
Free Churches

Most of us are familiar with the Evangelical Free Church in Lethbridge. Perhaps we might be less familiar with the history that gave rise to the word, “free,” in the name of that denomination. We should ask, “free from what?”

To fully understand the history of the name, we must go back to the year 380AD. As we are aware, Christians in the early centuries of Christianity were sometimes severely persecuted. Christianity did not have the official sanction of the Roman Empire, and that left Christians vulnerable to attack. Things changed significantly in 312AD when Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan which recognized Christianity as being a valid religion and moved it to become the preferred religion of the Roman Empire. Another huge change in policy took place in 380AD when Emperor Theodosius, in the Edict of Thessalonica, declared that Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. This was quickly adopted across the empire and remained true even after the Empire came to an end in 476AD and was divided into several smaller kingdoms. The Edict of Thessalonica gave Christians and Christianity dominance in the Mideast, in northern Africa and in much of Europe.

While this was a blessing, there were some significant drawbacks. The ruling civil authorities (kings and nobility) saw themselves as being called by God to be defenders of the Christian faith, and they took an active role in leading the church. Gradually they took upon themselves the duty of appointing church leaders to the positions of pastors and bishops, even appointing the Bishop of Rome, the pope, to his position. While it could be argued that many of the appointments by the kings and nobility were proper and good and those appointed to their positions served the Lord faithfully, it is also true that those appointed were expected to be supportive of the civil government. In other words, the civil authorities were more likely to appoint people who would show their appreciation for their appointment by being patrons of the civil leaders.

This all came to a head in the 11th and 12th centuries when the right of the nobility to appoint church leaders was challenged. For almost a century, the church struggled to gain the right to appoint its own leaders, independent of the kings and nobles. Eventually the church won out, and even the most powerful kings and civil leaders had to receive the blessing of the church leadership before they could be considered legitimate. Even today, in some countries the monarch is crowned by the highest religious leader, as is illustrated by the fact that King Charles was crowned by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the leader of the Church of England. (It should be noted that the achievements of the church in those centuries did not last as is seen from the fact that the king of England, while being crowned by the Archbishop, also appoints the Archbishop, a kind of compromise to what had been before the reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries.)

While the church won its independence from the government, the government continued to have great influence in the church. In many northern European countries, there was only one recognized church, and it was supported by the government. In Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, Sweden and Norway,

the state church has its roots in Lutheranism. They do not name their churches “Lutheran Churches,” but, rather, “Evangelical Churches,” which can be a little confusing because “evangelical” means something a little different in North America. In countries like the Netherlands, the Calvinistic teachings dominated, and these churches were called “Reformed Churches.” These official churches were considered national churches meaning that they were supported by tax dollars in addition to donations from the people. (This remains true in some places in Europe where the national church continues to receive tax dollars from the government.) Because of this financial support, it was often the case that the churches were not entirely free from governmental influence. And, from time to time, this caused concern among those who sought to follow the teachings of Scripture rather than be influenced by the civil authorities.

Thus, in Norway for example, a number of Christians left the state church (the Evangelical Church) and formed their own denomination calling it the “Free Church,” or, as we have it here, the Evangelical Free Church. The word, “free,” indicates that the church considered itself free from government influence. It also meant that it would not receive financial support from tax dollars.

In the Netherlands, at about the same time, it was felt strongly that the state church was too influential in appointing leaders and determining doctrine and in the early 1830s a movement began which led to a secession of a number of churches from the state church to form a new denomination with the result that the Christian Reformed Church was born. While this new denomination did not take the name “free,” it was understood that it was free from government influence, for it had seceded from the national church. (Note that the “free” in the Free Reformed Church does not have the same historical roots as the “free” in the Evangelical Free Church, although the sentiment is there.) It is important to realize that the early years of the CRC in the Netherlands were difficult, for the new congregations were forbidden from meeting together, and some of their pastors were jailed for violating old laws which had been long forgotten but were remembered so that there would be reason to level criminal charges against them. This persecution ended rather quickly and less than 70 years later, Abraham Kuyper, a member of what is now the CRC, became the Prime Minister of the Netherlands.

This history serves, in part, to illustrate what the phrase “separation of church and state means.” Some believe that the phrase is found in the American constitution, but it is not. Rather, the First Amendment of the US Constitution states that “congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion.” In other words, separation of church and state prevents the government imposing a particular religion on the people or forcing them to worship or believe in a particular way. Further, the government has no right to appoint the spiritual and religious leaders of any denomination.

But the restrictions are meant to go only in one direction. If there is a separation of church and state, meaning that the government cannot influence an individual’s religion, it also means that if a person believes that their religion should shape their political and social views of the country, that must be permitted. After all, if the government may not influence one’s religion, they cannot say that one’s religion is not permitted to influence any non-religious polity. Let’s be thankful for those who went before us and who fought hard to give us the right to believe and worship as we desire but let’s not forget that we still have the right to seek to influence those who hold power, for our faith requires that we do.

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