

# Why Value Free Speech?

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Crises such as the riot at the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and the subsequent banning of Donald Trump, et al, from Twitter and other platforms can spark interest in first principles and drive us to ponder the common phrases that often go undefined. Free speech is one. Most Americans defend it, but some think that entire groups of people have no right to speak. A student protester screamed “We don’t care what you think!” into the face of a liberal professor who was attempting to defend himself. She thus unknowingly echoed Pope Pius IX idea in his infamous Syllabus of Errors that “error has no rights.” Still, most of us believe that free speech is part of what makes us Americans, what makes us free people. But as sociologist Jacques Ellul noted, the more common a term, the less it is commonly understood. Words are better used as concepts than as incantations. Remembering the Communist government of Russia can give us a point of reference on free speech.

## The USSR and the US

I grew up during the cold war with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). I ducked under my desk on command along with my classmates for air raid drills in the 1960s. We feared a nuclear war with the only other superpower. Bomb shelters were common. Many nations had come under the iron fist of this imperialistic regime, and we feared it would crush more. We feared losing our hard-won and deeply valued freedoms. The official Soviet paper was called Pravda, which meant truth; we knew it was not the truth, since free speech was illegal. Our press was not perfect, but it was free.

In 1989, I watched in joyful amazement as the Berlin wall was torn down by freedom-loving Germans. Much of the world rejoiced. The Soviet Union itself would collapse in 1991, thus answering so many prayers by so many for so long. Communism fell for many reasons—economic, cultural, military, and political—but its greatest critic,

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, believed it had to fall because it was based on lies. “Live not by lies,” he said in a speech. His entire literary corpus was a testimony to truth that exposed lies, and he loved to quote the old Russian proverb: “One word of truth outweighs the world.” Rooted in Orthodox Christianity, the Russian people were better than the atheist communist usurpers—who abused their power through suppression of free speech, hatred, false imprisonment, and groundless executions. Dissident literature—*samizdat*—was hand-printed and smuggled with great care. Solzhenitsyn crystalized the reason not only for the gulag’s oppression, but for all Western decadence: “We have forgotten God.” But God has not forgotten us.



## God, Freedom, and Truth

God, unlike dictators, oligarchs, propagandists, spin doctors, gas lighters, slave owners, and other unjust and self-justifying masters, does not fear the truth. He owns it. Jesus had the audacity to teach that the truth would set us free and that he himself was the truth incarnate. He could speak truth to power because he had no truth to fear and no lie could stop him. His truthfulness insured his fearlessness and vice versa.

For us, finding, valuing, and declaring the truth in the face of ignorance and lies is harder. Instead of speaking truth to power, we might say nothing or cower before power. And, to make matters worse, we are prone to self-deception. We fear unpleasant and condemning truths about ourselves, our cause, our way. Our inner Nietzsche tempts us to enthrone our will above the truth to gain power, prestige, and pleasure. “The heart is wicked and deceitful above all things. Who can understand it?” cried the prophet, Jeremiah (17:9). Yet if one knows one’s penchant for untruth, one can police the mendacities and ask others to help keep watch. Freedom of speech is the heady and rich atmosphere in which truth breathes best for the most people. But what does that potent phrase really mean?

We take the freedom of speech as the moral right to communicate according to the dictates of our conscience and without censure or penalty from any outside authority. The First Amendment is the foundation for this right, and for the other four freedoms it guarantees.

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Thus, the state (“Congress”) cannot establish a church (establishment clause), nor prohibit the church’s or individuals’ religious teaching as it pertains to public life (free exercise clause). Neither can the state abridge the freedom of speech, press, or peaceable assembly. That is at the heart of America—however messy and nasty the outworking has been. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said in his “I Have a Dream” speech (1963), we need to keep faith with our creed that “all men are created equal” and so grant those men and women the right to speak and live freely.

### Three Truths Behind the Five Freedoms

For the First Amendment to be a proper standard, several ideas must hold true. The first is the grand metaphysical fact that there is truth to be found through inquiry. Consider the Declaration of Independence, which is the philosophical prologue to the Constitution.

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*

By truths, the Declaration means statements that correspond to objective reality. These statements are made true by the facts they describe. The Declaration makes no mention of personal feelings or perspectives according to race, gender, age, or anything else. It is a matter of objective truth, and that truth is established by God, the Creator.

Abraham Lincoln further ratified this in the Gettysburg Address.

*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

There could be no liberty (including freedom of speech) without the assumption of created equality.

Nevertheless, the right to free speech finds no support in a truthless world. When truth dissolves into disparate narratives, alternative facts, lived experience, and hedonic preferences, freedom of speech dissolves right along with it. If there is no objective truth to be found and championed through reason and evidence, then why allow people the freedom to pursue this will-o-the-wisp through speech, press, and assembly? Why not muzzle and control those with whom we disagree? That is just what some now propose.



Second, the right to the freedom of speech needs a high enough view of human nature to ground, respect, and promote truth-seeking as a guard against mere power mongering. Securing freedom of speech is logical only if the free exchange of ideas is the best way to find and defend truth. This assumes that some souls will rationally assess competing claims about God, humanity, the state, economics, the good life, and more. But even if some do not, they deserve the chance. Not everyone will be studious and rational in these endeavors, but all should labor to that end. This view of truth in relation to human nature is secured

by the Genesis account of human beings as made in the rational-moral image of God.

Third, justifying freedom of speech also needs the truth that human nature is afflicted by truth-denial. We are fallen, east of Eden, and we do not come into this world trailing clouds of glory. Without a free exchange of ideas, bad people can monopolize discourse for their own truth-averse and truth-obscuring ends. Thus, honoring free speech helps mitigate the effects of the fall on society. Free discourse allows all ideas to play out through discussion, debate, and dialogue—as well as through polemics, politics, and propaganda. It is a raucous, necessary affair. But it is better than Big Brother, whose footsteps and eyeballs are never far away.

## The Reach of the First Amendment

If we have established something of the value and philosophical foundations of the right to freedom of speech, then how far does that right extend legally?

The First Amendment restricts actions of the state, not those of private citizens in their voluntary associations. Every newspaper disallows some perspectives and may restrict some writers. If *The New York Times* rejects my editorial because of my viewpoint, my First Amendment rights have not been violated. However, if the federal, state, or local government demands that they pre-approve my church's sermons (to make sure it is free from hate speech), then freedom of speech has been violated.

How do behemoth tech companies—sometimes called “Masters of the Universe”—fare on freedom of speech considering their recent bans? Twitter, Facebook, Google, and Amazon are privately owned enterprises that have succeeded by offering popular products to consumers in a relatively free market. As such, it seems to be their legal prerogative to ban people from their platforms, it seems. That may be unfair, bigoted, and meanspirited; but it is legal by virtue of The First Amendment. For these tech giants to ban people because of their political views does violate the spirit and the sensibility of the First Amendment—that is, the idea that the free exchange of ideas (all things being equal) is better than ideological censorship. But the letter of the law is something else. (Perhaps the tech giants have violated anti-trust laws, though, and need to be accountable for that).

## The Freedom to be Right or Wrong

The First Amendment to the Constitution gives us freedom of speech as a right, but it does not guarantee that truth will be well received or that people will fairly assess matters. Your right to free speech also gives you the right to be wrong. Nevertheless, freedom of speech should be prized and protected, since it gives us the best shot at finding the truth about what matters most. It is better to defend an idea against attack than to silence the opposition. It is better to be refuted than to be muzzled, and it is far better to win a rational argument with an interlocuter than to cancel any opposition to it—and it is more fun, too.

Followers of Jesus have much to speak about, since Jesus is the truth incarnate and he has commissioned his followers to take his truth to the world. Therefore, they should prize, defend, and take advantage of the free-speech heritage of America. Freedom of religion, of speech, of the press, and of assembly should be a bulwark against any state censorship of conscience, creed, or confession. But whatever the political climate or legal strictures, we have no choice but to speak the truth in love about what matters most.



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