

[On March 3, 2006, I participated in a 6-member panel, sponsored by Mecklenburg Ministries, in which each participant was asked to give his/her response to the recent controversy in Denmark, sparked by the publishing of several cartoons depicting the prophet Mohammed.]

One of the scriptures to which I cling is a statement of the Apostle Paul to the church in Galatia: “*For freedom Christ has set us free.*”

“Freedom in Christ” is my firm conviction.

One of the civil claims I hold dear is that “self-evident truth” of “unalienable Rights... Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This liberty, at the heart of three of our most important documents, is further defined in terms of the freedoms of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition.

Civil freedom is my firm conviction.

Now, I am sure that as a Christian American I neither fully understand nor fully appreciate the “freedoms” about which I so readily preach. But as for my own “Christian response,” I knew nowhere else to begin, for freedom, as I understand it, is, perhaps, my highest value, spiritually and socially. So how do I respond when I become aware that “freedom,” itself, is so often the heart of the problem?

I, personally, begin this conversation by re-affirming, humbly, these freedoms I claim, as a Christian and a U.S. citizen. I cannot affirm the messages of bigotry and insensitivity that are still too prevalent – and made possible by these freedoms – but I must affirm the right of self-expression, troublesome though it will inevitably be. I affirm even the right of the Pat Robertsons of the world to make their misguided and embarrassing proclamations about God and God’s people. Our nation and world would be better off without such expressions – but only if the people who make them have chosen to express themselves in more mature, inclusive, and respectful ways. I believe that stifling self-expression is always a recipe for human self-destruction.

Next, as a follower of Jesus I reject violence as a solution to any crisis. I recognize that I speak from a position of privilege, a life far removed from injustice and the humiliation and maddening frustration that much of my world experiences daily. I can imagine that under such oppression violence seems a just resort. But I believe we must learn, as global citizens, and as a universal family of God, that such solutions are only an illusion – that violence can, and will, always only beget more violence.

So, directly to the point: I object to the violent response of those offended by cartoon drawings. Though I can understand this response, I do not believe such action will ultimately benefit either the Muslim community, or our global community. Yet, more must be said. A friend of mine, a young Cuban pastor visiting last year, observed that Americans seem to have made “freedom” our god. It was an instructive comment. His statement caused me to reflect on the difference in the “freedom in Christ” that is at the heart of my understanding of faith, and the “freedoms” I profess as a citizen. As a Christian, “freedom in Christ” must always be the standard by which I judge my civil freedoms. Such judgment will call me to constrain my own free choice by a prior consideration of my neighbor (whom I too often am tempted to call my “enemy”).

If I choose to use my freedom to roundly condemn those who do not share either my ideology or my theology. I am not free. If I choose to use my freedom to resolve conflicts with an ever-increasing violence. I am not free. I am persuaded by the life and death of Jesus that only when I have freed myself from the needs of self-protection and self-preservation, only when I am free enough to live and die for the other am I truly free.

*For freedom Christ has set us free.* I think any truly Christian response will always begin with “me,” and will echo Paul’s encouragement: *Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.*

May it be so!