

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Winter 2007 No. 103

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FREE TO TEACH

By David Phillips

Over the last year three university Christian unions have hit the headlines of the national press because of attempts to curtail their activities by those who do not agree with them. Conflict within universities is nothing new and Christian Unions have found opposition to their attempts to evangelise. There has also been resistance to the influence of Bible teaching churches on campuses, but these recent developments seem to fit a pattern. In two of the cases the opposition is related, at least in part, to the students' stance on issues of sexual morality. These appear to fit the pattern we see in other areas where those who wish to engage in homosexual conduct are trying to suppress the views of Christians who believe such conduct to be wrong.

I am indebted to the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship (LCF) and the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) for briefings and information in putting together this article. It was also encouraging to see in the national press a letter from a number of Bishops upholding the freedom of Christians in universities.

Exeter

At Exeter the first open shot appears to have been fired in May 2006 by a student who took issue with the name 'Christian Union'. The Students' Guild (an association of the students in a university) allowed the student to propose that the CU be forced to change its name to 'Evangelical Christian Union'. The process appears to have been handled in an underhanded way and the Guild voted this change by a small majority at an Extraordinary General Meeting.

The argument appears to have been that because the CU has a basis of faith which it requires its members to accept, it was deliberately excluding Christians who were not 'evangelical'. Whilst tensions between Christian Unions and other students groups are not new, the name Christian Union has been in use for more than half a century, so why has it suddenly become an issue? The CU (or ECU depending upon your view) students at Exeter seem to think that this has been a deliberate attempt to marginalise them and, given the events that followed, this understanding seems correct.

What ensued sounds like a classic example of student politics. The CU sought to have the decision reversed whilst Student Guild officers tried to use their power to block this and the student body as a whole showed great indifference. The Guild AGM reversed the decision, but their officers refused to ratify this and instead took the extraordinary step of seeking a referendum of the entire student body. Presumably the CU members had turned up in good numbers to the AGM and the Guild officers reasoned that the rest of the students would not like the CU. The vote took place in October with nearly 13,000 students eligible to vote. The students voted by a fairly narrow margin that the name should be changed, but the vote was apparently invalid because only about five percent of the student body voted, whereas Guild rules require that at least ten percent vote for a decision to be valid. This seems to leave a rather confused situation and at present the CU are using the name ECU.

During this process the Guild sought to suspend the CU from membership and to deny them the benefits associated with this, such as the use of rooms. The CU was required to disassociate from the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF) and to stop requiring CU committee

members to sign the UCCF doctrinal basis.

The temptation when faced with such pressure is to cave in. There is also amongst many Christians a reluctance to fight issues through legitimate political and legal means. This, despite the example of the Apostle Paul who was quite content to use the benefits of his Roman Citizenship to propagate the gospel and gain legal redress. Praise God therefore that Exeter CU has decided to fight this for the sake of Christian liberty. The CU is taking legal action in order to have their exclusion reversed. Given the draconian way in which the Guild officers have acted and their attempts to undermine the voting process this is a sad necessity. The CU are also arguing, rightly, that their basis of faith does not reflect 'evangelical Christianity' but rather simply historic orthodox Christian faith.

At the time of writing the legal process is ongoing.

Birmingham

I have mentioned Exeter first because it seems to have attracted most attention. Yet the situation at Birmingham University is very similar and occurred earlier in the year. The Birmingham case was reported in the national press but Exeter and Edinburgh (see below) seem to have hit a chord. Sections of the press have equated this with active discrimination against Christians because they are being treated in a way in which no one would dare to treat Muslims.

The Birmingham CU had already adopted the name 'Evangelical Christian Union' a number of years ago, although they are one of only a few CUs who have done this. In January they were expelled from the Students' Guild and their bank accounts were frozen. Being expelled means that they cannot book rooms nor use other facilities and cannot distribute material through the normal means. According to *The Times* the reason given was "refusing to open its membership to people of all religions". The CU in Birmingham has been going for over three-quarters of a century and again we must ask why is this suddenly an issue? The members of the CU believe that real reason for the suspension was not the one stated but rather their stance over sexual conduct. Again *The Times* reported that the CU had resisted calls for it to mention lesbian, gay and bisexual people in their constitution and further that some had wanted them to drop the words 'men' and 'women' because this is seen as excluding transsexual and transgender people.

With the help of LCF the Birmingham CU are also fighting their exclusion and this is ongoing.

Edinburgh

In Edinburgh the Christian Union has not only been in conflict with the Students' Guild but also with the university authorities. The underlying issue is also much clearer and in the open. The CU had planned to hold a course called PURE which, amongst other things, sets out Christian teaching on sexual intercourse; that it belongs within the context of marriage. This course has been used in other universities without complaint but not surprisingly there are many who dislike what is being taught. In Edinburgh however some students decided that such views should not be taught in premises of the Students' Guild or the University and they mounted a campaign to ensure that the CU could not use such premises for the course.

A group called BLOGS which appears to represent homosexual, bisexual and transgender students has particularly been behind the campaign. They do not like the fact that the PURE material describes sex outside heterosexual marriages as sin (I have not seen the PURE material itself so I can only presume it does make such a statement). However, they also say that describing such

conduct as sin makes them feel unsafe because people will use it as an excuse to attack homosexual people. This is a weak argument but it needs to be understood because it is the same argument put forward in the recent Gay Police Association advert which appeared to link the Bible with the shedding of blood. As Christians we have a difficult line to tread. The Bible teaches that all sexual intercourse outside marriage is wrong in the sight of God and we have to beware of isolating just homosexual practice. Assaults on homosexuals are clearly a problem, but it is hard to see how a course like PURE is going to stir up those who do such things. Moreover, we cannot pretend that one particular sexual sin is not a sin. Therefore, whilst we should recognise the concerns expressed we cannot let them be used to silence Biblical teaching and the freedom both to follow such principles and teach them to others.

BLOGS admits that the PURE course does not in fact cover this subject in much detail. Instead students who wish to pursue it further are encouraged to read a book which is recommended and to contact True Freedom Trust (TFT). BLOGS also finds this offensive because it believes both are seeking to reform homosexuals which I think they understand in terms of curing homosexuals of a disease. I don't know the book but the work of TFT does not have that focus, it is more about helping homosexuals to live faithful lives consistent with Biblical teaching. I suspect that BLOGS would still take issue with this approach but I do think they have misunderstood it.

Time to act

These are not isolated incidents but fit a wider picture of people trying to portray Christians as extremists and trying to silence Biblical teaching. It is important in responding not to fuel the arguments of those opposing Christian witness. The UCCF is encouraging people to bring this issue out into the open and to protest to the universities concerned. In both Exeter and Birmingham the matter is being pursued through legal means and the outcome of this will be important since it will set clear precedent. If they are allowed to stand, these decisions will become significant milestones in the erosion of freedom Christians have enjoyed to meet and to teach the Bible.

There do appear to be so many areas of concern at the present time and so much that Christian groups are asking members to do in order to try to protest but there is also clear evidence that such action is proving effective. Therefore we would encourage you to write to those concerned and also to pray for the CUs and for the lawyers acting on their behalf.

UCCF are encouraging people to contact local and national press around the country in order to draw attention to these issues. In addition they have suggested that people write to the authorities of the three Universities concerned. If you are able to write please remember that your words should be 'with grace, seasoned with salt' (Col 4.6).

Contacts:

Vice-Chancellor Professor Steve Smith, The University of Exeter, The Queen's Drive, Exeter, EX4 4QJ

Principal, Professor Timothy O'Shea, The University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh, EH8 9YL

Vice-Chancellor Professor Michael Sterling, University of Birmingham, Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT