

A Statement on Freedom of Speech at King University
Adopted unanimously by the Board of Trustees and Faculty
17-18 February 2022

King University aspires to be “a Christian place of the mind,” rooted in its Reformed theological heritage and committed to free inquiry and speech in the pursuit of truth. Seeking to produce graduates who are “thoughtful, resourceful, and responsible citizens,” we strive as a community of learners to discuss and debate ideas with openness and respect for others, always aware of our own shortcomings, enthusiastically growing in wisdom together. Our Christian educational mission demands freedom of inquiry, expression, discussion, and debate: the freedom to take a firm position or remain ambivalent, the freedom to be proven wrong, the freedom to change one’s mind.

King University bases its insistence on free speech on the theological principle that all truth is God’s truth, a principle which undergirds the academic pursuits of its faculty and student body. In pursuit of that truth, King fosters freedom of speech, and celebrates its results in publication, in the classroom, and in conversation. Those called to follow Christ do so with minds open to the truth wherever it may be found, irrespective of how it may seem to challenge them, and thus freedom of speech is vital to our endeavors as a Christian institution. Indeed, King holds that a faith that is at once confident and humble does not shy away from challenges to its very core; as Simone Weil suggests, “If one turns aside from Christ to go toward the truth, one will not go far before falling into his arms,” or, as Stanley Hauerwas reminds us, being a Christian means you can “never protect yourself from the truth.”

Moreover, the scriptures upon which our faith is grounded suggest that our growth demands open discussion: “... speaking the truth in love,” says the apostle Paul, “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Ephesians 4.15). For a community of learners, speaking the truth in love suggests that we must also listen well to others. From its ancient roots, the Reformed theology which is our heritage has recognized the limitations of every person, both in knowledge and goodwill, and our inability to grasp truth completely. We speak and hear the truth in love with a view to helping each other grow despite our inherent limitations, a goal which we pursue as lifelong learners. Commenting on St Paul’s words, John Calvin reminds us that “as we have not hitherto attained full and complete strength, we must make progress until death.” Freedom of speech contributes to our community’s shared, ongoing pursuit of faith, hope, and love.

While freedom and diversity of inquiry and expression are likely to trouble all of us, questioning both our deep and casual assumptions, we believe that such discomfort is necessary for learning. As such, King commits itself to free expression even when the ideas expressed seem offensive or antagonistic to some or all of its members. In an environment of free expression, such ideas can be evaluated on their own merits, held up to careful scrutiny and measured judgment. Silencing or ignoring ideas does not serve the pursuit of truth or our growth in love. Moreover, our Presbyterian heritage encourages us to gather and speak freely. In its polity of the assembly, this tradition stresses that individuals thinking and discussing together will arrive at better results than when speech is constrained or fettered. Finally, we seek to practice the ancient Christian traditions of mutual care and hospitality; we exercise charity toward one another, and we welcome those who disagree with us as friends and fellow bearers of God’s image. Therefore we guard the right to free speech of those with whom we may disagree sharply, neither obstructing nor interfering with that freedom.

In conjunction with its Reformed theological heritage, King University recognizes its own fallibility and imperfections. As such, and in keeping with its insistence on freedom of inquiry and speech, the institution does not affiliate itself with political positions. No employee or student will ever be compelled to a particular position by being part of the King community. This also means that employees and students, while free to express their political opinions, may not speak on behalf of the institution in such matters. In any public forum, it is incumbent on employees and students to distinguish between their own opinions and the position of the University.

Freedom of inquiry and expression does not mean that speech is without moral guidelines, and while King is committed to freedom of speech, it expects certain behaviors of its members. Speech that deliberately falsifies, defames others, or undermines the community of free inquiry at King may constitute a violation of King's expectations of its members. Likewise, certain prudential considerations may limit the freedom of speech in limited cases. Standing with the Chicago Statement, we may "restrict expression that violates the law, that falsely defames a specific individual, that constitutes a genuine threat or harassment, that unjustifiably invades substantial privacy or confidentiality interests, or that is otherwise directly incompatible with the functioning of the University. In addition, the University may reasonably regulate the time, place, and manner of expression to ensure that it does not disrupt its ordinary activities."

As a "Christian place of the mind," King commits itself to free inquiry and expression. With a mission shaped by its theological heritage, King undertakes this commitment as a way of following Christ. We pursue truth doggedly, speak with each other openly and lovingly, and welcome those who express opposing viewpoints. We seek to treat one another with hospitality and respect, while championing our liberty to engage one another with vigorous, reasoned speech. Understanding our own limitations, we see ourselves and those with whom we disagree as fellow-seekers; confident that Christ calls us to himself as "the way, the truth, and the life," we ask every question and listen to every voice in an environment of charity and freedom.