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Speak no evil – but what about freedom of speech?



There was good news yesterday (July 2019) for “Freedom of speech” and not just for Christians.

The Court of Appeal yesterday ruled that merely expressing disagreement with same-sex marriage does not amount to discrimination. Felix Ngole’s legal team had already pointed out that it should never have come to this and earlier suggestions of compromise had been declined leaving Mr Ngole no option but to take the case to the Court of Appeal and now the Court of Appeal has ruled in his favour. Pastor Omooba tried to propose a way to resolve the conflict, and the university is criticised by the judges who said:

“It is unfortunate that at no stage did the University grasp the olive branch proffered by Pastor Omooba.”

In 2015, during an online debate on same-sex marriage, Felix Ngole, a social work student at the University of Sheffield, commented on Facebook that the Bible says homosexuality is a sin. The university expelled Mr Ngole and claimed that any expression of disapproval of same-sex relationships would breach the professional guidelines for social workers.

The Court criticised the university for attempting to create a ban on freedom of speech and said: *“The mere expression of views on theological grounds (e.g. that ‘homosexuality is a sin’) does not necessarily connote that the person expressing such views will discriminate on such grounds.”*

To be against someone is to see someone as an enemy. This is the extreme case, so taking that as our example: Jesus Christ still tells us directly that we should LOVE our enemies. In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 5 Jesus says to us:

“...But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

So if we love our enemies then the judges were right that *“The mere expression of views on theological grounds does not necessarily connote that the person expressing such views will discriminate on such grounds.”*

The judges also said if social workers and social work students were banned from ever expressing such views, then Christians and those of other faiths would be prevented from seeking employment in a whole host of other professions.

In Romans chapter 13 St Paul talks of the law (i.e. the Judaeo-Christian law) and says the law is summed up in this sentence,

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

However we are different as Christians and we do not agree with everything the secular world dreams up!

St Paul writes in Romans at chapter 12:

² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Even in the first letter of John at chapter 2 we are told:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. ¹⁶ For everything in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives for ever.

The “Father” in this case is God and it emphasizes again that Christians are different to worldly values, but Christians are commanded to love (i.e. care for) others and to love their neighbour (which is certainly not the same as agreeing with them). As Christians we are called to care for and serve others, and publicly and privately we must be free to express our beliefs, especially when asked, without fear of losing our livelihoods.

As the judges pointed out:

“If social workers and social work students must not express such views, then what of art

therapists, occupational therapists, paramedics, psychologists, radiographers, speech and language therapists: all professions whose students and practitioners work under the rubric of the same general regulations? What of teachers and student teachers?"

All sorts of professions would be affected.

Andrea Minichiello Williams said that as the judges recognised, this would not just be a bar to Christians, but Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths. This is a victory for all of us and for freedom of expression for professionals of all kinds.

This is also not the first time this ruling has come from the Courts: In 2011, Christian housing manager Adrian Smith was demoted, and his salary cut by 40 per cent for posting on Facebook that same-sex weddings in churches would be "an equality too far". The High Court ruled in that case and even then ruled in Adrian Smith's favour.

As Ms Minichiello Williams also pointed out: This judgement must send a resounding message to Universities and employers across the land. Christians and others should be allowed to express their views. This is what free speech means. No one has freedom not to be offended. We must be able to disagree with tolerance, and not with silencing or bullying. Places of work, and universities in particular, should not be places where certain views are deemed politically incorrect and worthy of expulsion.

This judgement means that we are free to speak, free to express Christian views, to advocate for those views at university, in the classroom, and at work.

Christians should use our freedom of speech and unashamedly proclaim Biblical truth, however unpopular or out of fashion it may be. The truth will win out in the end. We hope that this judgement encourages Christians to be bold and fearless in expressing their Christian faith at work, at university, in church or elsewhere. All truth is found in Jesus Christ. In Colossians 1 we are told:

"For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together".

The world needs the truth for in the Truth all things hold together. And it is by the truth we are all set free.

In what is called the Great Commission Jesus Christ commands us at all at the end of Matthew's Gospel to "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*" which does involve speaking to people.

Felix is exactly the kind of person that we want in social work. Today he stands vindicated; today justice has been done. But it's not just for him; it's for us, the Church here in the UK. Let's ensure that this emboldens us to speak of the life-giving good news that is found in Jesus Christ.

July 2019