

Defending your Christian Union

It happened to me

I have written this briefing to help university students defend their CU. I was the President of Hull Christian Union (UCCF-affiliated) when it was threatened with expulsion from the Student Union. This was because of our policy that CU leaders should be Christians. I now work full-time as a researcher for The Christian Institute.



Alasdair Armour

It is tremendously important that Christian students stand firm when witnessing for Christ. It is very easy to compromise truth, especially at university where rejection of traditional norms is idolised. Standing firm is a good witness to the world, which needs us to be salt and light. It also helps other Christians not to cave in to pressure.

There is obvious intolerance of Christians today, particularly in regard to expressing our beliefs on certain moral issues. Some people would happily stop the gospel from being preached because they are offended by it. However, many laws exist to protect religious liberty and freedom of expression. The great British tradition of religious toleration

and freedom of speech has become famous throughout the world.

Universities themselves are indebted to Christian campaigners for the growth of free speech within academia. Zachary Macaulay, a significant figure in the abolition of the slave trade, was instrumental in the setting up of London University, the first of its kind to allow Dissenters and non-Anglicans into membership.

By standing firm and resisting pressure to water-down the gospel we help to uphold laws protecting our liberty and freedoms. We also challenge those who hear the message to repent, and we glorify God by living for him and showing that we care for the honour of his name.

A platform to witness for the gospel

For many campus-based universities the Student Union offers the best facilities for a CU. They have good-sized, accessible rooms, poster space and often funding. At some universities non-Union societies cannot even distribute flyers on site. A CU has as much right as every other society to these facilities. Without them it can be much harder to operate on campus, thus stifling gospel witness.

Defending your Christian Union helps promote the gospel. Not only can it help to secure practical resources to facilitate the work of the CU but the act of defending your gospel work can be an essential part of the witness. This was the experience of believers throughout the book of Acts. And what does it say

about the gospel and our commitment to it if we will not stand firm?

If you take a public stand, God may use it to promote the gospel within the University, creating opportunities for

Christian students to share their faith. Your case may be discussed more widely. It gives Christians a platform to explain what they believe. For example, the Exeter CU case has been reported around the world.



The Apostle Paul used his legal rights

The Book of Acts gives us several examples of Paul using his legal rights to promote the gospel. Paul was not afraid to use the law if he was wronged and the law was on his side. In fact, the Apostle was prepared both to use and not to use his rights as a Roman citizen, depending on whichever option most benefited the gospel.

Acts 16

Paul was thrown into prison without trial contrary to his rights as a Roman citizen. When the magistrates realised their mistake they wanted to release him quietly, but Paul shamed them for presiding over injustice by insisting they escort him out publicly. As a result the local magistrates would have been much more wary of arresting Christians. Paul used his legal rights as a Roman

citizen for the benefit of the church.

Acts 21

Paul obtained permission from the Roman army commander to address the crowd in Jerusalem, arguing he was a citizen of 'no ordinary city'. Paul used his cultural status to promote the gospel, despite the hostility that he would face.

Acts 22

Paul used his rights to avoid being unjustly punished. He was about to be flogged. When news reached the commander that he was a Roman citizen the flogging was prevented. The commander became alarmed, recognising that Paul had been treated unfairly under Roman law and that he could be held accountable for it.



The Apostle Paul by Karel Dujardin (1622-1678)

Acts 25

On trial before the Roman Governor, Festus, Paul knew Festus was considering sending him to Jerusalem as a favour to the Jewish leaders who planned to kill him en route. Paul therefore appealed to Caesar – the equivalent of an appeal to the supreme court.

Jesus faced opposition

Opposition is a natural part of the Christian life. Our sinless Saviour was fiercely opposed throughout his earthly ministry. Though he never did any wrong, religious leaders attacked him as a heretic, political leaders condemned him as a criminal and the crowd bayed for his blood.

Christ taught us that we should expect opposition: "If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household" (Matthew 10:25). We must share Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:12-14). Christ taught us that the world hates us because it hated him first. Only if we are worldly will the world love us as its own (John 15:18-21). The way to avoid opposition is to do what the world wants – but this is not an option for the faithful believer (Rom 12:2).

As with temptation, persecution is inevitable, and we must pray against it (1 Tim 2:1-2).

Many other Christians would love to have the freedom we enjoy

The Letter to the Hebrews (10:25) teaches us that it is good for Christians to meet together and share fellowship. In the UK we are privileged to have freedoms that many Christians in other parts of the world do not have. It is right that we should make full use of these freedoms.

There are many good laws which exist to protect religious freedom and freedom of speech on campus. When other bodies try to interfere with these liberties they may be acting illegally.

It is good and proper that we should seek to uphold the law. In doing so, we help to maintain the freedoms which are coveted by so many believers who are less privileged than we are.

Of course each case is different. In some circumstances it may not be appropriate or wise to take legal action. However there will be times when it is. A CU has the same right to share the same benefits as every other society on campus.

Exeter CU triggers climb down

Following a series of conflicts with their Students' Guild, Exeter Christian Union has taken the Guild to court. Exeter appears to be the first CU to sue its Students' Guild and University under the Human Rights Act.

In November 2005 an article published in the Exeter student newspaper criticised the CU's affiliation with the Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship (UCCF). It attacked the UCCF Doctrinal Basis and accused the CU of pretending to be open to all Christians yet "behind closed doors... is actively part of a fellowship designed to exclude many sections of the Christian community".

A hostile campaign ensued and the following semester the Students' Guild passed a motion changing the CU's title, against its wishes, to "Evangelical Christian Union". The CU's accounts were frozen to allow an 'equal opportunities investigation' to take place. The CU has launched a Judicial Review of the decision, citing their right to freedom of religion and freedom of assembly under the Human Rights Act.

Whilst important issues remain unresolved, the majority of the facilities have been given back to the CU. All because the CU took a firm stand. These developments have not been reported in the Press.

Hull CU threatened for insisting that executive members are Christians

In January 2004 the UCCF Christian Union at Hull University was de-ratified from the Student Union. It had been told by the University Student Union that its Christians-only leadership policy was discriminatory. The Student Union Council, led by a gay rights campaigner, voted to de-ratify the CU because its leadership was obliged to sign the UCCF Doctrinal Basis. The Christian Union insisted that only

Christians could sit on their Executive Committee as they were the appropriate people to lead a Christian Union.

Whilst no immediate expulsion took place, this meant the CU would no longer be able to receive the benefits of being a recognised society, such as funding, holding bookstalls, giving out flyers, booking rooms or putting up posters. This would have greatly damaged the opportunities for

campus evangelism.

The vice-president of the Christian Union contacted The Christian Institute who pointed out that the Student Union was acting illegally. Together the CU and The Christian Institute drafted a formal letter of complaint to Hull University and helped prepare a case to take to court. Thankfully, several months later the Student Union backed down and the CU was allowed back into membership.

Birmingham

In 2005 Birmingham CU was suspended from the Birmingham Guild of Students because it would not let non-Christians onto its executive committee. The CU had refused to make politically correct changes to its constitution (e.g. to include mention of transsexual/transgender people) and was not willing to allow non-Christians to become voting members of the society. The Guild also wanted to be able to send one of its own members to sit in on the CU's executive committee meetings, a wish which was refused by the CU. Mediation between the CU and Guild is ongoing.

Edinburgh

The Christian Union at Edinburgh University has been banned from running a course on Christian sexual ethics because it was deemed offensive to homosexuals. The CU had put on a six-week course entitled 'Pure', teaching an orthodox biblical view on sexuality. However, members of the Bisexual, Lesbian or Gay Students society (BLOGS) complained and caused the Student Union and University to ban the course from being held anywhere on campus. Ironically, the University stated that the ban was to protect free speech and debate.

What the law says

Education Law (England & Wales)

The simplest law to defend your Christian Union's freedom of speech and freedom of assembly is Section 43 of the Education (No. 2) Act 1986. This states that the governing bodies of universities have to take reasonable steps to secure freedom of speech. They have to ensure that the use of premises is not denied to any individual or group on the basis of their beliefs. It explicitly refers to premises occupied by the Student Union. (This law does not apply to Scotland.)

Section 43

"(1) Every individual and body of persons concerned in the government of any establishment to which this section applies shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to ensure that freedom of speech within the law is secured for members, students and employees of the establishment and for visiting speakers.

(2) The duty imposed by subsection (1) above includes (in particular) the duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that the use of any premises of the establishment is not denied to any individual or body of persons on any ground connected with

- (a) the beliefs or views of that individual or of any member of that body; or
- (b) the policy or objectives of that body."

The Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003 (GB)

Regulation 20(1) makes it unlawful for a University to discriminate against students because of their religion or belief, for example by not giving them access to benefits or subjecting them to "any other detriment".

Regulation 22(2) makes the University liable for the actions of its 'agents'. It is arguable that the Union is an agent of the University and any failure by the University to fix the situation would be a breach of the Regulations.

The Equality Act 2006 (GB)

Part 2 of the Equality Act 2006 prohibits religious discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities, services, use of premises and education. The University or the Union may comply with the

Education Act or the Employment Regulations, but still breach the Equality Act for discrimination against Christians.

European Convention on Human Rights

The European Convention on Human Rights is incorporated into our national law by the Human Rights Act 1998. All public authorities have to comply with it. It guarantees freedom of religion (Article 9), freedom of speech (Article 10) and freedom of assembly (Article 11). There is a strong legal argument that Universities (and perhaps even Student Unions) will be regarded, at least for some functions, as public authorities under the Human Rights Act.

Guidance from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals

In 1998 the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now called Universities UK) produced a document called "Extremism and intolerance on campus", issued as guidance for the management of Universities. It specifically addresses Student Unions and the scope for abusing the power of the Union to attack particular student groups.

The 1998 guidance has been replaced by new guidance from Universities UK published in 2005. However, the new guidance barely addresses the work of Student Unions so it seems fair to revert to the 1998 document. It has some very useful sections which you can quote. For example:

"...unions must exhibit conspicuous fairness and tolerance in relation to the societies that may be established, however offensive may be the particular aims or policies of that group. Provided that they act within the law and do not encroach upon the rights of others or seek to silence others, they have every right to exist and function." (para 12.3)

Most helpfully, it says: "We think it may be reasonable for some clubs or societies to have restricted eligibility, say on religious or nationality grounds. Otherwise, it would be open to a group hostile to the club or society to join and take it over in a way that would be quite wrong." (para 12.8)

Fuller extracts and explanations can be found at www.christian.org.uk/defendyourcu

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