

Freeing Speech (part 2)

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When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. ⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. ⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans?" ⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? ⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" ¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" ¹³ Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine." ¹⁴ Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: "Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. ¹⁵ These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! ¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ "In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. ¹⁸ Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." [Acts 2:1-18]

Our previous briefing made some legal, philosophical and theological observations about 'free speech' as part of an ongoing 'work in progress' on the subject. This briefing will continue trying to unravel free speech theologically, by summarising the argument of The Revd Prof. Oliver O'Donovan, as found in [The Desire of the Nations](#) (see below). Page numbers are included for anyone wishing to take it further.

For O'Donovan, the extraordinary events of that Pentecost day changed the world forever. God's people became open to **mutual address**.

- It eventually led to the 'conciliar movement' in Christendom—a call upon the Pope to take seriously the Christian wisdom of others.
- In turn, there blossomed parliamentary movement in civil society—a call upon the King to take seriously the wisdom, whether Christian or otherwise, of others.
- Threaded into this story is the Reformation, and the 'non-conformist' movement among Christians—a call by Christians upon each other to understand that claims for theological truth must be settled with words, not through physical force, when the Bible is discussed freely among groups who freely meet together.

It comes as quite a surprise for many people to see the central role of Christianity in this historical story.

In the popular alternative, secularism invented 'free speech': while Christians were busily killing each other, the 'Enlightenment' saved the West by inventing free and rational enquiry. But that account is heavily mythological, and simply fails to notice all the developments in medieval Christendom that gave rise to the very possibility of free speech. A seed fell on the day of Pentecost, and sprouted in the soil of Christendom.

There was no political 'free speech' in the Roman empire. But after Pentecost and during the centuries that followed, political authority had "to confront and accommodate the free discourse of a society which has learned to recognise authority also in the word spoken by God by manservants and maidservants" (269). If God could use *anyone* in his church to speak truth, then potentially, *any* voice could now address the society about the common good.

But this understanding of free speech, like the understanding of divinely given prophecy that it sprang from, did not mean that all words are created equal. Just as divine prophecy originated not with the prophet but with God (cf. 1 Cor. 14:36), so also wisdom about the common good was not necessarily held by all. Prophecy was “to be discerned, respected and attended to in silence by the rest of the community.” (281) Likewise, communities understood that “wisdom was distributed rarely, its speech to be received by attendant, and therefore dependent, communities of learners.” (282) The ‘prophecy’ begun at Pentecost was not a free-speech free-for-all: “let the others weigh what is said” for “the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets” (1 Cor. 14:29, 32).

O’Donovan thinks that this concept of mutual discernment together of wisdom is integral to what became known as ‘democracy’. Democracy is not fundamentally about ‘representatives’ or even elections. (A tiny minority rules us. Notions such as that ‘we all rule’ or that ‘we all judge rulers at election time’ are a fiction.) Primarily, democracy is about the way rulers must now respond to a wide public deliberation that is open to the whole community. And it is therefore also about the activities of a Parliament or a Congress, “a forum of deliberation before which a government is expected to explain itself and expose itself to critical interrogation” (270). At their best, such assemblies are places where the common good is ‘discovered’ together.

Of course that is not the way the world is now! A parallel story can be told, particularly during the twentieth century, where speech is stripped of the expectation that it will be ‘wise’, making it seem that all speech is equal. So “speech has lost its orientation to deliberation on the common good, and has come to serve the assertion of competing interests” (282). At its worst, public speech is merely a tool to amplify and express the power of interest-holders. What has been lost from view is the proper role of speech, to aid discernment by means of argument. Speech itself is ‘totalised’: that is, someone’s ‘freedom’ to speak a thing becomes more important than whether the substance of what is said matters.

O’Donovan’s account is a short summary of a long history, and you have read the summary of the summary. There is no room here to lay out the evidence for these claims. But one theme should have become very clear by now: that when free speech is not ‘totalised’, it *serves* something else: **the common good**.

The very possibility that there is such a thing as a ‘common good’—a life together that we can discover and which causes us to flourish—is itself seriously disputed. But it is safe to say that Christians remain optimistic something like that is possible. Even in a fallen world, we can discern certain trends and themes that make for better, not worse, societies, and the best kind of speech weighs the options.

The historic expression of ‘free speech’ has, then, been twofold: that in the church, Christians might discover truth about God together, and that in our secular lives with our neighbours, we might discover and discern a ‘common good’ together.

A Christian account of free speech, then, needs to beware that it does not forget its birthright. If ever the freedom to speak truth about God was thought to be under threat, it would be easy for Christians just to shrilly shout (with totalised speech) that they have a ‘right’ to say whatever they want whenever they want to. That response would fail to model what was originally understood on and after Pentecost, rather than promoting a forum for equitable sharing of wisdom.

That would be a mistake. Christian free speech concerns truth about God, and a common good in society. Not all words are created equal for this task, and a Christian account of ‘free speech’ does not include saying whatever we want.

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Sources/Further Reading:

O'Donovan, Oliver M.T., *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 268-70, 281-83.

Cavanaugh, William T. *Theopolitical Imagination*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2003, chapter 1.

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