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Let truth and falsehood grapple

March 15, 2008 ¦ Karen Swallow Prior

Recently, a jury imposed a judgment of nearly $11 million against a church that travels the country spreading the message that “God Hates America.” This church has gained notoriety in recent years for “celebrating” at the funerals of fallen American soldiers what it proclaims to be God’s judgment on America for having “sold her soul to the sodomites.” Because of these demonstrations, numerous states have enacted laws limiting protests at funerals and cemeteries. This judgment resulted from a lawsuit filed by the father of a soldier killed in Iraq whose funeral the group protested.

The Liberty University community stands uniquely poised within this clash of competing interests. Our university was founded for no less a cause than to raise up “Champions for Christ” who will confront and transform the culture. Thus we can understand this church’s concern about a sinful culture — if not their message or method. On the other hand, this same group protested at the Rev. Jerry Falwell’s funeral, deeming our founder a “false prophet” for preaching “false doctrines like ‘God loves everyone.’” So if anyone can understand the heightened grief caused by such hateful falsehoods, we can. And if anyone can empathize with the impulse to restrict such demonstrations, it is we.

Nevertheless, no one group more than Christians should be the diligent guardians of free speech.

For one thing, infringements on free speech in modern times target, more often than not, biblical Christians. The limits imposed in recent years by American courts on abortion protests and by legislators around the world on anti-homosexual speech provide just a few examples. But an even more important consideration stems from an understanding of the nature of truth.

The right to free speech, even when that speech is hateful or false, ultimately always serves the interests of truth. This principle has never been more eloquently argued than by the Puritan poet and pamphleteer John Milton in his 1644 treatise Areopagitica: “Though all the winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth,” Milton wrote, “so Truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and Falsehood grapple … .”

Similarly, Ecclesiastes 2:13 says, “Wisdom excels folly as light excels darkness.” Darkness isn’t a positive entity, but rather, the absence of light. The only way to dispel darkness is through the presence of light. Likewise, since truth is a fruit of the light (Eph. 5:9), the way to eliminate folly, or falsehood, is not to suppress it, but to shine the light of truth upon it.

Well-intentioned attempts — whether by the government or by Christians — to suppress speech only further darkness since even narrowly targeted restrictions on speech risk the inadvertent suppression of truth, for truth is vibrant not dead. “Truth is compared in Scripture to a streaming fountain,” argued Milton, “If her waters flow not in a perpetual progression, they sicken into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition.”

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