

Freedom of Speech

Preacher's Toolkit



Summary

Freedom of speech is a hotly contested subject: some believe it should be restricted to avoid offence, while some believe there should be no restrictions at all. As Christians, we walk a middle path between the political extremes. We must be willing to speak the gospel even when it is uncomfortable, we must be willing for people to say things which will offend us too, and we should never abuse our freedom, always speaking with both grace and truth. As Christians, we believe freedom of speech is desirable, but it is not something the Bible tells us to expect.

A Clash of Worldviews

A better story

Speech is a good gift from God. We are made in the image of a God who speaks, and he created us as beings who communicate. The way we speak, and the words we use, are important, and Christians are called to speak with both truth and grace, just as Jesus did. Jesus told his followers to expect their values to clash with the values of this world, and those around us might not like what we say. While we speak with respect and compassion, we are to keep speaking the gospel, obeying God rather than people.

Points of contact

Most people would agree that freedom of speech also implies the freedom not to speak: having the right to do anything does not mean everything is beneficial. Very few people would say there should be no limits on speech at all. It is right that we have laws surrounding libel and inciting violence, even if we disagree on where the lines should be drawn. Additionally, freedom of speech should mean freedom for everyone. We can desire freedom of speech for ourselves, but get affronted when someone is offensive or critical about Jesus or Christianity.

Points of difference

Some would argue that Christians should be free to say whatever they want. But there is no Biblical right to freedom of speech and we are not to expect free speech as Christians. The life Jesus promises is marked by persecution. Jesus expects our values to clash with the world's, and that the world will not like what we say. The New Testament in particular gives examples of people whose freedom of speech was curtailed as they tried to preach the gospel.

Some would say that Christians should simply

obey the law. But regardless of whether we officially have freedom of speech, we are still to preach the Gospel: we must obey God rather than man! In the UK, we are fortunate in the freedom we have, but there have been some attempts to limit what Christians can say on contested issues like sexuality and gender.

Some would argue that if we have freedom of speech, that's all that matters. But God calls us to speak up on behalf of the powerless, and to be a voice for the voiceless: the implication is that no one should be without a voice! When Jesus announced the arrival of the Kingdom of God, part of this involved healing those who were mute so that they could speak.

Some would say that freedom of speech means we can say what we want however we want. But freedom of speech does not mean we should abuse it. Christians are called to speak with both grace and truth, as Jesus did. Our speech should be for the benefit of others, for their encouragement, and for loving challenge. We want to imitate Jesus, in whose mouth no deceit was found. There should be some limits to speech as well; it is right that we have laws around libel or inciting violence, even if there are disagreements over where the line should be.

Some would argue that freedom of speech is about freedom for Christians. But freedom of speech has to mean equal freedom for everyone. It is easy to want freedom of speech for ourselves, but to get upset if someone is being offensive about Jesus or Christianity. Jesus himself endured abuse and insults, particularly on the cross: he does not need us to censor people on his behalf. As Christians, we believe in the fundamental equality of every human being; this means that we cannot deny rights to others which we seek to have for ourselves. Instead, we must "love our neighbour as ourself", even if this means frustration, upset or even ridicule. After all, the gospel will be offensive to non-believers too!

Politics

Freedom of Speech in the UK is guaranteed in the UK by Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights, applied in British law through the Human Rights Act 1998. The law allows for restrictions on speech intended to cause distress, incitement to violence, racial hatred and religious hatred, treason, indecency, and defamation or libel, amongst others.

England and Wales abolished its blasphemy law in 2008, and Scotland did so in 2024. Northern Ireland still retains a blasphemy law, although prosecutions are extremely rare.

Free speech has been a contested issue at universities in particular, where students have complained that they feel unsafe hearing certain beliefs, or protested loudly around certain speakers being invited. In response, in 2023, the Government appointed Arif Ahmed to the newly created position of Director for Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom (colloquially known as the 'Free Speech Tsar') at the Office for Students, to combat threats to academic freedom and to promote free speech; universities are at risk of sanctions, including fines, if they do not comply.

The creation of abortion buffer-zones has seen much criticism in the UK (particularly from the USA); in 2023, a national buffer zone law was passed in England and Wales to ensure that abortion facilities have exclusion zones in place, making it an offence to influence, obstruct or harass a woman seeking an abortion within 150 metres of an abortion clinic. Peaceful vigils are not allowed within an exclusion zone, and the police have even arrested people for silent prayer within zones. Similar laws were introduced in Northern Ireland in 2023 and in Scotland in 2024.

Although lobby-groups have tried to suggest otherwise, gender-critical beliefs (believing in the

primacy of biological sex over gender identity) are protected by UK law, as confirmed by the Forstater case in 2021, and a number of employers have been successfully sued for discriminating against them.

Successive governments have promised a full ban on conversion-therapy practices (attempting to change someone's sexuality or gender identity), potentially including around transgender identity. Christians can and should speak out against abusive practices, but in reality, these are already covered by existing legislation. Concerns have been raised that proposed legislation might outlaw traditional religious teaching on sexual ethics, or even criminalise parents for talking with their children, particularly over gender. Several groups have warned that a ban would be unworkable, and jeopardise freedom of speech, and thus far, no government has introduced such a ban.

The current Labour Government is running a consultation about a definition of Islamophobia; there are fears that this will effectively introduce a new blasphemy law, outlawing certain criticisms of Islam or the Prophet Mohammed.

Laws around protest were tightened by the previous Conservative Government. The Public Order Act 2023 makes it an offence to obstruct major transport works, or interfere with key national infrastructure, as had been done by various climate organisations, such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil.

The UK supports freedom of religion, not just at home but across the world, and has a Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion or Belief. The role focuses on advocating for religious freedom globally, addressing issues like persecution and discrimination based on belief. The current special envoy is the Labour MP David Smith.

Glossary

FREEDOM OF RELIGION OR BELIEF

Sometimes abbreviated to FoRB. It is the right to adopt a religion or belief, to practise it without hindrance, to share your faith and to change your religion or beliefs. It is not just the freedom to hold personal thoughts and convictions, but also being able to express them individually or with others, publicly or in private.

PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS

Nine characteristics around which it is illegal to discriminate. They are: age, gender reassignment, being married or in a civil partnership, being pregnant or on maternity leave, disability, race (including colour, nationality, or ethnic origin), religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

HATE INCIDENT

Any incident which the victim, or anyone else, thinks is based on someone's prejudice towards them because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, disability or because they are transgender.

NO-PLATFORMING

A controversial policy, particularly prevalent at universities, where a distinction is made between someone being allowed to speak freely, and giving them a platform to speak freely, which has often resulted in speaking events being cancelled.

CANCEL CULTURE

The widespread withdrawal of support for a public figure who has done something unacceptable or offensive (known as 'cancelling').

SAFE SPACES

A term used (sometimes pejoratively) to describe an environment in which individuals can feel 'safe' from discrimination, criticism and emotional or physical harm.

TRIGGER WARNING

Sometimes known as a Content warning, this refers to a statement before a piece of writing, speech or video which warns the audience that it will contain potentially distressing material. The word 'trigger' refers to feeling 'triggered' by particular content, potentially due to previous trauma.

Key Bible Passages

GENESIS 1:3

"And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light."

PROVERBS 12:18-19

"The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue lasts only a moment."

PROVERBS 10:19

"Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues."

PROVERBS 31:8-9

"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

ISAIAH 53:9

"He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth."

MARK 7:34-35

"[Jesus] looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means "Be opened!"). At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was loosened and he began to speak plainly."

JOHN 1:14

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."

JOHN 15:18-20

"If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

ACTS 4:18-20

"Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard."

1 CORINTHIANS 6:12

"I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything'—but I will not be mastered by anything."

EPHESIANS 4:29

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”

COLOSSIANS 4:6:

“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”

JAMES 3:5-8

“The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.”

Quotes

“This is slavery, not to speak one’s thought.”

EURIPIDES, Greek playwright

“If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.”

GEORGE ORWELL, Author

“Free speech is one of the most important things to me, but I think it gets confusing when it comes to offense. Because for one, just because you have the right to say anything, it doesn’t mean you have to.”

RICKY GERVAIS, Comedian

“There’s free speech and then there’s hate speech”

PAM BONDI, U. S. Attorney General

“Everyone is in favour of free speech. Hardly a day passes without its being extolled, but some people’s idea of it is that they are free to say what they like, but if anyone says anything back, that is an outrage.”

WINSTON CHURCHILL, Prime Minister

“It is not an accident that freedom of religion is one of the central freedoms in our Bill of Rights. It is the first freedom of the human soul, the right to speak the words that God places in our mouths.”

GEORGE W. BUSH, U. S. President

“I’ve had many conversations with students who say they don’t feel comfortable because their professor has expressed views against homosexuality. They don’t feel comfortable being in class with someone with those views. And I say, ‘I’m sorry, but my job isn’t to make you feel comfortable. Education is not about being comfortable. I’m interested in making you uncomfortable.’”

PROFESSOR LOUISE RICHARDSON, former Chancellor of Oxford University

For Further Research

CARE’s Topic Page (care.org.uk/cause/freedom-of-speech)

ADF International (adfinternational.org/en-gb)

Free Speech Union (freespeechunion.org/)

Battle of Ideas Videos (youtube.com/@battleofideas/videos)

Association of Christian Teachers: After Charlie Kirk: Free Speech and Education in the UK (www.christian-teachers.org.uk/blog/after-charlie-kirk-free-speech-and-education-in-the-uk), 2025

Daniel Friery: Why should Christians care about free speech? (www.affinity.org.uk/social-issues/why-should-christians-care-about-free-speech/), 2025

Andrew Walker and Kristen Waggoner: The Unchained Word: A Public Theology of Free Speech, (www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-unchained-word-a-public-theology-of-free-speech/), 2025

ADF, Evangelical Alliance and Lawyers’ Christian Fellowship: Christianity in the workplace, 2022

Paul Coleman: Censored, 2012

Andrew Doyle: Free Speech and why it matters, 2022

Douglas Murray: The Madness of Crowds, 2020

“Freedom of speech is one of the most precious human rights. A free society depends on the free exchange of ideas. But some students justify ‘no platforms’ and ‘safe spaces’ in the name of not causing offence, even though nearly all ideas are capable of giving offence to someone. Many of the most important ideas in human history – such as those of Galileo Galilei, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud – caused great offence in their time. There is no right to not be offended, whether on a university campus or anywhere else.”

PETER TATCHELL, Gay rights activist

“There is freedom of speech, but I cannot guarantee freedom after speech.”

IDI AMIN, Ugandan military dictator

“We recognise the wonderful advantages in having CU representatives at the Fresher’s Fair, but are concerned that there is potential for harm to freshers who are already struggling to feel welcome in

Oxford. Our sole concern is that the presence of the CU alone may alienate incoming students. This sort of alienation or micro-aggression is regularly dismissed as not important enough to report. ... Historically, Christianity's influence on many marginalised communities has been damaging in its methods of conversion and rules of practice, and is still used in many places as an excuse for homophobia and certain forms of neo-colonialism.”

JCR WELFARE SUB-COMMITTEE, Balliol College, Oxford, October 2017

“Disagreement is not oppression. Argument is not assault. Words – even provocative or repugnant ones – are not violence. The answer to speech we do not like is more speech.”

DOUGLAS MURRAY, Author and journalist

“There is nothing intimidatory or harassing about an elderly woman standing by the roadside offering to lend a listening ear.”

ROSE DOCHERTY, who was detained for silently standing outside an abortion buffer zone holding a sign

“Like all evils in this sinful world, evil speech is the corruption of a wonderful created good. It is the fundamental human power that distinguishes us from the rest of creation and unites us to God. By speech God brought the world into being, and by speech Adam named the animals. By speech the incarnate Word revealed his redeeming work to men, and by speech his faithful apostles spread it throughout the known world.”

BRAD LITTLEJOHN, Christian scholar

“As Christians, we must clearly affirm that freedom of speech can be a great good. But it is an instrumental good, a means to the end of proclaiming truth and encouraging righteousness. It is not an end in itself, as if the mere freedom to open our mouths were sacrosanct.”

BRAD LITTLEJOHN, Christian scholar

Key Stats

- Freedom of Speech in the UK is considered to be going backwards. The Free Speech Advocacy Organisation's index marks countries out of 100, based on things like media freedom, internet censorship, and academic independence. From 2013 to 2025, the UK's rating fell from 88 to 79, moving it from 'Open' to 'Less Restricted' alongside Colombia, Nigeria, and South Africa, for the first time. Similarly, the advocacy group Index on Censorship ranked the UK behind Israel, Chile and Jamaica.
- The 2025 Freedom of Expression Survey found that almost half of the population think that people are too easily offended. Three in ten tend to think that people need to be more sensitive in the way they speak. Three in ten people think that religious freedom is protected too much. Islam is the only religion asked about where a larger proportion of the public think that the religion is protected too much (39%).
- Half (50%) of academics surveyed by YouGov say that staff at their university can express views on some, but not all, controversial topics. One in ten (9%) say they are not free to express views on any controversial topics. The most common topics that academics do not feel free to discuss are sex and gender and racism. One in three academics on both the political left and right do not feel free to discuss controversial topics generally, for instance in external speaking engagements. A quarter of those who do not feel free in their teaching cite fear of physical attack. However, 70% think that their university does protect freedom of speech and robust debate.
- Globally, freedom of speech is declining. More than 5.6 billion people across 77 countries have experienced a deterioration in their freedom of expression over the past decade, while just 299 million people – fewer than 4 percent of the global population – have seen an improvement.
- A 2022 report from King's College London on freedom of speech in the UK showed that 36% of those surveyed would support a private company firing an employee for being a member of a political party which expresses offensive views.
- A 2021 YouGov poll found that 57% of Britons had sometimes stopped themselves from expressing political or social views because of the fear of being judged or negative responses.
- In the run up to the 2024 General Election, A Savanta poll of 2,000 UK adults found 77% agree that “politicians should be able to speak their minds and freely debate difficult issues”.

Stories

The non-Christian philosopher Kathleen Stock is gender-critical, and has published work criticising the idea of gender self-id. She was employed by the University of Sussex, which had a policy that course materials must “positively represent trans people”. In October 2021, a group of queer, transgender and non-binary students began a campaign for her to be sacked because of her views which they claimed “endangered” transgender people. She received death threats, and was advised by the police to install CCTV in her home and be accompanied by bodyguards on campus. She resigned from the university. In 2025, the Office for Students fined the university £585,000 for failing to uphold free speech.

In 2014, Gareth Lee, a gay rights activist, placed an order for a cake with Ashers Baking Company, owned by Daniel and Amy McArthur in Northern Ireland, asking for it to be decorated with the slogan “Support gay marriage” (same-sex marriage was illegal in Northern Ireland at the time). The McArthurs are Christians, and declined the order, returning the money. Lee complained to the Equality Commission of Northern Ireland that he had been discriminated against on the grounds of sexual orientation. They supported him in filing a lawsuit, and the McArthurs were fined £500 by the county court. The McArthurs appeal was eventually escalated to the UK Supreme Court, who found, unanimously, that Lee had not been discriminated against on the grounds of sexuality, and that Ashers had a right to decline the order on the grounds of compelled speech. The case attracted significant media attention, and even gay rights campaigners like Peter Tatchell supported the McArthurs’ right to freedom of expression.

Adam Smith-Connor is a British army veteran, who was arrested in 2023 for silently praying in his head for his aborted son for three minutes within a 150-metre “buffer zone” around a Bournemouth abortion clinic. 74-year-old Rose Docherty was arrested on video by four officers holding a sign outside a Glasgow abortion clinic which said: “Coercion is a crime, here to talk, only if you want.” Both have been convicted, and the Scottish MP who authored the buffer-zone law praised the police’s response to Docherty’s case, commending them: “for acting so quickly ... This kind of intimidation [silently holding a sign] has no place in a modern or progressive Scotland.”

Victoria Culf, a Christian artist, was reported to police and barred from her own exhibition at Watford museum after expressing gender-critical views rooted in her Christian faith. The dispute began when a council worker, whose child was socially transitioning, discussed transgender issues over a cup of tea. Mrs Culf responded: “I wouldn’t be being true to myself if I agreed with you,” and said she believed that social transitioning was harmful. Though she thought the exchange ended “calmly and amicably”, she was soon informed of harassment claims. Court documents reveal the council worker emailed senior staff, claiming police had logged the discussion as an incident. However, police records showed it was not treated as an incident or an investigation, describing it instead as “free speech”. Mrs Culf is now taking legal action against Watford Borough Council for discrimination, harassment, and breach of contract.

Pastoral Issues

For people affected by sensitive subjects

- Freedom of Speech tends to touch on sensitive areas. Our situation in the UK where, for the most part, our freedoms are not in question. means that it only really becomes an issue around subjects like abortion, race, sexuality and gender.
- It may be worth flagging in advance that you will touch on these topics, and that pastoral support is available.

For people facing a freedom of speech issue

- Most people do not face a direct issue about freedom of speech in their community or workplace, but some do. There may be people in the congregation who are contemplating speaking up about an issue that might bring them into conflict with an employer or organisation.
- It is not wrong to speak the truth or to speak up when you see something wrong. It is important for Christians to be courageous in standing up for what we know is right and not to be conformed by the culture around us.
- Nevertheless, we need to be wise in the way we speak. We should not look for conflict and controversy where it is not needed.
- Christians should ask themselves: Is this a stand worth taking? The Bible shows how Daniel compromised on some aspects of Babylonian culture, but not others.
- We should ask: Does this benefit others, or just myself? If we are helping others it might be worth speaking up. On the other hand, if it is just for my own benefit, then we might be called to turn the other cheek.
- We are called to speak with truth and grace. Is there a way to approach this issue in a gracious way, that reduces the chance of conflict? There will still be a chance that people will take offence at what we say, but we must choose our words carefully to try to avoid offence if we can.

For congregations

- Freedom of Speech has been central to some of the most divisive political moments in recent years, such as the Southport riots and grooming gangs. It may prompt discussions or even arguments after a service.
- It is important for people not to feel alienated. Calling certain opinions far-right (or far-left) can be counterproductive, and the term can be applied too broadly so that it includes mainstream opinions on issues such as immigration or the place of Islam in the UK.
- At the same time, it is important for everyone to understand the responsibility which they have for their speech: words have consequences. How we speak is as important as what we say.