



The Church of Scotland

Church and Society Council

Surveillance and Social Justice – May 2017

Section 13. Privacy as a gift for dignity

13.1 In 1973 the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, demonstrating a remarkable level of foresight, rendered its discussion of privacy in a resolutely theological key:

“It is especially important to be reticent about demanding or exposing another’s record, and to respect each person’s unique context. Christian faith stresses the dignity of persons and groups living by grace in a fallen world. We rejoice in a forgiving God who in his mercy can decide to forget the past and to open the future to his creatures. His liberating grace empowers us to care all the more for individual and social freedom.”¹

We are, they argue, not to be reduced to information, but our personhood is to be respected: “we belong to a social system of informational exchange; but we belong to it also, or seek to, as *persons*”.²

13.2 The Background Report draws on the Book of Genesis to talk about the “gift of privacy” which comes from the garments of animal skin that Adam and Eve receive from God (Gen 3:21). With this gift of privacy, humans receive “the right of...reticence before the eyes of each other, and even before the eyes of God”.³

13.3 Human dignity and the freedom to flourish authentically is the Roman Catholic Church’s principal theological defence of the right to privacy.⁴ There are inter-personal dimensions too. We respect another’s privacy and hold confidences shared with us because we are obligated to be faithful to truth. We are to give others a just portrayal, and not constrain the space in which they might develop their God-given potential.⁵

13.4 To put this into a Reformed key, John Calvin’s theology of liberty of conscience can help us see how privacy is not so much a withdrawal into ‘private space’ but into Christ who is the believer’s righteousness (Matt 6 v 6).⁶ What matters far more than the state’s intrusion into your ‘private life’, Calvin says in effect, is what use you make of that privacy. Do you use it for bolstering your own self-righteousness or is it a meeting point with the Grace of God?

[See the full report](#)

¹ United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., ‘Privacy: The Preservation of Privacy - Policy Statement and Recommendations adopted by the 185th General Assembly (1973),’ *Church & Society* 63: 6 (1974), 22-28 at 22.

² United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., ‘Right of privacy and its protection,’ *Church & Society* 65: 2 (1974), 4-49 at 5.

³ United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., ‘Right of Privacy,’ at 13.

⁴ *Dignitatis humanae* (1965)

⁵ *Communio et progressio* (1971)

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke & Co., 1957). Book 3, Chapter 19, especially sec. 7.