20. We have to take the offering then.

The first Congregationalists drew a distinction between what they called an historical faith and a saving-heart faith. Historical faith was intellectual only. It consisted in knowing about the Christian message and believing that it was sound. This was important, but in the eyes of the early Congregationalists it was not enough. True faith involved the whole man, including his heart. Thomas Hooker said that only when you feel your heart "wrought upon" by God's Spirit do you know what faith is all about or can you share its meaning with another.

An emphasis on saving-heart faith is basic to our heritage, and we need to recover that emphasis. But it is just because we believe in freedom for the heart as well as the mind, that we of the United Church feel it is wrong to subject people to emotional duress. There was a time over a century ago when many of our churches were deeply involved in the revival movement. In fact, it was in a Congregational church that the Great Awakening began two and a half centuries ago. People were much impressed by the emotional fireworks that went along with that. Some of them tended to equate those fireworks too simply with the action of the Holy Spirit, and then in time they decided to help the Holy Spirit along. Men such as Charles Grandison Finney, a Presbyterian who joined the Congregationalists, developed what were called "the new measures." These were techniques for breaking people down at revivals. They were, in fact, a kind of religious

brain-washing. These measures included the mourners bench where the preacher aimed his fire at selected people in the presence of the congregation and the protracted meeting, where people sat up all night and even longer until they got saved from sheer exhaustion. You see the "hot seat" and the "marathon session" are not such mod gimmicks as people think they are.

Now some of our forefathers began to question that way of dragging people kicking and screaming into the Kingdom of God. For example, there was John Williamson Nevin, another ex-Presbyterian who became a leading figure in the German Reformed Church, which ultimately became part of the United Church of Christ. Nevin wrote a book called The Anxious Bench in which he attacked the news measures style of revival. He wrote:

> "the anxious bench, revival machinery, solemn tricks for effect, decision displays at the bidding of the preacher, genuflections and prostrations in the aisle or around the altar, noise and disorder, extravagance and rant, mechanical conversions, justification by feeling rather than by faith have no connection with true religion."

"True religions feeling," he said, "is inward and deep; shrinks from show, forms the mind to a subdued and humble habit." Among the Congregational Churches too, there were people who bucked the popular tide and pointed out the excesses to which the new kind of revivals were leading. Even Finney himself had second thoughts about his methods.

So in time our churches outgrew the revival system. The Evangelical and Reformed Churches never did share in it very much, and the Congregational churches put it aside during the last century. Perhaps they over-reacted to the crudities to which they had been exposed. There is still a place, I think, for evangelistic meetings. We could use more warmth and more beat in our music. Personal testimonies that are truly sincere will never be out of date. But engineering of mass hysteria, the manipulation of crowds of people by means of hypnotic music, group gesturing, appeals to fear and feelings of alienation, the bringing of emotional pressures to bear on individuals and families, the stripping of persons of reason, inhibition and all the refinements of culture so that they may be softened up for some crude religious pitch - the calculated rape of the human psyche in the name of Christ - all that can only be repugnant to those who value that freedom of the human spirit for which our church stands.

In the United Church of Christ we stand for freedom in religion. But, of course, that cannot be separated from freedom in the society where we practice our religion. The words of James Russell Lowell's hymn that we sang today remind us of this:

> "Men, whose boast it is that ye come from fathers brave and free,
> If there breathe on earth a slave, are ye truly free and brave?
> If ye do not feel the chain when it works a brother's pain
> Are ye not base slaves indeed, slaves unworthy to be freed?"

Through the years people in our churches have asked themselves that question and they have tried to answer it by concerning themselves with the rights and liberties of the downtrodden and oppressed. John Calvin's Geneva and John Cotton's Boston were in some respects oppressive. But the seeds of freedom and democracy were sown in those religious experiments of which we in our church are the most direct American heirs. The oldest democracy in the world arose out of those Swiss Reformed Communities, and the New

England town meeting is but the secular reflection of the New England Church meeting.

But the connection is even more direct than that. Some day I hope to preach some more sermons about the scenes in the history windows by the front door. You will note that one of those scenes shows Thomas Hooker delivering his famous speech at the opening of the first legislature in Connecticut in 1638, a speech in which he said:

"The foundation of authority is laid in the free consent of the people."

The last scene depicts Lyman Abbott preaching a sermon against slavery in 1860. The quotation reads:

"God is showing the inherent weakness of all forms of government not founded on the law of love."

Today this concern for freedom in society goes on. Last week one of the confirmation class asked me what specifically the United Church of Christ was doing for racial justice. He felt that much general talk occurred but little in the way of specific action. He was right and I agreed. But during the week I found in my files a newsletter from the United Church Commission for Racial Justice devoted to prison reform. Among the specific things it reports is the case of Marie Hill, a 16-year-old black girl in North Carolina who was sentenced to the gas chamber for allegedly killing a white man. Believing that injustice was being done, the United Church of Christ Commission on Racial Justice mobilized sentiment against the conviction, procured competent defense lawyers and got the decision reversed by the United States Supreme Court. That is something specific done for freedom. It is in keeping with our ongoing tradition.

Of course, one may argue - but isn't it true that the majority of people in the United Church either oppose or are indifferent to the kinds of thing that national and regional church agencies have done in the area of social justice? Yes, that is probably true, and it is disillusioning. But the fact is that it is also true to a greater degree in almost all the other denominations. Despite massive resistance the United Church of Christ continues to lead the way in its active involvement in the cause of freedom and justice in society. If we look for the distinctive role of our church, we would do well to look in this direction of social ethics - rather than in the direction of Singspirations and Ice Cream Socials.

Somehow you cannot put your finger on the distinctive style of our denomination without speaking of freedom - freedom in the institution and in the way we respect the individual quest for a living faith, freedom in the social order.

Of course, this freedom has specific roots. In the words of a leading British Congregationalist of the turn of the century - P. T. Forsyth - ours is a <u>founded freedom</u>. It is founded in a Christian faith. We are the United Church of <u>Christ</u>. Like all freedom that is not mere chaos, our liberty arises from a specific commitment. As our local church covenant states, we are bound in discipleship to Jesus. But in that bond we find the truth that sets us free - free from selfishness, free from prejudice, free from hate, free to live as children of God and to seek his kingdom in the world.