ACADEMIC FREEDOM & RELIGIOUS CONTROL: 
AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS 
INTO HOW SEMINARY FACULTY MAKE SENSE OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM 

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Abstract

There is a lack of qualitative research on how seminary faculty members perceive and make sense of academic freedom. This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study aimed to deeply understand how faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom. Three seminary faculty members were identified through criterion sampling and interviewed to understand how they make sense of academic freedom in regards to teaching, researching, and publishing in a seminary that uses a confessional statement as a means of religious control. Three salient super-ordinate themes emerged from an analysis of the data obtained from the participants’ responses: (1) Describing Academic Freedom (2) The Threats to Academic Freedom (3) The Confessional Statement. The participants made strong references to the importance of academic freedom though they admitted it was a difficult concept to define. They also perceived there to be a corrosion of academic freedom in many seminaries and colleges associated with their denomination, including their own institution, and identified specific threats to academic freedom that contributed to this corrosion. The findings are obviously significant for seminary faculty members in that they ought to motivate them to be more engaged on their campuses in promoting and protecting their academic freedom. Faculty members also ought to be able to fully articulate what academic freedom means and how it is understood and applied in their seminary. Additionally, the findings are relevant for seminary administrators as they can aid in the development of policies and governance structures that promote, protect, and advance academic freedom on their campuses.

Keywords: academic freedom, interpretative phenomenological analysis, religious control, seminary faculty, threats to academic freedom
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Chapter 1 – The Research Problem

In January of 2010, Dr. Bruce Waltke shot a video for the Biologos Foundation, where the evangelical Old Testament professor was filmed lecturing about scholarship, faith, and the theory of evolution. The Biologos Foundation is an evangelical research group that promotes the synthesis of evolution and Christian theology. In the video Waltke not only endorsed evolution but also argued that evangelical Christians could face a crisis for refusing to accept and integrate the theory of evolution into their theology. Administrators at the Reformed Theological Seminary, where Waltke was a professor, became alarmed. The video so displeased administrators and trustees of the seminary that Waltke asked the BioLogos Foundation to remove it from the organization’s website. But apparently that was not enough to save his job. The seminary later announced, in April of 2010, that it had accepted Walke’s resignation (Jaschik, 2010).

Another more recent violation of academic freedom in a religious higher educational setting has sparked a debate among religious scholars in the Church of Christ denomination and its affiliated seminaries. In April of 2012, Dr. Anthony Le Donne, was terminated from Lincoln Christian Seminary (LCS), a Church of Christ divinity school located in Lincoln, IL. In a letter posted on his blog Le Donne described the reason for this termination:

I am writing with disappointing news. After over a year of pressure from Lincoln Christian Seminary donors, concerned citizens, and certain employees, the president of the university has decided to terminate my employment. I have been told that this decision is in direct response to the publication of my popular-level book, Historical
Jesus. I have no doubt that the administration made a staunch effort on my behalf, but eventually needed to assuage the fears of (what I am told) is a largely anti-intellectual constituency (LeDonne, 2012).

As exampled in the Waltke and Le Donne cases, academic freedom, the freedom of faculty members to research, teach, and publish on any subject related to their profession without the danger of sanction, coercion, or the threat of termination, has been and continues to be a thorny and complex subject matter, especially in private religious seminaries, colleges, and universities (Byrne, 1989; Cafardi, 1990; Dewey, 1902). Many seminaries say they grant academic freedom to their faculty but concurrently enact religious control measures such as requiring them to sign statements of faith, otherwise known as confessional or doctrinal statements, in which the professors must acknowledge they subscribe to a set of orthodox religious beliefs. Faculty members are not only required to subscribe to these statements but to teach and research in accordance with them. In addition to these formal control measures other informal forces place pressures on faculty members to conform and subscribe to certain unwritten rules of the game.

**The Problem of Practice**

These confessional statements and religious control documents differ from institution to institution but generally require faculty members to assent to a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible or to the deity of Christ (Logan, 1991). Many of these statements also include doctrinal statements on specific denominational issues like baptism, creation, and eschatology. These confessional statements are often extremely vague and open to interpretation by many internal
and external constituents but they can be extremely powerful and coercive. The violation of them, whether real or perceived, through teaching, research or political activism can become a basis for reprimand and possible termination. These religious control measures can, in some cases, create a culture of fear and suspicion where faculty members live everyday with the pressure of possibly being punished for what they say in the classroom or write in a publication.

Complicating the problem is that a comprehensive legal definition of academic freedom does not exist. Academic freedom is a notoriously nebulous legal concept. Byrne (1989) has written that, “There has been no adequate analysis of what academic freedom the Constitution protects or have why it protects it. Lacking definition or guiding principle, the doctrine floats in law, picking up decisions as a hull does barnacles” (p. 252). This leaves the faculty member vulnerable in terms of legal recourse if he or she is terminated. In landmark cases on academic freedom, U.S. courts have even ruled that academic freedom applies to the higher education institution and not to individual faculty members supporting an institutional rather than individual definition of academic freedom (Regents of Univ. of Michigan v. Ewing, 1985; Feldman v. Ho, 1999). The notion of individual or personal academic freedom is a vague idea that is not convincingly derived from any recognizable legal doctrine, making the law in regards to academic freedom difficult to interpret. It is also difficult to predict how courts will rule (Diekema, 2000).

Surprisingly faculty members in private religious colleges may actually find the U.S. Constitution working against their academic freedom. The establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution empowers a religious organization against the employee and permits the organization to restrict the speech of their employees without interference from the government.
This includes the speech of faculty at religious colleges and universities. Religious colleges and universities have the capacity to expect their employees and faculty to support and even promote their religious views. They can also require faculty members, as a condition of employment, to sign a confessional statement of faith or another religious control document. Contract law becomes the foundational legal basis for determining the degree of academic freedom in religious institutions (Kaplin & Lee, 2007).

While some important work has been written on the issue of academic freedom in religious colleges, a review of the literature demonstrates a lack of qualitative research on how faculty members as a whole and specifically within seminaries make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom (Sweezy & Ross, 2011; Barger, 2010; Goddfredson, 2010; Romanowski, 2010 & Martindill, 2008).

Hamilton (1996) has asked, “Why is there so little collegial public defense of freedom of academic thought?” Hillier (1989) believes the answer to this question is that “too few academics have given the concept much thought” and have a rather superficial and “muddled idea of what it means” (p. 117). Moens (1991) adds that it is a “commonly used but misunderstood concept” and that few “academics bother to explain what the concept of academic freedom means to them” (p. 58). This research study attempted to investigate what academic freedom means to seminary faculty and how they make sense of its application in their specific educational institution.
Significance

The issue of academic freedom is significant because the level of academic freedom permitted at a seminary has repercussions not only for the open exchange of ideas on campus, but also for programs permitted on campus, and the political and religious positions taken by faculty members in their extramural activities. As Barger (2010) has concluded, “Academic freedom and the free pursuit of knowledge stands as the sacred core of higher education and is key for faculty members to teach, to research, and to publish in their area of specialty” (p. 1).

Academic freedom is equally important for the advancement of scholarship and research in all institutions including private religious institutions and seminaries. Some of the early efforts by groups like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) were directed specifically to protect faculty against the intrusion of church ecclesiastical bodies in their pursuit of knowledge and truth. Additionally, since it is true that private institutions of higher education, including seminaries, outnumber institutions in the public sector, “the manner in which academic freedom is understood in these institutions, is crucial to the search for and exploration of knowledge in our society as a whole” (Holbrook & Hearn, 1986).

Practical and Intellectual Research Goals

The researcher’s practical goal in conducting this study was advocacy. He desired to be an advocate for academic freedom on his campus and other campuses within his denomination. The LeDonne incident that occurred recently within the researcher’s denomination, known as the Churches of Christ, deepened the researcher’s motivation in advocacy. The researcher aimed to use his research to initiate a conversation about academic freedom issues within the
denomination’s seminaries and present his findings at the denomination’s annual academic conference.

In addition to the practical goal the researcher set two intellectual goals for this study. The first intellectual goal was interpretive. This research study was positioned within the interpretivist research paradigm. This is why the researcher ultimately chose phenomenology as the general research method because phenomenology is an interpretative science. Benton & Craib (2001) have argued that the social sciences were “primarily concerned with meaning, and in particular with individual meaning or the ways in which shared cultural meanings affected the actions of individuals” (p.76). As a result, the meaning people make of their lived experiences becomes the focus of this type of research. The researcher aimed to develop a deep understanding of how faculty members at confessional seminaries attached meaning to academic freedom. The researcher desired to capture the language and metaphors faculty members use to describe academic freedom. The way seminary faculty interpreted academic freedom in their context is an important component of understanding how they negotiate teaching and research in light of the degree of academic freedom in their institution.

A second intellectual goal was exploratory. This study aimed to discover themes for the purposes of developing a possible later descriptive or experimental study (Maxwell, 2005). In other words, this themes derived from this study have helped the researcher develop salient factors or themes for possible use in a later questionnaire. It also will help the researcher refine his questions if he chooses to replicate the study in other contexts or if he attempts to expand his sample. In this case, the researcher only knew roughly in advance what he was looking for and
so he felt as if he needed to achieve a deeper understanding of the issues related to the topic by conducting qualitative exploratory research.

**Research Question(s)**

The central research questioned examined in this study was: “How do faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom?” Additional sub-questions were:

1. How do the faculty members define or articulate the concept of academic freedom?
2. In what ways do they perceive that academic freedom is important in religiously based higher education?
3. In what ways do they perceive that academic freedom might differ in their institution from those institutions that do not have religious control documents such as confessional statements?
4. In what ways do faculty members perceive that these religious control measures influence their teaching and research?
5. What threats to academic freedom are perceived and in what ways do these threats influence teaching and research?

**Summary and Organization of the Study**

This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) study aimed to deeply understand how faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the
concept of academic freedom. Three faculty members were identified through purposive
criterion sampling and interviewed to understand how they made sense of academic freedom in
regards to teaching, researching, and publishing in a seminary that uses a confessional statement
as a means of religious control.

What follows are chapters 2-5. Chapter 2 presents and discusses the theories that frame
the researcher’s understanding of the problem of practice. These theories also helped to inform
and shape the design of the study. This is the conceptual framework related to the subject. Also
in chapter 2 is a literature review grounding the study in the existing literature on academic
freedom and proposes the relevancy and importance of this study. Chapter 3 details the research
design and includes a restatement of the research questions as well as a detailed description of
the procedures and models were used to collect and analyze data. Chapter 3 also discusses the
ethical considerations of the study and demonstrates how the researcher attempted to minimize
any harm that may potentially affect participants who consented to participate this study.
Chapter 4 summarizes the findings of an analysis of the interview transcripts with three seminary
faculty members in regards to how they attached meaning to academic freedom. Chapter 5
contains a discussion and interpretation the findings and how the findings are connected to the
body of literature on academic freedom. It also highlights the implications of the findings for the
educational community and proposes some recommendations for further research as well as the
limitations of the study.
CHAPTER 2 – The Conceptual Framework & Literature Review

This research study was informed by the historical and legal position of religious institutions and seminaries as defined under the U.S. Constitution, the private – public distinction and the concepts of individual and institution academic freedom. Taken together, these perspectives provided a useful lens that informed the researcher’s understanding of how academic freedom is different in legality, nature, and application at religious colleges and seminaries. It also influenced the researcher’s understanding of the way in which academic freedom is brokered and administered in seminaries and religious higher educational institutions. Confessional statements and statements about academic freedom in seminaries are typically crafted with certain assumptions about the historical and legal nature of academic freedom.

An additional lens vital to the researcher’s understanding of academic freedom in religious institutions was Diekema’s (2000) writings on the threats to academic freedom. These threats to academic freedom exist for all higher educational institutions but the one’s highlighted here are especially salient in religious institutions and seminaries. As Diekema (2000) has written, “they often come in subtle form and fashion” and as “wolves dressed in sheep’s clothing” (p. 11). Many of the threats to academic freedom documented by Diekema were evident in the shared experiences of the participants in this study.

Finally, the proposed study was situated within the interpretivist intellectual paradigm and as a result phenomenology and its assumptions about how people make sense of their major life experiences became an important lens through which this study was designed and the interview data was interpreted. The study was informed and framed by the historical-legal position of academic freedom as well as the philosophical position of phenomenology that
provided the researcher with a “rich source of ideas about how to examine and comprehend” the lived experiences of individuals (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The Historical and Legal Nature of Academic Freedom

The Constitution and First Amendment

Significant to the conceptualization of academic freedom in religious colleges and universities is the authority and freedom given to religious organizations by the U.S. Constitution. The legal position of religious organizations under the establishment and free exercise clauses of the U.S. Constitution is quite different from that of other organizations. The establishment clause is found in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and it states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” Together with the free exercise clause, in which government cannot prohibit the free exercise of religion, the establishment clause makes up what are called the “religion clauses” of the First Amendment (U.S. Const. Bill of Rights, amend. 1).

The Supreme Court has interpreted the establishment clause to disallow the formation of a national religion by the U.S. government. It also prohibits a national preference for religion over non-religion. The exercise clause has traditionally allowed religious organizations to promote their religious doctrines without interference from the government. Whereas public and governmental bodies are to remain neutral on religious issues it is assumed that religious organizations will actively promote their individual religious ideas and missions. Additionally, the establishment clause means that religious organizations can legally constrain the religious speech of their employees without intervention from the government. Religious organizations
also have the capacity to require and expect their employees to support their religious dogmas. This power changes the nature of academic freedom for private religious institutions and seminaries. It also limits the courts’ capacity to entertain lawsuits against religious organizations. The courts have generally chosen to stay out of the internal affairs of religious organizations especially when it requires the court to interpret dogma or influence the structure or governance of religious organizations (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 44).

The Private-Public Distinction

Academic freedom at public institutions is protected by the First Amendment against internal institutional and external governmental restraints. The public institution is an agent of the state government and therefore when it restrains academic freedom it violates the First Amendment. In private institutions the First Amendment only protects academic freedom from external governmental restraints. An internal restraint would not involve a government agent and as a result the First Amendment would not apply (Kaplin & Lee, 2007, p. 240).

The U.S. Supreme Court has traditionally held that academic freedom is a First Amendment right at public institutions (Sweezy v. New Hampshire, 1957; Keyishian v. Board of Regents, 1967; Regents of Univ. of Michigan v. Ewing, 1985). However, the First Amendment has generally not been applied to private institutions, including religious ones, in relationship to academic freedom. These private institutions may honor freedom of speech and academic freedom at their pleasure but they are not required by the law to do so. Academic freedom in private institutions is therefore fixed in contract law and not constitutional law (Kaplin & Lee,
Such contracts in religious institutions usually include a confessional statement of faith or other religious control documents. These documents have legal force.

**Institutional and Individual Academic Freedom**

There are two kinds of academic freedom recognized by legal scholars. First, there is individual academic freedom protecting an individual faculty member’s speech. This is also called faculty academic freedom. Secondly, there is institutional academic freedom protecting universities from governmental interference. This is a freedom applying to a group of scholars and not to individual scholars. Institutional academic freedom gives to the university the right to select faculty and students, as well as what is taught in the curriculum and which courses are required in certain degree programs. Institutional academic freedom does not shelter individual academics with heretical views from being fired by the administration but it does protect them from being terminated by legislators or politicians for their views (Kaplin & Lee, 2007; Swezey & Ross, 2011).

The clearest definition of institutional academic freedom appears in *Regents of the Univ. of California v. Bakke* (1978). The court opined that institutional academic freedom means that the university can determine for itself on academic grounds: who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study. The significance of this ruling for seminary faculty is that they do not have the professional and individual right to academic freedom as defined, advocated, and maintained by groups like the AAUP. Individual academic freedom in religious institutions is intrinsically linked to institutional academic freedom with
institutional freedom taking precedent. Individual academic freedom varies greatly and depends heavily on the way it is structured by the institution.

The courts have traditionally favored institutional academic freedom over individual freedom and especially in religious institutions. Poch (1993) writes, “Where as the AAUP tends to emphasize the academic freedom of individuals, the courts – and particularly the Supreme Court – tend to recognize institutional academic freedom” (p. 60).

**Diekema’s Threats to Academic Freedom**

Threats to the protection and advancement of academic freedom emerge from both internal and external forces and these threats are present to certain degrees in all types of colleges, universities, and seminaries. Drawing on his twenty years as president of Calvin College, an evangelical college and seminary, Diekema (2000) has discussed several prevalent and distinct threats to academic freedom found specifically within religious institutions and seminaries. These threats included dogmatism, prior restraint, censorship, and the “chilling effect” and all appear to be attempts to enforce doctrinal conformity to one degree or another (pp. 11-37). The three threats were prominent in the responses of the study’s participants.

**Dogmatism**

Blatant dogmatism is one of the chief threats to academic freedom in religious institutions and seminaries. Dogmatism aims to “banish all ambiguity or tentativeness by appealing to a kind of ultimate, static, and simplistic” view of truth or knowledge (Diekema, 2000, p. 13). A religious dogmatist contends that certain religious truths are not subject to
scrutiny, criticism, or change (Scott, 1995). Johnson (2009) has found dogmatism to consist of the following characteristics: a preference towards firm answers, intolerance of ambiguity, rigid certainty, compartmentalization, and limited personal insight. Rokeach (1960) proposed that dogmas “serve two powerful and conflicting sets of motives at the same time; the need for a cognitive framework to know and to understand and the need to ward off threatening aspects of reality” (p. 67).

In regards to religious higher educational institutions, Diekema (2000) has written about the ongoing struggle between the search for truth and the dogmatism that accompanies many ideological systems found within the church and religious colleges and seminaries. He argues that religious educational institutions ought to thrive “on raising difficult questions, searching diligently for answers and then finding that this process may lead to new insights” but sadly they often subsist only to promote outdated ideologies and ward off threatening ideas (p. 13).

Diekema (2000) has also argued that ambiguity is a key feature of any genuine academic enterprise and the rigidity of dogmatism seeks to eliminate this ambiguity. Religious scholars should be encouraged to take up an argument against any recognized orthodoxy to determine whether there are warranted reasons for its continued usage in the church or society. Originally, academic freedom was developed to permit scholars to call into question ideologies that permeate society and so it should not come as a shock that academic freedom and dogmatism are often rivals.
Prior Restraint and Censorship

Censorship of an opposing view is the strongest of human impulses. When individuals act on this impulse to censor someone, they inhibit the ability of others to freely express themselves or to explore new areas of knowledge or to challenge religious dogmas. There are always those, within religious systems, who believe it is their duty to relentlessly inspect and block content they personally have deemed harmful, offensive, or hazardous. In religious higher educational institutions it might be thought that a group of scholars or an individual scholar may be too dangerous to be heard by students because he or she promotes an unorthodox view of God or the Scriptures.

Diekema (2000) has argued that censorship is not only an impulse of religious and conservative groups. The “drive to interfere with the ‘wrong’ thoughts of others can come from any direction: from the Right or the Left, patriots or traitors, capitalists or socialists, feminists and multiculturalists and a variety of others” (p. 27). The urge to censor another person or group commonly arises out of virtuous motives. It is an attempt by the censors to enhance a virtue but in the process the virtue becomes a vice. The irony is those who insist on censorship usually exalt the right to free speech but argue that in this particularly unique case, censorship is necessary, and morally justifiable. The censors argue that speech must be restrained for a much nobler cause (p. 27).

The “Chilling Effect” and Self-Censorship

The “chilling effect” is generally described as “the subtle discouragement of the exercise of a recognized right” (Diekema, 2000, p. 33). In other words, there might not be a direct law or
policy restricting the right but some action by someone in authority or a cultural cue causes members within an institution to become hesitant to exercise the legitimate right for the fear of negative consequences. Sometimes the chilling effect is a stifling force resulting from a vague or poorly worded policy or legal statute. Individuals become uncertain about how the policy might be administered and therefore they make sure they avoid coming in conflict with it. Diekema (2000) has written that there is “nothing more destructive to the maintenance of morale in a faculty than the ‘chilling effect’ that comes with the use of college authority to restrain or censor” (p. 33).

In religious higher educational institutions Diekema (2000) has argued that the restrictions on academic freedom are often not blatant but come from well-meaning administrators who are concerned that the academic freedom granted to faculty may result in the offense of a constituent which can have a long term negative effect on the institution’s financial health or enrollment. The signal is sent subtly to faculty members to avoid being offensive at all costs. However, when offensiveness becomes the reason for the restriction of academic freedom “it opens the road to widespread censorship” because almost anything can become offensive to someone (p. 34). The most critical effect is not the direct penalty placed upon the faculty member whose academic freedom was violated, but rather it is the response of other faculty members who want to avoid a similar fate by refusing to address issues of controversy or unpopular topics in their classrooms or publications. Once one faculty member is publically reprimanded for something he said or published it causes a domino effect and creates a faculty hesitant to comment on controversial matters, hence, the “chilling effect.” Faculty members do not say what they believe to be true because they do not want to deal with the stress and
annoyance that may result such as peer alienation, undesirable student opinions, or the fury of alumni or other constituents. Diekema writes, “It is not the iron fist of repression but the velvet glove of seduction that is the real problem” (p. 34).

**Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is not as much a research approach or method as it is a philosophical orientation and a means of conceptualizing and viewing the world. The 19th century proponents of phenomenology saw it as an entirely new branch within the field of philosophy that would compliment such fields as epistemology, ontology, logic, and ethics (Moustakas, 1994). In this sense, phenomenology is seen generally as the study of human experience and in particular the investigation into what it is like to be a human being and experience a thing or phenomenon that comprises our lived world (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Phenomenology is different from ontology in that it does not attempt to answer the question of “what exists?” but rather “what is it like to experience some aspect of existence?” This ties phenomenology to existentialism and separates it from the more traditional approaches to philosophy that encapsulated the Enlightenment and Age of Science.

The founder of the phenomenological project was Husserl (1970) who argued that the starting principle of phenomenological inquiry is that human experience ought to be investigated in the manner in which it occurs, and in its own terms. This attempt, by Husserl, to design both a linguistic structure as well as a method for investigating human experience would distinguish phenomenology from other fields of philosophical inquiry.
Husserl, attempting to address the long-standing Cartesian problems of doubt and skepticism, acknowledged the importance of returning to the self to unpack “the nature and meaning of things as they appear” to the subject “and in their essence” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Husserl’s approach acknowledges that epistemology begins internally in the consciousness rather than externally in the senses. This assumption places phenomenology in direct opposition to empiricism and logical positivism, the two movements that heavily influenced analytical philosophy in 20th century.

Husserl’s phenomenology traces its origins directly to the transcendental idealism of Kant who was known for his widespread use of the term phenomena, which means in the Greek, “appearance” (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). Kant believed that there was a rational, a priori dimension to knowledge, namely, that the form of all knowledge was independent of experience (rationalism). He also believed that the content of all knowledge came via the senses (empiricism). Kant attempted to synthesize rationalism and empiricism, the two major divisions of philosophy during the 18th and 19th centuries (Geisler, 1988).

Geisler (1988) has written about Kant saying that he believed “the ‘stuff’ of knowledge is provided by the senses but the structure of knowledge is attained eventually in the mind” (p. 16). As a result, Kant promoted a form of idealism, which was an attempt to synthesize rationalism and empiricism. What Kant did, unknowingly, was drive a deep gulf between the knower and what is known. Kant’s idealism resulted in a form of agnosticism, for if one cannot know anything until after it is structured by the a priori forms of sensation and the categories of understanding, then there is no way to get outside one’s own consciousness and know what the thing really was before he so formed it. One can know what something is to him (the appearance
of the thing) but never what it is in –itself. The subject is “cut off” from knowing a thing outside of the way it appears in his consciousness.

Of all Kant’s arguments the most important to the field of phenomenology is the observation that the only thing that can be known with certainty is the way in which something appears in the consciousness. Reality, which exists outside of the consciousness of the knower, cannot really be known with any degree of certainty but the subjective, first person experience, found within the consciousness, is indubitable. As, Husserl (1970) articulated “Ultimately, all genuine, and in particular all scientific knowledge, rests on inner evidence: as far as such evidence extends, the concept of knowledge extends also” (p. 61). According to Husserl, (1970) that which appears in the consciousness is an absolute or certain reality while what appears in the world is a product of synthesis and how it becomes represented by the knowing subject.

D’Souza (2009) provides a tangible illustration of Husserl’s perspective. He asks his reader to consider the experience of seeing the Empire State Building. Where is the Empire State Building located? Does the subject see the Empire State Building “out there?” Actually, no she sees it in her mind. He writes, “It would be ridiculous to suggest that the actual Empire State Building has physically entered her head; rather her mind forms a picture or representation of the Empire State Building” (p. 149). The same can be said of any sensory apprehension or state of memory. All experiences are apprehended in the mind or consciousness of the knowing subject. As Berkeley said, “The only things we perceive are our perceptions” (Wild, 1967).

The knowing subject assumes that there is a free standing reality out there but according to phenomenologists and idealists reality is simply a reconstituted picture of the reality that
appears in our consciousness (D’Souza, 2009). In fact, some philosophers would argue that all we have is the picture represented in our consciousness and not its corresponding reality. The subjective experience of our own consciousness is the only true reality. We can doubt external reality but we cannot doubt our own consciousness and the experience we have with the “things” in our minds. This is why Husserl believed that phenomenology was the most important science because it attempted to understand and structure that which is known with certainty – the human consciousness. Additionally, this places phenomenology in direct opposition to logical positivism and other epistemologies and research orientations that are associated with radical empiricism or scientific realism.

The indubitable nature of the subjective experience is referred to in phenomenology and in the philosophy of consciousness as *qualia*. There is something that it feels like to experience a particular phenomenon that is irreducible for the individual. Philosophers call such sensations *qualia*, which refer to the inner quality of an experience on the part of the one who is having it. In other words, qualia refer to the introspectively accessible, phenomenal aspects of our mental lives. Dennett (1991) uses the term to refer to built-in properties of subjective experiences that are nonphysical, irreducible and ‘given’ to the subjects incorrigibly or without the possibility of error. For example, if a subject reports, “I am having an experience X,” this proposition is existentially undeniable and infallible. Phenomenological analysis attempts to tap into qualia allowing an individual to express how a particular phenomenon appears to them.
Conclusion on the Conceptual Framework

An analysis of the legal-historical research on academic freedom demonstrated that it is defined and applied uniquely in religious institutions and seminaries. Religious institutions are legally empowered to exercise religious controls through various mediums including confessional statements and other statements included in faculty handbooks. This legal power changes the fundamental nature of academic freedom in religious institutions and how it is framed and conceptualized. Faculty in religious colleges, universities, and seminaries are, as a result of the legal environment, vulnerable to intrusions and violations of their academic freedom in ways that faculty at public institutions may not be vulnerable. The degree of susceptibility is dependent on the individual institutional approaches and policies (contract law) governing academic freedom.

In addition to the historical and legal perspectives on academic freedom there exists a set of unique threats to its advancement in religious institutions. According to Diekema (2000) dogmatism, censorship, and the “chilling effect” threaten the advancement of academic freedom in religious institutions. These threats are tools used by various individuals and interest groups to enforce conformity to some sectarian ideology. Diekema (2000) argues that academic freedom is crucial to religious institutions and if it is were not so important it would not be threatened in such ways.

Finally, phenomenology, with its assumptions about the nature of human experience, became a suitable philosophical framework for a research study that had interpretive goals. The researcher aimed to understand how participants make sense of their experience and this aim
influenced the researcher’s choice when determining what research method would be appropriate to organize and position this study. Phenomenology and its philosophical assumptions also informed how the researcher analyzed and described the experiences of the participants. These assumptions greatly structured and influenced the analysis stage of this study.

The Literature Review

The literature review followed four main strands of the literature on academic freedom: 1) the historical roots of academic freedom and in particular its development in ancient Greece and Europe, 2) the practical perplexity of arriving at a unified definition of academic freedom both legally and professionally in the United States, 3) the current state of academic freedom at religious institutions as articulated in documents from the American Association of Universities Professors (AAUP) and the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) where it is acknowledged by both that contract law rather than constitutional law serves to govern academic freedom issues in seminaries, and 4) the rather scant empirical research conducted on seminary faculty and how they experience, perceived and make sense of academic freedom.

The Historical Roots of Academic Freedom

A history of academic freedom typically begins with Plato’s academy in Ancient Greece. In Plato’s academy the motivation for intellectual activity was a dedication to truth rather than appeasement to some educational or government institution. This same principle dominated medieval universities in Europe and one can still find this idea, in some form, in the modern European university. Other aspects of academic freedom, developed during the Reformation, the
Enlightenment, and early Modernity have likewise influenced its modern formation in the United States and in religious institutions in particular.

**Plato’s Academy**

Academic freedom is a modern term that finds its origin in ancient ideas (Hofstadter & Metzger, 1955). The philosophic foundations of academic freedom can be traced back to Ancient Greece and Plato’s Academy as well as Aristotle’s Lyceum (Jaeger, 1944). Plato’s Academy was not operated or funded by the government. It also did not have the goal of serving societal ends (Sullivan, 1971). While the learning promoted in Plato’s Academy did benefit society, this was not its primary reason for existence. The academy existed to train students in the unhindered pursuit of truth and wisdom for the purpose of developing the individual. Societal benefits were to be seen as mere by-products of this education training.

When it came to instruction, Plato refused to be bound by his research and what he had previously written. He believed that knowledge was not contained in writing but rather in a person’s soul. Only the soul had the ability to truly defend itself. Additionally, Plato believed there was a metaphysical absence in writing and as a result one should not judge another’s beliefs solely on what he had written (Jaegar, 1944). Livingstone (1944) has asserted that Plato’s concept of academic freedom meant the absolute liberty for students and teachers to experience unhindered dialogue for the purpose of developing personal ethics or what Aristotle called character. This dialogue only took place when two or more souls were present and communicating directly with one another. It was impossible to properly dialogue using writing.
Therefore, a scholar should not be persecuted for what he had written. It was also impossible to assume that what a person had previously written was reflective of his current views.

The prototypical argument for the necessity of academic freedom in Greek society and later on in European society came from Plato’s account of Socrates’ trial and death. Essentially, Socrates’ death is the first noteworthy incident of academic freedom in Europe. Socrates was tried for corrupting the youth with new and rebellious ideas and leading them away from the gods of Athens. He asked public questions and challenged long held assumptions. As a result, he created enemies for himself among those in political power who took offense to what he was saying. Socrates was seen as a martyr for the truth and stands as the example as to why scholars and philosophers must be protected (Sullivan, 1971). The authorities of Greece learned from their experience with Socrates and made it a policy to not impede with the Academy in its pursuit of truth (Andreescu, 2009). The importance of Plato’s ideas on scholastic freedom is that in many ways they influenced the way knowledge was formed and pursued in the Middle Ages and beyond.

The Middle Ages

The university was originally a medieval institution and historical accounts find significant levels of academic freedom in the universities of the Middle Ages (Hofstatdter & Metzger, 1955; Poch 1993; Sullivan, 1971). During the Middle Ages the university stood at the institutional peak of the social structure. Political support was given to the universities by emperors and popes alike who held learning and the pursuit of knowledge in high regard. This
Dieckema (2000) has argued that the widespread sense of academic freedom in universities at the time was also influenced heavily by Christian theology. The faculty and administrators of these universities believed that it was the will of the Divine to seek and transmit truth. It was believed that those associated with the academy were carrying out a calling from God that surpassed the power of any political or religious entity to limit. Government and religious powers were hesitant to engage themselves in the day-to-day operations or instruction of the universities for fear of interfering with God’s will in the world.

Courtenay (1989) has written about the ecclesiastical control over academic judicial proceedings in the 13th and 14th centuries and has concluded that the European university allowed to a great degree open debate on a number of controversial issues and there are many examples of scholars who went onto prominence in universities and churches after their scholarship was censured by the Catholic church. He argues that there was a good amount of autonomy both for the individual scholar and the university.

Indeed, the universities of the Middle Ages were essentially autonomous corporations. They operated in many ways similar to the early medieval guilds. A guild existed to ensure industrial quality and would make sure that anything produced by a guild member was up to standard. Each university developed its own policies for teaching and administrators were chosen from the ranks of the instructors and professors. The policies and rules were quite strict and sometimes hindered the autonomy of the individual scholar. The university was a corporate
power and in such a culture the loss of individual freedom is expected. Hofstadter & Metzger (1955) have reported that university policies and rules strictly controlled every aspect academic life including trivial details on what faculty could wear, to the subjects of courses, and the instructional methodologies for lectures. The power squarely belonged to the institution and not the individual (Sullivan, 1971).

Marsden (1994) argued that it is from the early medieval university that we get the notion of institutional or corporate academic freedom. It is generally accepted that there are two different kinds of academic freedom. There is first, individual academic freedom protecting an individual faculty member. Secondly, there is institutional academic freedom that protects universities from interference by government, a freedom that applies to a community of scholars and not to individual faculty members. Institutional academic freedom gives to the university itself the right to select faculty and students, as well as what is taught in the curriculum. Institutional academic freedom does not protect individual professors with unorthodox views from being terminated by the university administration but it does protect faculty from being terminated by politicians or religious leaders (Tight, 1985). The latter is the type of academic freedom that primarily existed in the medieval university.

The Middle Ages were not absent of conflict when it came to academic freedom. The universities of the Middle Ages were dominated by a culture of faith and operated in a society subjugated by a religious worldview. As a result, the institutions usually favored religion over scientific approaches to research. In the University of Paris, theology and philosophy were the dominant disciplines of study and the faculty members were under the control of clerics who also taught in the departments. Both internal and external forces enforced a system of orthodox faith.
The medieval church did not tolerate dissension from dogma and the university assumed the right to censor scholars who contradicted church teachings, often as a proactive measure to keep the church from interfering in university affairs (Courtenay, 1989). Poch (1993) has observed that medieval faculty members could investigate new knowledge as long as they did not blatantly go out of their way to violate the doctrinal authority of the church.

**The Protestant Reformation**

Martin Luther’s Reformation is often seen as solely a church schism but few remember that he was a German professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg when he strongly disputed the Catholic church’s claim that freedom from divine punishment for sin could be purchased with indulgences. He confronted the selling of indulgences with his Nine Five Theses in 1514 and posted the document on the door of the All-Saints church that was associated with the university. Luther saw the document as an academic paper with the intent to spur debate about a practice he believed lacked scriptural support (Kittelson, 1986). Hillerbrand (2009) has argued that Luther did not have a goal of standing up to the Church, but saw his document as a scholarly objection to church praxis. The Church’s attempt to silence Luther can be seen as violation of his academic freedom.

A by-product of Luther’s Reformation, important to the topic of academic freedom in Europe, was the emphasis on the individual pursuit of truth apart from the interference of religious authority. Luther taught that a Christian was “a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” (Kittleson, 1986, p. 155). At the time of the Reformation, it was generally believed that the Catholic Church determined what was true and false. Church doctrines became the truth
within the Church and society. The Church went so far as to say that only the Pope and the priests could determine truth. Luther’s reform stressed a strong individualism, and that each man could be his own priest and that the only true authority is the Bible. As a result, each man was called to study the Bible on his own and arrive at his own conclusions and interpretations. Luther’s argument was an argument for the unfettered individual pursuit and interpretation of truth. Luther’s reform was essentially a humanist movement as it emphasized the individual’s right to freely interpret Scripture as well as nature (Hillerbrand, 2009).

The Enlightenment

Like Luther, Renee Descartes emphasized the individual pursuit of knowledge particularly in the sciences. What Luther did for theology, Descartes did for philosophy and science. Descartes was most famous for his work, The Discourse on Method (1637) which is best known as the source of the saying "Je pense, donc je suis" or "I think, therefore I am.” Descartes’ method rejected the notion that the subject ought to accept any truth secondhand or through tradition. The human subject ought to be the sole arbitrator of truth. Descartes called for a methodological skepticism that was a method where the subject doubted everything previously believed in order to evaluate the world free of any presuppositions. In other words, the subject must pursue knowledge without any interference from outside sources including sense data, tradition, revelation, the Church, or other minds (Brown, 1984).

Brown (1984) has argued that the autonomy of the modern academician is traceable back to the methodology best represented in Descartes’ The Discourse on Method. The six principles guiding Descartes’ method should characterize the research of autonomous academics today.
These six principles are: 1) Intellectual activity should be pursued independently and individually; 2) Inquiry should have no limits; 3) The amount of time expended on inquiry should be determined by the scholar; 4) Objectivity and detachment from the object of study is necessary; 5) Rationality is universal and absolute; 6) Security and stability are necessary conditions for scholarship.

An additional concept emerging from the Age of Enlightenment important to understanding the nature of academic freedom is the phrase *libertas philosophandi* meaning “freedom in philosophizing” (Isaac, 2011). Sutton (1953) has argued that the European Enlightenment call for freedom in philosophizing is the source of today’s call for academic freedom. A 1622 defense of Galileo by Tommaso Campanella may be the earliest use of the phrase in reference and support of scientific freedom (Stewart, 1994). The freedom to philosophize includes the Cartesian method of skepticism in which doubting authority or being skeptical of tradition is seen as a profitable exercise closely associated with the independence of philosophy and science from theological domination (Maclean, 2006; Isaac, 2011).

**Modernity**

Post-enlightenment notions of academic freedom were first codified by Humboldt when he developed the research university in Berlin in 1818 (Tight, 1985). Hofstadter and Metzger (1955) have discussed two Humboldtian traditions of German academic freedom that have influenced the development of academic freedom in Europe in the United States. The first is *lernfreiheit*, which means “learning liberty.” It grants faculty freedom in instruction, in the absence of intrusion from the administration. The second concept was *lehrfreiheit*, which means
the freedom of the scholar to pursue the research wherever it leads, without restriction. Both of
these traditions are reflected today in German jurisprudence. The Humboldtian concept did not
include the freedom to express views in class or in research articles that were outside the
professor's academic discipline. Additionally, German students were given the freedom to study
what they wished. Academic freedom was not just a right sought by institutions and professors
but also by students.

The Search for a Definition

Academic freedom is a multifaceted term evading a succinct definition both
professionally and legally (Diekema, 2000). Additionally, as the previous section detailed, it has
a long and tumultuous history. Poch (1993) generally describes its use in American universities
as “the intellectual liberties required to explore, expound, and further knowledge” (p. 3). Byrne
(1989) has expressed a view that a unified legal definition of academic freedom does not exist
and the norms surrounding it are found loosely defined in the many decisions of federal and state
courts (Kaplin & Lee, 2007). This is problematic because as Bligh (1982) has observed,
“everyone seems to agree that academic freedom should be defended, but there is little
agreement or clarity about what it is. Unless we know what it is and can justify it, we will
neither defend it convincingly nor exercise it responsibly” (p. 10).

While a legal definition of academic freedom is hard to nail down, a professional
definition does exist in a more unified form in the United States. The professional concept of
academic freedom in the American academy was influenced greatly by ideas coming from
German universities (Davis, 1984). Hofstadter and Metzger (1955) discuss two academic
freedom concepts that entered higher education in the U.S. shortly after the Civil War. The first was lernfreiheit, which means “learning liberty.” It granted faculty members complete latitude in the teaching of their students, in the absence of intrusion from the administration. The second concept was lehrfreiheit, which means the freedom of the researcher to take any direction the research seemed to indicate, without external authoritative restraints. The lehrfreiheit is similar to the principle of Plato’s Socrates: Follow the evidence, wherever it leads.

The influence of lernfreiheit and lehrfreiheit can be seen in the language set out by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), which provides the most recognizable professional definition of academic freedom. The AAUP is an organization dedicated to issues of academic freedom and tenure. The purpose of academic tenure was that it is a mechanism for protecting academic freedom by ensuring that faculty can be fired only for causes such as professional incompetence or behavior that stirred up condemnation from the scholarship community itself. The AAUP came into being partially as a result of academic freedom issues in religiously affiliated universities. Arthur Lovejoy was a central figure in establishing the AAUP and led an investigation into the firing of a professor who had fallen out with institutional orthodoxy in a Wesleyan college (Pollitt & Kurland, 1998; Mardsen, 1997).

A widely accepted professional definition of faculty academic freedom appears in the AAUP’s Policy Documents and Reports (2001). The definition has changed little since 1940 and encompasses three major principles of academic freedom. First, faculty members “are entitled to full freedom in research and in the publication of the results.” Secondly, “teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject.” Thirdly, “when they speak or write as citizens, faculty should be free from institutional censorship or discipline” (pp. 3-5).
Academic Freedom in Private Religious Institutions

Legally speaking, academic freedom disagreements in religious universities and colleges are governed by contract law principles (Habecker, 1991). The terms of the employment contract, including the confessional statement of faith, become the basis for determining the degree of academic freedom within the institution. First Amendment rights do not limit private institutions from censoring faculty or requiring them to teach and research within the limitations of a confessional statement of faith. In light of this fact, the original 1940 AAUP statement on academic freedom contained a special clause for academic freedom in religious institutions. This clause clearly recognized the liberty of religious universities to establish qualifications on academic freedom. It encouraged such institutions to state clearly in writing the limitations on academic freedom and to present these to faculty at the time of their hiring. Faculty need to know what can be taught in the classroom and what cannot be taught (AAUP, 1940, ¶ 7). The clause was reinterpreted in 1970 and read, “Most church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 Statement, and we do not now endorse such a departure” (AAUP, 1970, Item 3).

The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) is an organization of seminaries and other graduate schools of theology and religion. It serves primarily as an accrediting body for such schools. The research site for this study is accredited by the ATS and adheres in principle to the policies set by the ATS. The ATS has an extensive policy statement (1976) detailing guidelines for academic freedom at its member institutions. Many ATS seminaries and schools have adopted this policy statement with little or no changes and have included it in their faculty handbooks. The ATS policy statement, like the 1940 AAUP
statement, acknowledged the unique way that academic freedom applies in religious institutions. “Theological schools may acknowledge specific confessional adherence as laid down in the charters and constitutions of the schools” (p. 41).

The ATS policy also recognizes that a theological school having a doctrinal standard may fully expect its faculty to subscribe to the standard. However, the ATS policy advises that “Any challenge to the confessional or doctrinal regularity of a faculty member should be subject to open hearing before the faculty member’s colleagues and before the governing board of the school after consultation with students” and that a procedure be in place to make sure that the faculty receive and honest and just hearing (p. 42). Additionally, the institution should provide its faculty members with “all appropriate procedural safeguards for the protection of their academic freedom” (p. 42). Teachers are also to be given the freedom to express and act upon their convictions as individual citizens but they should realize that there is an understood representation of their institution when they speak (p. 44).

Summary of Literature Review

Since academic freedom is foremost a legal subject most of the research literature has taken the form of what Permuth & Mawdsley (2006) call “traditional legal research” which is “a form of historical-legal research that is neither qualitative nor quantitative” (p. 6). This type of research is a systematic investigation involving the interpretation or explanation of a particular issue or set of cases, known as precedent, within the law.

An analysis of the literature on academic freedom also revealed that there were a limited number of empirical studies, both qualitative and quantitative, attempting to understand how
individuals or groups process and interpret academic freedom within their unique higher educational environment (Sweezy & Ross, 2011; Barger, 2010; Goddfredson, 2010; Romanowski, 2010 & Martindill, 2008). An analysis of these few empirical studies on academic freedom demonstrated that there was a need to understand how individuals experience, process, and make sense of a phenomenon like academic freedom. While many of these were qualitative studies, none of them employed the method of phenomenology and specifically IPA, which was the choice of the researcher for this investigation.

While there certainly is a need to understand and dissect the nature and history of a legal phenomenon, there is also a need to understand how this phenomenon impacts individuals who work and live under its dominion. The researcher believed there was a need for phenomenological research that aimed to understand how those impacted by a phenomenon understand it, make sense of it, and experience it. The researcher believed this phenomenological aspect was missing from the body of literature on academic freedom and especially in regards to seminary faculty members. In other words, there appeared to be a gap in the literature in regards to understanding how individual faculty members in seminaries make sense of and experience academic freedom. Additionally, the researcher had not identified a phenomenological study conducted in this area of seminary faculty and specifically within the Church of Christ denomination.
CHAPTER 3 – Method and Research Design

Research Question

The central research question for this study was, “How do faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom?” This research question attempted to meet both the exploratory and interpretive intellectual goals set by the researcher. In regards to the exploratory goal, it helped the researcher discover common themes of human experience to ground theory for the purposes of identifying themes for a later study on academic freedom. This research has also helped him develop salient factors for use in a later questionnaire or in the replication of this study to other groups. In regards to the interpretive goal, it has aided the researcher in understanding how faculty members at religious confessional institutions make sense of and describe academic freedom. Additionally, it has helped the researcher to understand how faculty members make meaning of the concept of academic freedom and how they apply that meaning when they perform their teaching and research duties.

General Strategy of Inquiry

The general strategy of inquiry that matched the intellectual goals and central research question was qualitative research because this study aimed to achieve a deep understanding of how seminary faculty make sense and attach meaning to academic freedom. As a result some type of qualitative interviewing was the best method (Maxwell, 2005). The researcher aimed to capture the language and metaphors faculty members used to make sense of and interpret academic freedom within their context. Weber (2011) has written:
The way in which people express the meaning they make of their world is through language and symbols. This elevates the importance of hermeneutics as a process of understanding words and symbols within their context and concomitantly using that meaning to provide further context for the entire collection of words and symbols, a process called the hermeneutical circle. This means that it becomes imperative to understand people’s use of language in an ongoing relationship to other symbols in their world (p. 56).

In the researcher’s understanding of research methods quantitative research did not provide him the opportunity to understand deeply how faculty members attach meaning and make sense of academic freedom. Quantitative research was also not appropriate because the researcher was not attempting to determine relationships between variables but rather trying to decipher salient themes that described the experiences of the participants.

**Research Method**

The method identified that best responded to the research question was phenomenological research, which is a type of qualitative research method. Phenomenology concerns itself with determining the structures of consciousness including the first person subjective perceptions and interpretations of reality (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The only method researchers have for accessing the contents of the human conscious is self-report. The human subject must report to a researcher his or her first person experiences and interpretations of reality. The first person experiences of subjects are known as “qualia” which concerns the first person subjective nature of consciousness in which the subject has restrictive access
(Dennett, 1991). Topics appropriate to this method include those central to the shared life experiences of individuals.

Phenomenological research attempts to answer the question: “How do people make sense of their major life experiences?” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Creswell, 2007). These experiences “may be classified as 'sensitive' areas of inquiry due to the potential for intrusion into the private sphere” (Walker, 2007).

Phenomenological research allowed the researcher to answer his overarching research question concerning how faculty members’ make sense of academic freedom. “Sense making” is part of the “private sphere” or phenomenal realm. Life experiences and worldviews are shaped by the human interpretation and understanding of different events and concepts. Phenomenology is usually the choice of researchers who want to understand, analyze and describe these types of shared, “lived experiences” and the meaning they hold for those who have experienced it. Phenomenology is also ideal for acquiring information through interviews of several subjects who have shared an experience (Creswell, 2007). Additionally, it is especially useful “when a phenomenon of interest has been poorly defined or is absent of conceptualization” (Walker, 2007).

Within the domain of phenomenological research are several philosophical approaches that include hermeneutical and transcendental phenomenology. These approaches address the manner in which the researcher gathers, codes, and interprets empirical data. The particular phenomenological research method that best matched the research question for this study was a newer approach known as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis or IPA (Smith, Flowers, &
IPA is intellectually related to both the hermeneutical and transcendental traditions and specifically aims to explore in “detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, & Osborn, 2003, p. 53). An IPA study concerns itself with the meanings that particular experiences and events, hold for participants.

IPA has a unique dimension that distinguishes it from other forms of phenomenological research. Smith & Osborn (2003) have written that “a detailed IPA analysis can also involve asking critical questions of the participants, such as the following: What is the person trying to achieve here? Is something leaking out here that wasn’t intended? Do I have a sense of something going on here that maybe the participants themselves are less aware of?” (p. 53). As a result IPA exercises a double hermeneutic and places an emphasis on sense making by both the participant and the researcher. Allowances were made for the researcher’s perceptions as well as the participants’ when analyzing and interpreting the data.

**Study Sampling**

Since sampling is done theoretically and not statistically in a phenomenological study, and a great amount of data is analyzed, a small focused sample was suitable for this study (Mouton & Marais, 1992). The researcher selected three seminary faculty members identified through purposeful and criterion sampling. Creswell (2007) has argued that criterion sampling works well when the participants studied represent people who have a shared experience with a phenomenon. The sample was also a homogeneous sample meaning that all of the participants came from the same seminary and had taught in this seminary. All of the participants were seminary faculty members who have signed the same theological or religious confessional
statement as required by their seminary. The participants signed this statement acknowledging that they are in agreement with the statement and will teach, research, and publish in accordance with the specifics and tenets of the statement. In other words, these participants shared the experience of teaching, researching, and publishing in the same confessional religious seminaries.

**Data Collection**

The researcher was the only interviewer for this study. Before the interviews were conducted the research site’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted permission and approval was also granted by the IRB at Northeastern University. The researcher was able to identify and recruit participants through a “gatekeeper” who suggested the names of individuals who might be interested in participating in the study. This gatekeeper also suggested that these particular individuals would provide deep insights into the topic of academic freedom. The gatekeeper indicated that he had discussed academic freedom with these individuals in the past and suggested that many of them had deep insights on the issue as a result of their personal experiences.

The researcher contacted these candidates through email to invite them to participate in the study. The email invitation explained the purpose of the research and provided details about the interview protocols. Three candidates for participation were contacted and all three expressed interest and arranged a time to sit for an interview. All three candidates conveyed an eagerness to participate in the study. At the arranged time the researcher reviewed the study’s purpose with the participants, explained the consent form, and described how the researcher
would work to protect their confidentiality. The participants were also given the ability to withdraw from the interview at any point. Each participant signed the consent form.

The participants were given access to their transcripts two weeks after the interviews were conducted. This is an accepted phenomenological research practice known as member checking (Creswell, 2007). The participants were given five days to read and analyze the transcripts in order to provide more information or to supplement their responses by clarifying their statements. The researcher also gave them permission to retract any statements they did not feel comfortable revealing publically. Two of the three participants added minor clarifications through the member-checking process but none of the participants requested retractions or expressed concerns about any of their responses or direct quotes appearing the paper.

The interviews took place at a secure location away from the research site in a room that would prevent disturbances and would also aid the quality recording of the interview. No other person was present during the interviews, which ranged from 44 minutes to 53 minutes. The interviews were recorded using an Apple 4S iPhone application known as iTalk Recorder which is a full-featured recording application with an intuitive user interface that allowed the researcher to choose different levels of recording quality and easily manage the recordings for transcription. The mobile application was also chosen over a digital recorder because the researcher’s iPhone is secured by a password whereas the digital recorder he owned was not. Storing the recordings digitally in a secure environment was a priority for the researcher. Additionally, after comparing the digital recorder with the iTalk Recorder application the researcher felt more comfortable operating the latter.
The researcher utilized a set of predetermined open-ended questions focused on the participant's experiences, perceptions, definitions, and interpretations of academic freedom in their seminary. The interviews could be described as an exchange in which the participants and the researcher engaged in a dialogue about academic freedom. The researcher utilized open-ended questions to guide, narrow, and focus the responses of the participants but in many cases the interviews took on a life of their own and the researcher probed some issues with questions he had not previously planned to ask. Such semi-structured interviews were useful for providing an understanding of the issues because the researcher was able to clarify responses through guided follow up questions (Creswell, 2007).

Smith & Osborn (2007) have written that with semi-structured interviews the researcher has a set of questions and an interview schedule but the questions and structure are simply a guide and do not dictate what occurs in the interview. These interviews remain non-directive so that the participant talks and the researcher listens. Semi-structured interviews have the following dimensions:

1. There is an attempt to establish rapport with the participant.
2. The ordering of questions is less important.
3. The interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise.
4. The interview can follow the participant’s interests or concerns (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 58).
The Research Site

The research site was a seminary located in the Midwest section of the United States. The seminary was accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and is associated with the Churches of Christ denomination. The seminary offers graduate degrees in theology, religious studies, divinity, pastoral counseling, and religious education. The seminary requires that all faculty members sign a confessional statement of faith indicating that they will teach and research in accordance with the statement. It was a precondition for inclusion in this study that the participants were seminary faculty members who have signed the same theological/religious confessional statement as required by their seminary. In this, they shared a similar life experience. The participants had signed this statement acknowledging that they are in agreement with the statement and will teach, research, and publish in accordance with the specifics and tenets of the statement. This statement had legal force and power over their careers.

Participants & Demographics

Since the participants were drawn from a very small pool of faculty and because the research site was a seminary with a small student body and non-faculty workforce, demographic information, such as age, academic department, or length of service are not revealed. A higher level of anonymity was requested by the IRB committee at the research site to protect the participants. Some general identifiers are reported here without jeopardizing the anonymity of the participants. For instance, all three of the participants have taught and served in seminaries and religious colleges for more than 10 years including this research site. Additionally, all three participants hold a doctorate in their respective fields and teach courses of a religious nature.
They have experience teaching theology, history, religious education, and biblical studies courses. Many teach across disciplines as a result of their research interests. All the participants were male and have signed the seminary’s confessional statement of faith. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants in the results section. The pseudonyms chosen were Matthew, Jeremiah, and Adam.

**Limitations**

Sample size is usually regarded as a limitation within phenomenological studies. The sample size of the study, three participants, is regarded as small and posed a limitation in its ability to be generalized to other populations. In phenomenological research there are no rules for sample size (Patton, 1990). The sample size was influenced by what could be done with available time, human resources, and financial resources.

The sample size of three participants was also influenced by the writings of scholars in the field of IPA research. Smith & Osborn (2007), who have pioneered the field of IPA research, have recommended that doctoral students conducting an IPA study for the first time limit their sample size to three participants. This allows the student sufficient time to engage each individual case while also allowing for a detailed analysis of “similarity and difference, convergence and divergence” (p. 57). They also caution that a newcomer to IPA may become overwhelmed by the vast amounts of data resulting from such a study and not be able to produce a “sufficiently penetrating analysis” (p. 57). The researcher took Smith & Osborn’s advice into consideration when determining the sample size. This did not minimize the fact that the data
retrieved from a small number of participants in the study was valuable to the researcher in his role as an educational practitioner and also to the body of research on academic freedom.

There was an additional note in regards to small samples that the researcher considered when it came to the questions of limitations. Sisia (2011) has observed that Piaget’s groundbreaking research on childhood development was based on his observations of only his two children. Smith & Osborn (2007) have written that phenomenological “studies have been published with samples of one, four, nine, fifteen and more.” Patton (1990) has argued, “The insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than the sample size” (p. 245).

**Validity & Research Bias**

The contention that phenomenological studies are deficient in the areas of validity and reliability is controversial (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). According to Creswell (1998) sound models of phenomenological research can show academic thoroughness and rigor. Those comparing it to other types of quantitative research often criticize phenomenological research as an “unscientific” method of inquiry. But the critics often fail to acknowledge that quantitative paradigms and phenomenology are essentially incommensurable. The incommensurable nature of the paradigms was articulated in the conceptual framework section of this proposal when phenomenology was defined. Stone (1985) has written that phenomenological research “is strictly scientific, but concentrates on meaning rather than measurement and it treats the data rigorously without doing violence to it” (p. 108).
With this in mind, phenomenological research investigates and makes inquiry into the lived experiences of individuals (Giorgi, 1997). In order to truly capture these unique and subjective experiences the researcher was required to attempt to “eliminate everything that represents a presupposition” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). A major challenge of any phenomenological study is to describe the essence of an individual experience, as it exists, and not how the researcher perceives it to exist. Researcher interference and bias were threats to the validity and reliability of this phenomenological study. The researcher collected and analyzed the data in accordance with the established procedures for IPA research. These protocols were intended to reduce researcher influence on the findings and the participants. However, the specific method of IPA research makes allowances for the role of the researcher in the analysis and interpretation of the data. IPA recognizes that in most qualitative studies, absolute objectivity is impossible and that qualitative studies consist of a two-stage interpretation process where the participants are making sense of their world while the researcher is “trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world” (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Miles & Huberman (1994) argued that reliable research must appear to be reasonably consistent and stable throughout the period of investigation. A component of consistency and stability in a research study is that the analysis and findings must be clear, honest, and accurate. A strategy called member checking can help in accomplishing this. Creswell (2007) has described member checking as a practice in which the researcher asks the research participants to read and verify the accuracy of the transcripts and the findings. Member checking was practiced during this study.
Marshall & Rossman (1999) have also emphasized the importance of explicitly stating the research design and methodology used and to show the connections between the data and the interpretations. They also emphasize the presentation of the study in a scholarly framework and keeping data transcripts available for possible reanalysis. Assisting this is the practice of reflexivity, which forces the researcher to acknowledge his or her role and the situated environment of their research. Reflexivity bolsters greater levels of transparency and quality in phenomenological research and especially in an approach like IPA.

**Statement of Reflexivity**

Since the researcher and the study’s participants were simultaneously experiencing human beings, and there was an attempt to capture the essence of that experience, the researcher felt it was necessary for him to consider and disclose how his own perceptions and biases might influence the interviews and the reporting of the findings. While IPA is a research method that makes allowances for the researcher’s experiences and interpretations, it adds a level of credibility and transparency to the study to include a statement of reflexivity, disclosing possible sources of researcher bias (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

There were two areas where the researcher felt that his biases might have influenced the analysis of the interviews. First, the researcher admitted that as he listened to the shared experiences of the participants he could not help but recall his own painful experiences of teaching religion courses and facing similar situations where students complained to the administration about something he had commented on or discussed in a class. The orthodoxy of the researcher was called into question, he was labeled a liberal, and this has had a lasting effect
on the way he has taught ever since. The researcher has definitely practiced self-censorship and experienced the “chilling effect” described by Diekema’s writings and the participants’ responses.

Secondly, the researcher also felt it necessary to disclose that he had worked for the research site for five years full-time and had recently left the institution on a full-time basis due to several factors, including a financial crisis, in which several of the researcher’s colleagues were fired unexpectedly. One of the colleagues fired was a participant in this study and the researcher had reason to believe that his termination was unfair. The decision to leave the institution was a very difficult set of circumstances for the researcher and the researcher’s departure from the institution on a full-time basis took place just as the transcripts of his interviews were being coded and analyzed. The relationship between the researcher and the institution associated with this study might have influenced the way the data was analyzed and how the themes were discovered.

**Data Analysis**

Smith & Osborn (2007) have written that the “assumption in IPA is that the analyst is interested in learning something about the respondent’s psychological world” (p. 66). This usually involves describing beliefs and constructs that emerge or are suggested by the respondent’s answer. It also may be the case that the analyst determines that the respondent’s story can itself represent a piece of respondent’s identity. In any case, what is important is holding meaning central. The goal is to always attempt to comprehend the complexity of these
meanings rather than just to measure their frequency. The researcher is therefore “in an interpretative relationship with the transcript” (p. 66).

The transcripts of the interviews were coded and analyzed for common themes. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) describe IPA as “a set of common processes and principles which are applied flexibly, according to an analytic task” (p. 79). The analysis is inductive and iterative. For first time IPA researchers Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) have recommended the consideration of the following strategies for analysis and as a result the researcher for this study followed them closely:

1. The close line-by-line analysis of the experiential claims, concerns, and perceptions of each participant.
2. The identification of emergent patterns that emphasize convergence and divergence, commonality and nuance.
3. The development of a “dialogue” between the researcher, the coded data, and his knowledge of the subject.
4. The organization of this material in a format that allows for analyzed data to be traced through the entire process, from initial comments on the transcript, through initial clustering and thematic development, into the final structure of themes.
5. The development of a narrative evidenced by a detailed commentary on data extracts.
6. Reflection on one’s own perceptions, conceptions and process (pp. 79-80).

The researcher, being a novice IPA analyst, closely followed the six steps laid out by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) when mining the data for themes.
Research Sequence

The steps in this research study were as follows: 1) Identified a research site which was a Midwest Church of Christ ATS accredited confessional seminary. 2) Considered and articulated the ethical implications of the study. 3) Received IRB permission from Northeastern University and the research site to conduct the study. 4) Identified, through criterion sampling, three participants. 5) Asked participants to sign a disclosure statement and discussed the specifics of the study with them as well as answered any questions they had about the study. 6) Conducted the interviews in a neutral off-site location and recorded them digitally. 7) Transcribed the recording verbatim. 8) Made provisions to store the transcribed data in a secure/private location and in multiple places. 9) Analyzed the data according to commonly accepted IPA strategies summarized previously in this paper. 10) Introduced the thematic scheme and described the data at face value. 11) Discussed and interpreted the findings and how the data is connected to the theoretical framework and literature review. 12) Concluded with implications to suggest further research and how the study met the intellectual goals set by researcher at the beginning of the study.

Ethical Considerations

When conducting research using human subjects it was important to keep in mind the principle of beneficence that states that it is the moral obligation of the researcher to advance the most important interests of others and remove harms. Researchers should aim to increase benefit and at the same time reduce the potential to cause harm (Walker, 2007). With this in mind, there
were two general ethical considerations of which the researcher kept in mind as he conducted his research.

The primary ethical consideration for the researcher in this study was protecting the identity of the participants. Academic freedom in religious institutions is a controversial and heated topic and participants in this study needed to be reassured that their identities would be protected and that no harm came to them as a result of participating in this study. Maintaining confidentiality was the highest ethical priority. This priority demanded that the researcher make every effort to prevent anyone outside of him from connecting individual subjects with their responses. Since the researcher worked in the organization for a time, he was careful to maintain confidentiality no matter the circumstances. Additionally, it was necessary for the researcher to appropriately erase study data and the corresponding transcription documents when the study was completed and approved. There was a disclosure statement provided to the participants that described how the researcher worked to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, participants were asked to sign a consent form and details of the study were discussed verbally before the interviews began. The researcher also was available to answer any questions that participants had about the design of the research and its significance.

In regards to confidentiality, the participants were also given access to their particular transcripts two weeks after the interviews were conducted. This is an accepted phenomenological research practice known as member checking (Creswell, 2007). The participants were given five days to read and analyze the transcripts in order to provide more information or to supplement their responses by clarifying their statements. The researcher also
gave them permission to retract any statements they did not feel comfortable revealing publically.

A secondary ethical consideration was to fully explain the purpose of the research to the participants about the benefits of the research for society and for their profession. The researcher desired to have informed participants who understood what to anticipate when they volunteered for this study. The researcher answered any questions that the participants had concerning any part of the study. The researcher informed the participants that they had the option to leave the study at any time if they felt harm could result.

Willig (2001) has outlined the basic ethical considerations for research that involves human subjects:

1. Informed consent. The researcher should ensure that participants are fully informed about the research procedure and give their consent to participate in the research before data collection begins.
2. No deception. Deception of participants should be avoided altogether.
3. Right to withdraw. The researcher should ensure that participants feel free to withdraw from participation in the study without fear of being penalized.
4. Debriefing. The researcher should ensure that, after data collection, participants are informed about the full aims of the research and access to any publications arising from the study.
5. Confidentiality. The researcher should maintain complete confidentiality regarding all information about participants acquired during the research process (p. 18).
In the design and implementation of this study, these ethical considerations were strictly applied and followed without compromise.
Chapter 4 – Findings & Analysis

This study aimed to understand how faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom. An analysis of the interview transcripts yielded three superordinate themes and seven sub-themes. These themes captured how the participants made sense of and attached meaning to the concept of academic freedom in their roles as seminary faculty members. An exploration of these superordinate themes and their constituent sub-themes formed the basis of this chapter, with each theme illustrated by concentrated summaries and rich, thick descriptions of the participants’ perceptions and understandings. Occasional verbatim quotations obtained from the interview transcripts are also strategically included. A summary of the findings also concludes each themed section. The superordinate themes and their subthemes were: 1) Describing Academic Freedom (1.1 Nebulousness, 1.2 Social Progress, 1.3 Diversity of Views); 2) The Threats to Academic Freedom (2.1 The Big “L” Stands for Liberal, 2.2 It’s Not the Administration) and 3) The Confessional Statement (3.1 Institutional Identity, 3.2 Broadness).

Describing Academic Freedom

This superordinate theme exemplifies some of the challenges in defining or conceptualizing academic freedom in any succinct or concrete way. While the participants articulated the difficulty in defining academic freedom there was convergence in a portion of their responses. There was enough convergence to allow the researcher to identify three sub-themes: Nebulousness, Social Progress, and Diversity of Views.
Nebulousness

Participants consistently communicated the difficulty of defining or describing academic freedom in any tangible form. When asked about how they described or defined academic freedom the participants commented that academic freedom was slippery, lacked a solid foundation, has changed over time, is opaque, and has a degree of incomprehensibility. While all participants were able to define it in their own ways and to various degrees, they each acknowledged the difficulty of fully encapsulating academic freedom even subjectively.

Two of the participants, Matthew and Jeremiah, hesitated when asked to define or describe academic freedom. It was rare to see scholars speechless on a subject, especially a subject so central to their professions. This hesitancy surprised the researcher to some degree, considering that the participants knew beforehand that academic freedom was to be the subject of their interview. The researcher anticipated that they would have a readily available definition.

When asked to define academic freedom Matthew immediately sighed and commented on the “broadness” of the researcher’s question. He appeared to be buying time or stalling to give himself a moment to generate a decent and respectable response. Silence followed for a moment. It was a little uncomfortable for the researcher as silence is never a good sign at the beginning of an interview. But Matthew was in deep thought, his thumb on his chin, and then came his first word -- “nebulous.” Academic freedom is nebulous, vague, foggy, and ill defined. It is open to multiple interpretations. Jeremiah also struggled to come up with a simple definition. He asked the researcher to rephrase the question several times and specified whether a theoretical or personal definition was desired. The researcher let him decide.
While nebulousness was common in the initial responses the participants began to attach lively metaphors and images to the concept as the interviews progressed. The participants began to provide poignant examples, from their lived experiences, which unpacked a much deeper meaning. The researcher sensed that as they dialogued about academic freedom, it was becoming less nebulous.

**Social Progress**

While the three participants openly acknowledged the nebulous nature of academic freedom they all characterized it in much the same way in regards to the role or function it should play in the development of new knowledge in society and in Christendom. When asked about the role of academic freedom in society all three tied it to the notions of social progress and change.

Adam spoke about academic freedom and the ability to question things within the confines of a broadly stated Statement of Faith. Jeremiah spoke about the right to be skeptical of arguments. He indicated that the right of academic freedom was not only the right to generate new knowledge, free from external restraint, but it was also the right to call into question or criticize current ways of thinking or traditions. Academic freedom is the right of scholars to falsify outdated theories and models of reality. It is not just a right. It is a responsibility of all scholars. As Jeremiah articulated:

Academic freedom should be characterized by a sense of liberty to question currently accepted truths under the assumption that current ways of thinking about any given topic may not necessarily be correct or may not be articulated in ways that are necessarily in
line with other contemporary ways of thinking or articulating other fields of knowledge or domain… it protects a society from remaining locked in structures of ignorance. It encourages people who are dedicated to research to actually push the boundaries of what is known or can be known. It's really tied to the principle of progress, I would say, in terms of social theory.

When the researcher asked Jeremiah if the right to question current ways of thought applied to seminaries, like his, where confessional statements and theological ideas tended to be viewed as immutable, he responded with an emphatic “yes” and said it is even more crucial in seminaries concerned with facilitating the growth of the church. Religious knowledge as a function of the life of faith communities has to be constantly adapting itself to the world in which the people of faith live. The church would not survive if it did not adapt its ideas and question long held beliefs and methodologies. Jeremiah argued that the role of academic freedom in a seminary and in the larger faith community was to insure that a dialogue continued in a meaningful way and not just to overthrow dogma or tradition but to keep the community vibrant, rather than allowing it to stagnate to a point where the theological and biblical beliefs of the faith community can no longer speak to the world at large. In other words, a seminary exists to aid the church in maintaining its relevancy in society and how else could that happen if outdated traditions are not questioned freely? Adam’s response was very similar to Jeremiah’s in this regard but he added that Jesus of Nazareth questioned commonly held assumptions. Jesus was highly critical of the traditions and false assumptions of the religious establishment of his day. Christian scholars, when they question religious ideology, they not only contribute to social progress but also participate in the very ministry of Jesus.
**Diversity of Views**

Diversity in regards to views or ideas was a dominant theme in the researcher’s interview with Matthew. Matthew associated academic freedom with the free exchange of ideas and the development of an institutional culture where there was a degree of tolerance for those who held diverse views on matters of faith and conduct. He mentioned that both academic freedom and the First Amendment were proposed to protect the free flow of ideas and that nothing should upset the flow. Ideas should not be censored. Not all ideas need to be advocated on a Christian campus but they do need to be considered and explored. He added, “Of all people, Christians should not be afraid of the truth.”

Matthew expressed his concern that academic freedom was excessively limited in his seminary by what he called “a spirit of legalism.” The researcher should point out that the mood of the interview with Matthew changed dramatically when the issue of legalism surfaced. The researcher detected this was a subject matter about which Matthew was passionate. Matthew sat up in his chair when discussing the legalistic atmosphere of the seminary. The interview suddenly became very intense.

Matthew never defined legalism in any certain terms but he indicated that in his seminary there was an underlying, often unmentioned legalistic undercurrent. He talked about what he called “the party-line” and how faculty members had to know where the line was drawn and not push it. You needed to walk in step with “the party-line” or you could face scrutiny or even termination. He talked about it as if it was enforced by a totalitarian regime out of Stalinist Russia. Matthew said, “You could get labeled as dangerous for your ideas, making you a target.”
The legalism stemmed from a lack of trust in new ideas. Some members of the administration, senior faculty, and the board of trustees, Matthew alleged, tended to distrust modern scholarship and promoted an anti-intellectualism and dogmatism on campus. This anti-intellectualism had a powerful grip on the campus community and many of the students. Social harm was often the classic rationale for such censorship. These new ideas could possibly poison the minds of innocent students and potentially undermine their faith in God and as result they should not even be explored or introduced into the curriculum or classroom. If you questioned long held denominational doctrines in class it could lead students to doubt their belief system and even their faith in Christ. Ideas can be revolutionary and transformative and legalists know this and will always attempt to suppress new mental models. New ideas challenge longstanding beliefs and disrupt the hold of tyrannies.

Matthew felt it was necessary to give some history on why he believed the campus culture was so legalistic. This was clearly his interpretation and he admitted to the researcher a degree of bias. His biased stemmed from the fact that he had recently been laid off by the seminary. He explained that the seminary had had a long theological tradition going back to the early 1900s. This theological tradition was reactive to liberal and modern movements within theological and biblical studies. These movements favored science over the Bible and as a result, many within the seminary’s past and present leadership tended to favor a kind of separatism, which meant they would separate themselves from society, retreating from associating with groups, even other Christian denominations, who did not agree with their particular religious doctrines. This distrust of others or “xenophobia,” also manifested itself in a distrust of new ideas and certainly a distrust of anyone on the faculty who would disagree with
commonly held assumptions or the “party-line.” Matthew also said this atmosphere of distrust limited the free exchange of ideas on campus and the diversity of views that could be addressed in the classroom and in graduate forums. He said it had limited his ability as an instructor to get his students to think critically and to question commonly held assumptions. There were just some issues that you did not bring up in class or write about in articles. You knew, “not to go there.”

Jeremiah also believed that the exploration of diverse ideas was related to the concept of academic freedom. He believed that the right to explore diverse ideas was “inherently Christian.” He remarked that God is not distraught when Christians hold different views and disagreements arise in the faith community. When these views are expressed with integrity and virtue and debated with civility and deference, arguments about various issues teach us a great deal not only about different forms of knowledge but about how to treat others who do not hold to the same notions of God as we do. We learn to love people, different from us, which is at the heart of the gospel of Christ. It is easy to love those who agree with you but more difficult to love those who do not. It goes back Christ’s mandate to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you or where the scriptures tell us to learn to live at peace with everyone.

Jeremiah maintained that what you do not want in a seminary or community of faith is a naïve or insipid uniformity where students and faculty are not permitted or even required to defend their worldviews. The researcher asked Matthew what he meant by the use of the word “required.” He commented that many of the anti-intellectual faculty members in his seminary felt as if it was not necessary to defend their views because they felt as if they possessed a superior knowledge on “loan from God.” To question them was to essentially question the Bible
itself. He went on to say that everyone should be forced to defend his or her ideas. It is the challenge to your ideas, by those who disagree with you, that often forces you to develop more sophisticated arguments to justify them. He added that a dialogue about a diversity of opinions over which there is significant disagreement also pushes the conversation forward in the collective quest for knowledge. A seminary should be a place where both the faculty and the students are free to explore ideas and arrive at truth together. The search for truth is not an individual search but a collective social search truth. Human beings construct and understand truth together. This development of truth only happens in an atmosphere of openness and tolerance.

Adam also commented on academic freedom and the exploration of a diversity of views using the phrase “tolerance for divergent views” to describe the phenomenon. Adam’s perceptions of tolerance were somewhat different from those of Matthew and Jeremiah as they were shaped by his experiences teaching in a state university for several years. In fact, he still teaches at this institution as an adjunct. Adam commented that there is not always as much academic freedom on the other side as one might think.

Adam confessed that he did not feel comfortable talking about his religious beliefs in his classroom on the state university campus. He talked about how the department in which he teaches at this university is considered to be radically “left-leaning” when it comes to social and political thought. Most of the full-time faculty members would be classified as progressives and socialists. Some are radical feminists and Marxists, which results in an anti-religious sentiment within the department. Adam observed that while he is socially and politically progressive to some degree and often in agreement with many of the faculty on social and political issues, he
knows that his more conservative religious views would be considered radical and unwelcomed if presented or advocated in the classroom. When asked what particular religious views would be considered radical he responded his view that the Bible was the Word of God. This belief would not be viewed favorably. Many intellectuals see the Bible as a text of terror and a source of intolerance. It is ironic that there is such intolerance towards Christians. The researcher asked Adam if he believed that the Bible is a dangerous text of terror and he responded, “in some cases the Bible has been mishandled and misapplied.”

But there is a form of political correctness on this secular university campus that stifles academic freedom and puts considerable restraint on faculty members who do not “fit the mold” of the current thinking on campus or the current trends within their department. Adam, who appeared to be an open-minded individual, talked about an anti-religious bias that pervaded the state university in which he taught. He regretted that he has not found an institution in which he could teach without some level of restraint in regards to his position on religious subjects, whether that was at a state institution or seminary. Ironically, religious views are suppressed in both secular institutions as well as in seminaries. True academic freedom is found nowhere except in the naïve minds of scholars.

**Summary on Describing Academic Freedom**

In summary, the participants stated the following in regards to how they described and attached meaning to the concept of academic freedom:

- The participants agreed that academic freedom was a nebulous concept and even brilliant scholars have difficulty describing it concretely. While it is a slippery term, the
participants were able to attach metaphors to it in very meaningful ways throughout the interviews.

- The participants associated academic freedom with the right to question established patterns of thinking. This right was necessary to keep society and the church from falling into patterns of ignorance and tradition.

- Academic freedom was also related to notions of tolerance and intellectual diversity in regards to ideas and worldviews. A seminary needs to be a place where views, even views contrary to the Christian faith, can be explored and considered. Legalism and dogmatism can be a threat to the free exchange of ideas on a seminary campus.

- Academic freedom is not only restrained at religious institutions but there exists an anti-religious bias at some state institutions where certain religious ideas are not welcomed into the classroom.

The Threats to Academic Freedom

This superordinate theme represents the perceived threats to academic freedom at this research site. The researcher had no specific questions planned to prompt the discussion of threats but allowed the threats to emerge naturally when brought up by the participants. The participants articulated many threats to academic freedom but the most salient threats resulted in the development of the following two sub-themes. The sub-themes were the Big “L” and It’s Not the Administration.
The Big “L” Stands for Liberal

The threat of being labeled a “liberal” reoccurred thematically throughout the narratives. Adam referred to it as the Big “L” and remarked:

When it comes to theology and it comes to church practice, if someone accuses you of being liberal, they’re essentially saying you are not a part of the denomination any more or in some way that you are not a Christian.

Adam explained that in general the word liberal, in his denomination, referred to someone who did not hold to a fundamentalist view of biblical inerrancy. When the researcher asked him to define what this term meant he responded that it was the belief that the Bible, in its original form, was without error. Adam explained the history behind inerrancy as a doctrine. He was proficient at explaining historical theology and you see why he was an effective instructor. In the late 1800’s many biblical scholars and theologians began to apply the assumptions of the scientific method to the study of scripture. This led to a great amount of scrutiny about certain components of the Bible and many begin to reject the claim that the Bible was without error or had a supernatural origination. Passages of the Bible such as Noah’s flood, the six days of creation, and the existence of a real Adam and Eve were considered legendary rather than historical. Additionally, supernatural events, called miracles or signs, were also considered legends, including the miracles of Jesus. The resurrection, the central miracle of the early Christians and apostles, was also doubted and in many cases denied as historical. Miracles were considered unscientific.
Adam went on to explain that the scholars who rejected inerrancy were labeled as liberals and they started their own seminaries while those who accepted inerrancy started theirs. The liberal seminaries were usually associated with the mainline denominations and the inerrantist seminaries were associated with what is now called the evangelical denominations. Adam explained that his seminary was started during this period of higher criticism of the Bible. Another seminary within the Church of Christ denomination “went liberal” and several professors left and started their own seminary. They did it to “protect the faith” from the onslaught of liberalism. When asked if his seminary was a fundamentalist seminary Adam commented, “it has its roots in that tradition and the faculty, it is assumed, all hold to the same notion of biblical inerrancy and will defend this doctrine.” Adam added that the confessional statement of his seminary, which faculty must sign, has as one of its central doctrines, biblical inerrancy. Inerrancy was a big issue in this seminary.

Adam explained that the word “liberal” is a potent word within the denomination and its seminaries. One should never underestimate its power. He recounted an experience that best captured the power of the “L” word.

The time where I realized the extent or the influence of this particular word, the “L” word, is when I was recruiting for the institution. I recruited for the seminary, before I was a faculty member, and went to a college in Missouri that was a very conservative school, ultra-conservative school. The school held to what I would call an ugly conservatism, very much comfortable with tearing other people down and so on.

Adam described that he had set up a display on the campus that had books by some of the faculty from his seminary. One of the books was a book on the Historical Jesus. The book was
quite controversial when it was published and the faculty member who had authored it had become kind of a lightning rod within the denomination. Adam continued:

I had a student who came and looked at our display and walked up to it and the first thing he picked up was that book. Right away, he said, “Do you know this guy,” and started asking questions about him. At some point in the conversation the student says, “Well, he’s a liberal.” I asked, “What do you mean by that?” He said, “He’s a liberal.” He couldn’t say any more about it. He wouldn’t define what that term meant. He just kept saying he’s liberal as if that was conclusive. It was as if I say he’s a liberal that means something conclusive. I assume by the way he was saying it that means he’s not a Christian, he’s not orthodox and he is not one of us.

The researcher observed that this was the second time Adam associated being labeled a liberal with being ostracized from his denomination. This was an apparent concern to Adam. Getting the Big “L” label was the equivalent of being excommunicated from the church. You were a Galileo in a sense. The denomination had no room for liberals and they were to be shunned and dis-fellowshipped. This threat of excommunication appeared to be an even bigger threat to Adam than losing his job as a faculty member. Adam mentioned that his personal and spiritual identity was deeply tied to being a member of his denomination and this went beyond his position as a faculty member. He indicated he had been raised in this denomination and his religious identity was forever tied to being a part of this group. To be labeled a liberal would result in a spiritual isolation.
Jeremiah indicated that he had experienced firsthand being labeled a liberal. He actually survived what he later called a “witch hunt.” In this case, one could call it a “liberal hunt.” Jeremiah recounted an occasion where he was asked to appear before the academic affairs committee of the board of trustees concerning some complaints people were raising about a single paragraph in an article that he had written about four or five years earlier. All it takes is for one constituent to misinterpret a few lines of what you have written to get you in trouble. The specific issue Jeremiah was up against was related to the authorship and historical integrity of one of the books of the New Testament. They were concerned about his views on the authorship of that book and the origins of that book.

The underlying issue with the complaints went back to the aforementioned doctrine of biblical inerrancy because questioning the authorship of certain books in the Bible was something that many liberal scholars had done and as a result some external constituents questioned whether Jeremiah was a liberal who secretly denied inerrancy. One person, who was a strict fundamentalist graduate of the seminary, wrote a letter to the president about the short statement in Jeremiah’s article. Jeremiah indicated this was in a context where the president was being pressured a great deal by some factions, some more fundamentalist elements of the constituency, to basically fire the entire department Jeremiah was in and start over because the department contained some faculty members who were considered liberals, even though they had all signed a confessional statement acknowledging their belief in the veracity and inspiration of the Bible.

In the context of that departmental scrutiny, Jeremiah was asked by the president to appear before the academic affairs committee of the trustees to settle this matter and to alleviate
their concerns. The letter had been sent not only to the president but also to some of the trustees. Jeremiah commented that the president’s intention in doing this was to simply put an end to that kind of criticism by having the trustees talk to me directly, rather than hearing about it through another channel. Jeremiah reflected on these events and commented:

At the time I perceived it as highly coercive, because I work in an institution that has no tenure. Any kind of investigation of that kind can readily lead to immediate termination, because you have zero protection. In point of fact, it turned into an ugly affair, because a number of students found out about this. They began to raise protests against this action on the part of the president.

The researcher asked Jeremiah about how this incident has affected his research and he remarked that it has had “a lingering on-going effect on my considerations about some of my publishing.” Jeremiah said he coped with the threat by simply refusing to consider certain topics he knew would be perceived to be dangerous to his career and employment. He reflected that his main concern was to avoid creating controversy and disgrace for the school but personal economic concerns were also prominent.

If I was terminated on the grounds of unorthodoxy, that would obviously impact my hire-ability if I were to get a job … I'm an ordained minister, so to get a job in a church with the climate of higher education right now, it's very difficult to get jobs in my field. If I lost my job here over that, it could take me a year or more to find another job.
It’s Not the Administration, It’s the Students

This sub-theme was developed from the references the participants made to the pervasive threat they perceived coming from sources outside the administration. In particular, all the participants identified that a substantial threat came from students both present and former. Jeremiah commented that he had not experienced a significant threat coming directly from the academic administration in recent years and had even felt that many administrators were on his side. He commented that the administration pays very little attention to what he publishes and this might be part of the reason. Most administrators do not read his books or articles. They are too busy or uninterested.

Jeremiah reported that in more recent years threats have increasingly come indirectly through the administration from students on campus or former students. These students have levied serious accusations in regards to his orthodoxy. They have even questioned his salvation at times. Jeremiah believed that because students have a lot of power they would sometimes use this power to wage war against faculty members with whom they disagree or perceive to be out of step with the party line. On occasion students will even pit faculty members against him by complaining about him to them. Some faculty members are eager to turn against him and the student provides the ammunition. So the threat comes from the student through faculty.

Faculty members, in my experience, do not go to the administrators with this information from students and say, “This person teaches this thing that is unorthodox.” Where it will manifest itself is in the ways that some faculty members treat other faculty members, the
way that some faculty members would review their peers, not just personally, but even in formal review processes.

Jeremiah remarked that he has had some ongoing battles with former students who have tried to label him as a liberal. Some have called for his termination and mounted public campaigns against him. The difficulties he has run into with these students relate to their attempts to interpret his views on points that are significant to them in terms of faith. Jeremiah gave an example of one student who has campaigned against him:

Right now, one of my former students has an Internet blog that is basically dedicated to refuting my teachings, because he views them as dangerous. He views a lot of my research on early Christian tradition and its formation as unorthodox and in his view dangerous.

The researcher asked Jeremiah which aspects of his teachings were perceived to be dangerous by this student. Jeremiah responded that it was his theoretical approach to the formation of the Gospels and of other early Christian literature. In his research he appeals heavily to social science models and particularly to collective memory theory to aid in the understanding of the biblical text. This student interprets that those theoretical models inherently eliminate the possibility of holding a high view or inerrant of Scripture. Jeremiah believes that what happens is that this student takes an element of the seminary’s statement of faith regarding inerrancy and then interprets what he considers to be implications of the research through the lens of that particular theological issue of inerrancy. What is ironic is that Jeremiah has never
written a single paragraph in any of his publications about the issue of inerrancy. He rarely uses the word inerrancy.

Matthew also described the threat that comes from students. He articulated why students can be a substantial threat to academic freedom in his context. It relates to a lack of tenure and also to the seminary’s business model. When students make complaints about faculty members they are taken seriously by the administration because the administration aims to please students, since it is so dependent on their tuition. Matthew commented that the seminary and its related college have experienced deep financial problems in recent years as a result of declining enrollment. In fact, the day that the interview took place with Matthew; the seminary and its college announced another round of layoffs that included several faculty members. As a result, student evaluations of faculty, both formal and informal hold a lot of weight and since faculty do not have tenure, all it takes is the just the right complaint from the right student and it can lead to your termination. Both Jeremiah and Matthew gave an example of the same faculty member who was recently terminated because some more legalistically minded students made a complaint to the dean about a few statements he made at an academic conference held on campus. The administration officially stated that the termination was a result of cost cutting measures but there was little doubt among the other faculty that students had raised concerns about his orthodoxy and this contributed to his termination.

Adam also reflected upon his awareness of the potential problems students can generate for faculty when it comes to teaching. He remarked that he always questioned who his students were and what kind of connections they have and what kind of networks they have. He too
articulated that students, in the current financial environment, hold a lot of power. He gave an example of how he operationalizes this within his classroom.

I’m in a situation right now where I’ve had the same student for three classes in a row. He goes to a very conservative rural Church of Christ. I’m immediately in my head questioning, who’s his minister, who does his minister know, how well is he connected to a trustee or other faculty members or to the president of the school? If I say something in this class that this guy really disagrees with and thinks that I’m falling off the side of orthodoxy does he have the ability through his connections for that to get back to the administration where I would get questioned?

Adam admitted that he makes it a point to get to know each of his students, not just for pedagogical reasons, but to get an idea of where the problem student or students might be. He “sizes-up” his classroom. There are some courses, depending on the make-up of students, where he feels less restricted to explore diverse ideas and then there are other courses where he knows, based on the student make-up, to remain silent, less he get in trouble.

Adam added that he and many other faculty members live constantly with the fear that if they say the wrong thing in a class it could possibly mean the end of their careers at the school. He recalled a conversation he had with another faculty member one night after a class and the professor said to him, “I know for sure that tonight was the night. I know I said something and I’m getting fired for this.” Both Adam and Jeremiah reflected upon the same frustration of working under the pressure that if they said something in class it would be misconstrued as being
out of step with the party line and they would be categorized as a liberal. Or even worse, they could be out of job the next morning. This was a real possibility in Adam’s view.

**Summary on the Threats to Academic Freedom**

In summary, the following themes emerged in regards to the perceived threats to academic freedom:

- The participants described the threat of being labeled as a liberal and the consequences that could possibly result from the labeling. Participants described vivid experiences they have had in regards to the way the word is used in their seminary and denomination. One participant shared being forced into a hearing with the board of trustees to defend himself against claims that he was a liberal. This event has had a negative long-term psychological impact on his publishing and teaching. He also used the term coercive to describe the situation and felt as if his job was in jeopardy. He has since taken some topics off the table for the fear of termination.

- The liberal label is usually given to individuals who reportedly disavow a doctrine known as Biblical inerrancy that holds the Bible to be literally true. The charge of being a liberal is usually based on someone’s subjective perception of what a faculty member has written or taught in regards to the doctrine of inerrancy.

- The term liberal is a real and powerful word in this particular seminary and its affiliated denomination. The participants described the unpleasant consequences of being labeled a liberal. The consequences include termination, excommunication from the denomination, and even spiritual isolation.
Two participants shared their view that students, both current and former, and not the administration pose the more substantial threat to their academic freedom. One participant shared that he has a former student who has started an Internet blog refuting his teachings, because he views them as dangerous. Another participant recollected a conversation he had with another professor who was concerned that he had said something in his class that evening that would lead to his termination. The faculty members lived with the constant anxiety of having a student misinterpret something they have said in class.

The Confessional Statement

This superordinate theme exemplifies the responses participants made in regards to the way they perceived that the confessional statement of faith influenced their teaching and research. There was also much discussion about how the confessional statement works within the culture and structure of the institution. The most salient and common refrains resulted in the development of the following two sub-themes. The sub-themes were Institutional Identity and Broadness.

Institutional Identity

All three participants, when asked, indicated that seminaries and religious institutions reserved the right to require faculty members to sign a confessional statement of faith because it defined the institution. The participants argued essentially that the statement allowed the denomination and the churches to maintain control of its academic institutions so that together they could further the religious mission of the faith community and that mission was tied directly
to a series of doctrines or beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, the nature of man, and the conditions for salvation. The statement of faith reflected the beliefs of the larger faith community. So the participants seemed to agree that it was an important document in their seminary.

Matthew talked about how the statement gave the institution an identity and differentiated it from other types of academic institutions. It also reflected something about importance of the religious belief system held by constituents or stakeholders associated with the institution. These are important beliefs to these constituents and seminaries help to uphold and preserve them for future generations.

Jeremiah had the most to say about how the confessional statement functioned in the seminary. He believed that the function of the statement of faith was to give faculty members, administrators, and students a parameter and common point of dialogue in talking about the institution's values or the institutions “position” on certain key issues. Jeremiah said,

For example, if I were to publish or to teach something that someone said is contrary to the school's statement of faith, any attorney could readily call up ten academic experts who would say, “No, what that individual teaches is in fact in compliance with the statement of faith.” The statement is not legally powerful, but rather becomes a talking point for the school's identity, a theological and ideological identity.

Jeremiah argued that the seminary had an ethical obligation to maintain its confessional tradition and as a result the confessional statement of faith should be preserved in its current form. He expressed that in a religious confessional seminary the administrators and faculty members have an obligation to serve the constituencies of the institution by maintaining an
adherence to the statement. Donors give money to support these institutions and students pay tuition to come to these institutions. In purchasing they have a right to expect a certain product. If someone is going to give money in support of a school, they have a right to expect that the school operate within the ideological parameters they want to support.

If a student comes and pays money to take a course, expecting a certain ideological parameter, they should receive what they anticipated. Now many students are always learning new things, but I'm saying, if they have a general expectation about, I chose this school because it operates in this ideological frame, then to do something outside that frame, I would consider this to be unethical because that's a bait and switch. It's not what they expected.

So there is a balancing act from Jeremiah’s point of view. There is a tension between unrestricted academic freedom on one end and institutional limitations on the other. In other words, faculty members need to be given the ability to discover new knowledge and challenge outdated ways of thinking but at the same time there must be a consideration of and respect for the institution’s mission and its larger identity and its overall ideological branding. If the seminary embarked on a strategy of no longer serving its constituent community, which many seminaries have, they will die or they will cease to be vital. Jeremiah expressed that as a faculty member it is a question of balancing your own interpretation of the confession with the demands of academic rigor over against the constituency that you're serving. There are individual and institutional considerations and factors at play. It is quite complicated.
**Broadness**

When asked to describe the key characteristics of the confessional statement used in the seminary, Matthew commented that the statement at his seminary was “extremely broad.” The researcher asked Matthew what he meant by the word “broad.” He responded that it was a very general statement of faith and did not address many of the issues he called “hot button” issues at the seminary and within the denomination. For example, it did not deal with the issue of women in ministry, which was an issue all three participants mentioned without being prompted. Other issues of controversy not covered in the statement of faith were contemporary moral issues such as gay marriage, homosexuality, and abortion. Other controversial issues human origins such as evolution, the age of the earth, and interpretations of Genesis were not included either.

Matthew emphasized that just because the confessional statement did not address these issues it did not mean the faculty had the liberty to express whatever they wanted to on these topics. The confessional statement was not comprehensive enough and so other informal measures of religious control were used to keep faculty in check. Matthew explained that it was the informal and unwritten doctrines that truly restricted academic freedom. These inherited beliefs were not encoded in a document to be found anywhere on campus but rather they were stealthily embedded in the organization’s DNA. Jeremiah agreed with Matthew that “the actual restrictions are not always overt and they are often implicit.” A faculty member had to be in tune with the seminary’s culture to see that there was indeed a position on these issues. It was just expected that if you were a faculty member in this institution, you would not believe in or promote gay marriage, alternative lifestyles, or abortion. Matthew commented:
The phrase was used whether it be in an academic setting or a social setting, if you wanted to say or discuss something, the phrase that was used was, "That’s not who we are." Let me give you a social example. Some students wanted to have a dance. The president said, "We’re not going to do that. That’s not who we are." Even though there was no regulation against it from a Christian perspective, nothing in the student handbook or faculty statement against it, that’s how that situation was handled. That is not who we are.

The researcher returned Matthew to the issue of women serving in ministry and how the institution could hold a faculty member to a position that was not formally spelled out in a confessional statement. How did this work? Matthew expressed that the administration and trustees would “draw the line” not openly in any confessional statement but that it was “just understood” that the institution’s stance was that women were not allowed to be ordained ministers. It was unwritten dogma. Women enrolled in the seminary’s Masters of Divinity program were not allowed to take preaching courses because “women could not be preachers.” Women were required to take another public speaking course in place of preaching. When asked if most of the faculty agreed with the exclusion of women in this way, Matthew said, some of the faculty agreed and some did not, but it was not up for debate or discussion. Matthew expressed that “on our campus you were not really allowed to question whether women could be in ministry, because there was an understanding of what we, as an institution, believed about women in ministry. So there was a certain expectation that ‘this is what the party line is.’”

Matthew continued to emphasize that these controversial doctrines were found nowhere in a contractual document like a statement faith. They would not be in the faculty handbook or
the employee manual either. Someone new who came to campus as a faculty member would soon find out by way of the grapevine or informally or maybe even in an informal meeting with their supervisor or someone within the administrative chain that "this is what we believe and teach about women in ministry or abortion or gay marriage." Matthew explained that such doctrinal positions were found in the campus atmosphere and in the minds of the senior administration and the senior faculty members. It is a part of who the leaders were. It was a reflection of their core beliefs. These beliefs are found in the president's cabinet and in all the members of the cabinet. Matthew indicated that they would not be in those positions if they did not adhere to “the party line.” Matthew commented:

You just could not step outside of those informal boundaries. What will be interesting to watch at this particular institution as some of the senior faculty and administrators retire will be if the younger faculty members don't adhere to "the party line." It could be very interesting as to how the milieu of the seminary is changed.

The researcher probed the other participants to see if there were any concerns about the statement of faith and its ability to limit their academic freedom but not one of the participants expressed much concern about the actual statement itself and its power. It was just too broad. Jeremiah remarked that the statement was “useless from a legal standpoint” and he felt confident that he had the theological sophistication to work around the specifics of the formal statement. He also used the word “vague” to describe the statement. Adam did not appear concerned either about the vagueness. He even admitted that while he had signed the statement several times he could not recite any line verbatim from the statement.
Both Adam and Jeremiah were in agreement with Matthew that it was the informal way that these issues were administered, brokered, and interpreted that were of concern to them or that could pose potential danger. Adam called the issues not in the statement, “gray matters.” Jeremiah said that stances on these issues were a part of the “received tradition” of the seminary and you had to receive them by being a part of the denomination or the seminary culture over the years. You learned by osmosis what these stances were.

Jeremiah indicated that there had been a move in recent years to solidify the institution’s stance on some of these “gray matters” that were not covered in the confessional statement. At a faculty meeting, earlier in the year, an administrator proposed that a group of faculty members be commissioned to write a 20 page white paper on the issue of human sexuality and in particular homosexuality. There were a great many concerns expressed by the faculty in doing this, one of which was that there would be a lack of clarity on how faculty would be held accountable for teaching in accordance with such a long and complex document. Human sexuality is a complicated issue, even in the Bible and the administration might be surprised by the lack of consensus on some of these issues.

Summary on the Confessional Statement

In summary, the following themes emerged in regards to the participants’ perceptions of the confessional statement:

- The participants agreed that a seminary has a right to maintain a confessional statement of faith and require faculty members to adhere to it. The statement of faith reflected the beliefs of the larger faith community of which the seminary served.
• The statement of faith is not legally powerful, but rather it becomes a point of reference for dialoging about the school’s theological and ideological identity.

• The seminary has an ethical obligation to preserve its confessional tradition and as a result the confessional statement of faith should be preserved in its current form and remain unchanged. Administrators and faculty members have a responsibility to serve the constituencies of the seminary by maintaining a general adherence to the statement.

• The statement of faith is extremely broad and does address many modern controversial topics such as women in the ministry, gay marriage, human sexuality, or abortion. Faculty, however, are not free to express their views on these issues, but rather informal forces limit and restrict what faculty can teach and believe on these subjects. The actual positions on these matters that faculty were supposed to support were found in the campus atmosphere and in the minds of the senior administration and the senior faculty members. Some efforts have even been made by the administration to solidify the institution’s position on these issues by writing white papers on these matters.

**Conclusion**

This chapter described the findings of an IPA of transcribed data from three semi-structured interviews with seminary faculty regarding their perceptions and lived experiences with academic freedom. The analysis resulted in the identification of three superordinate themes and seven sub-themes illustrating how the participants made sense of and attached meaning to the concept of academic freedom in their roles as seminary faculty members.
The participants generally made strong references to the essentiality of academic freedom though they admitted it was a difficult concept to define. They also perceived there to be a corrosion of academic freedom in many seminaries and colleges associated with their denomination, including their own institution, and identified specific threats to academic freedom that contributed to this corrosion. Additionally, all three participants described ways in which they had personally experienced direct or indirect restrictions to their teaching and research and how they had been negatively impacted by these experiences. They also described the broadness of the confessional statement in their institution and how it was open to many interpretations. This created a set of strong informal forces limiting and restricting what they can teach and believe on many subjects, including subjects not directly addressed in the formal confessional statement.

A discussion of these findings will be the focus of the chapter that follows. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the major salient themes with an emphasis on how they support and contribute to the research literature on academic freedom, as well as, the significance of these findings, and the possible implications for the higher educational community and specifically seminaries and religious institutions.
Chapter 5 – Discussion of the Research Findings

This interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) aimed to deeply understand how faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom. One central research question was used to guide the researcher in his investigation of the phenomenon: “How do faculty members at a Church of Christ seminary make sense of and attach meaning to the concept of academic freedom?”

Three salient super-ordinate themes that emerged from this study are 1) Describing Academic Freedom, 2) The Threats to Academic Freedom, and 3) The Confessional Statement. What follows is a discussion of these themes with a focus on how they support and contribute to the research literature on academic freedom, the significance and limitations of the findings, and the possible implications for the educational community.

Describing Academic Freedom

In regards to the nebulous nature of academic freedom the participants generally described academic freedom as a difficult concept to define or describe with any measure of precision. They articulated its importance and acknowledged its essentiality in higher education but they openly struggled to give a readily well-formed or succinct description of academic freedom. This finding confirms the consensus of opinion on the nebulous nature of academic freedom within both the legal and professional literature (Bryne, 1989; Bligh 1982; Kaplin & Lee, 2007 & Sweezy & Ross, 2011). While academic freedom can be generally defined and discussed, arriving at a specific and normative definition is difficult and virtually impossible. The participants in this study were experienced professionals in higher education, holding
doctorates in their fields, and yet they were unable to clearly define it. They are not alone as it
appears even those in the legal professions have yet to fully arrive at a clear legal definition.
Byrne (1989) has expressed a view that a unified legal definition of academic freedom does not
exist and the norms surrounding it are found loosely defined in the legal decisions handed down
by the courts (Kaplin & Lee, 2007).

This suggests that a primary problem in establishing, protecting, and defending academic
freedom in a seminary is that a succinct and normative definition is difficult to form. How can
something be protected when you do not know exactly what it is you are protecting? Bligh
(1982) has observed, “Everyone seems to agree that academic freedom should be defended, but
there is little agreement or clarity about what it is. Unless we know what it is and can justify it,
we will neither defend it convincingly nor exercise it responsibly” (p. 10). In other words, there
is a practical perplexity concerning how academic freedom should be administered and brokered
in society and in educational institutions because many experts can agree that academic freedom
is important and should be defended but they struggle to properly define or describe what it is
that should be defended. In religious higher educational institutions, where religious control
documents are legally binding, the matter of academic freedom becomes even more complex. If
we combine the nebulous nature of academic freedom with a vaguely written confessional
statement of faith we have the perfect recipe for confusion and conflict.

The difficulty in defining academic freedom has implications for faculty members in
seminaries in that they ought to be cautioned about assuming a definitive right to individual
academic freedom when such a right might not exist in any real way either professionally within
their institution or legally within the court system. Standler (2000) has written, “My concern is
that professors in the United States may believe that academic freedom is a valid legal doctrine with power and vitality, when – in fact – it is often only empty rhetoric by professors and lawyers” (p. 1). This imprecise nature of academic freedom combined with a vague religious confessional statement of faith in seminaries can lead to a great deal of uncertainty when it comes to the way academic freedom is administered and brokered in their institution. Faculty members in most seminaries should concede that they are extremely vulnerable to the various threats to academic freedom conveyed in this study and by other scholars. In other words, seminary faculty members need not live in denial about the uncertainty of their right to academic freedom because it may not exist in a real way. It is almost impossible to predict how a court might rule in regards to an individual academic freedom case. Faculty members ought not be overconfident that a court will rule in their favor.

This should also serve as an admonition to potential faculty members of seminaries and other religious institutions, upon their hiring, to carefully review the mission statement, confessional statement of faith, and the academic freedom policy of the institution to which they have applied (Diekema, 2000). Potential seminary candidates should also be discouraged from accepting a faculty position at a seminary whose mission statement and confessional statement of faith contain items that are obviously contrary or inconsistent with their own belief system. These religious control documents have real power and can greatly impact their career and even their personal wellbeing. Candidates for positions in a seminary should not disregard them or minimize their significance when considering a job offer.

The researcher would also encourage current seminary faculty members to be able to provide a well-crafted personal definition of academic freedom. It should be an issue about
which they have thought deeply. They should also be able to articulate its significance to themselves and their fellow colleagues (Diekema, 2000). Hillier (1989) has written that “too few academics have given the concept [of academic freedom] much thought” and have a rather superficial and “muddled idea of what it means” (p. 117). Faculty members should also be encouraged to take the time to appreciate how academic freedom is applied both formally and informally within their seminary. Each faculty member would also be sensible to memorize the confessional statement of faith or at the very least intimately familiarize themselves with its specifics. An alarming concern the researcher had, following the interviews in this study, was that two of the participants openly acknowledged that they were not aware of the specific points covered in the confessional statement of faith they had signed and two participants even acknowledged that they were not familiar with the institution’s academic freedom statement found in the faculty handbook.

There are implications also for academic administrators and leaders of seminaries in this finding. Diekema (2000) recommends to leaders of seminaries and religious colleges that they create a committee on their campus, whose mission would be to define academic freedom for their institution. This committee would also promote an understanding of the principles of academic freedom according to this definition and see to its protection for faculty, administrators, and students. This committee would also campaign to purge the campus of the various threats to academic freedom mentioned in this study (pp. 82-83). This committee could also serve to hear cases involving the violation of academic freedom amongst faculty.

While academic freedom was described as a nebulous concept, the participants were able to attach some common descriptors to it. Each participant associated academic freedom with
social and ecclesiastical progress and specifically with the right to question established patterns of thinking within the church and society. Academic freedom is absolutely necessary to protect scholars who question dogma, ideologies, and theories. A society that has higher education institutions, including seminaries, without academic freedom is a society dedicated to the uncritical perpetuation of dogma. The freedom to question or to be skeptical of arguments was the most commonly salient theme mentioned by the participants in regards to describing and defining academic freedom.

This emphasis placed by the study’s participants on the freedom to question commonly held assumptions and established patterns of thinking, including religious ones, can be traced to several points within the literature on the history of academic freedom. It finds its origins in the trial of Socrates, considered the first violation of academic freedom in Western Civilization. Socrates’ trial is captured in Plato’s writings. The trial of Socrates began with his challenger Meletus, who asserted before the Archon, a state official with predominantly religious duties, that Socrates was speaking against the gods of Athens. The Archon subpoenaed Socrates to appear before a jury of Athenian citizens, to answer charges of corrupting the youth of Athens and questioning the existence of the Athenian gods. Socrates was eventually sentenced to drink poison for casting doubt upon religious dogma he found to be philosophically questionable (Sullivan, 1971).

The freedom to question established patterns of thinking also finds its roots in the Protestant Reformation of Martin Luther. Luther’s reformation originally was not an organized attempt to create a new church or to generate new theological knowledge but rather it was a criticism of what he perceived to be inaccurate truths perpetuated by the Roman Catholic Church
(Kittelson, 1986). Luther was questioning dogma. Hillerbrand (2009) has argued that Luther, in posting his famous 95 Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Church, did not have a goal of standing up to the Church, but saw the document as a scholarly objection to the Church’s theology. The Church’s attempt to silence Luther can be seen as violation of his academic freedom but Luther was not attempting to generate new knowledge but simply exercise the divinely granted right to question religious authority and dogma (Hendrix, 1974).

The freedom to question is also uncovered in the Cartesian philosophical method of doubt. This method of critical analysis, proposed by the French philosopher and mathematician, Rene Descartes, begins from a position of skepticism in which the researcher must put aside his pre-defined ideas. As Descartes wrote:

> The first of these [rules] was never to accept anything as true if I did not have evident knowledge of its truth; that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions, and to include nothing more in my judgments than what presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I had no occasion to doubt it (Descartes, Cottingham, Stoothoff & Murdoch, 1987, p. 120).

This indicates that the responsibility of seminary faculty members is not to merely indoctrinate their students with religious dogma, but rather their responsibility is to educate and train students to become critical thinkers who themselves are able to question and analyze ideas. Dogmas are typically imparted and absorbed by students in an unthinking and indiscriminate manner. This is what distinguishes indoctrination from education. Education is concerned with producing critical thinkers who arrive at rational and reasonable conclusions based upon
evidence and argumentation. This is exactly why academic freedom is indispensable to seminary education because this sort of critical emphasis and orientation is only possible in a seminary if there is a freedom to exercise a healthy suspicion of dogma and other beliefs (Fessel, 2006).

Academic administrators and leaders of seminaries should also be reminded that there is a relationship between the protection of academic freedom and the formation of an educational environment where critical thinking thrives. Academic freedom is necessary not just so faculty members can organize and structure their research and teaching but so they can enable students to acquire the critical thinking skills they will need to contribute to society and the church. Academic freedom continues to be debated in many seminaries and religious institutions, although critical thinking, a product of academic freedom, is the chief sign of higher learning. Most academic administrators in seminaries would concur that critical thinking is a desired outcome for all of their students but if they restrict faculty in the critical analysis of controversial ideas they will indirectly restrict their students’ ability to think critically. In restricting academic freedom, administrators are essentially telling their faculty to stop thinking about certain subjects, discouraging them from introducing and debating these subjects in their classrooms. According to Fessel (2006) debating controversial subjects is essential to the development of critical thinking in the classroom:

Critical thinking enjoys almost universal support, except when applied to controversial topics. Yet it is these topics that are often the most effective initiators of critical thinking exercises that improve students’ rational approaches to challenging problems. The use of controversial issues to promote critical thinking requires an institutional commitment to academic freedom in order to survive (p. 51).
Society and the church benefits when students are provided opportunities to think critically about controversial issues. Academic freedom helps to insure that faculty members are protected when they introduce these issues that invite critical thinking.

Another result associated academic freedom with intellectual diversity. A seminary ought to be an open arena of ideas where views, even views contrary to the Christian faith, can be explored and considered. Academic freedom insured that diverse views could be explored without the threat of punishment. One discovery indicated that legalism or dogmatism were significant threats to this free exchange of ideas on the seminary’s campus.

This helped to confirm Diekema’s (2000) framework on the threats to academic freedom and specifically the role that dogmatism plays in obstructing intellectual diversity. Dogmatism is an enemy of academic freedom. While the study of the psychological and social phenomenon of dogmatism is outside the realm of this particular study, this suggests that an area of possible further research could be an investigation into the way dogmatism functions within the culture of a seminary. Another possible area of research might be to measure the prevalence of dogmatism within a seminary or religious institution in order to predict the level or amount of academic freedom present. Johnson (2010) has recently identified 13 features of what she calls the dogmatic personality trait that become developmental factors shaping its trajectory in individuals. Other psychological measurements of dogmatism exist such as Rokeach’s (1960) Dogmatism Scale that tests his loosely organized features of dogmatism in individuals. These instruments might be employed by scholars to measure the degree of dogmatism within a seminary setting giving insight into the unique manifestations of dogmatic belief within their
context. Higher rates of dogmatism might indicate to what degree academic freedom would exist within a particular seminary.

This is a critical finding for academic administrators of seminaries who desire to promote and protect academic freedom and intellectual diversity on their campuses. Seminary administrators need to find intentional and creative ways to bring a diversity of views to their campuses. Inviting speakers, who represent diverse and sometimes unpopular, points of view, is an effective way to promote intellectual diversity. Recently, at the research site for this study, a New Testament scholar from another university, who was a critic of biblical inerrancy, was prohibited from speaking at a seminary forum on campus. He was initially invited to speak but after further consideration, certain seminary administrators revoked the invitation, preventing his ideas from being heard and considered by students and other faculty. The seminary featured in this site has some work to do to enhance and promote intellectual diversity.

In some cases Christian universities and seminaries, to guarantee that opposing viewpoints are not broadcasted without a Christian response, organize a public debate where a Christian scholar may debate a non-Christian scholar or a scholar with opposing religious views. For example, in April of 2009, Biola University & Talbot Seminary invited the well-renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens to its campus to debate one of its philosophy professors, William Lane Craig. Hitchens had the opportunity to share his views in contrast to Craig’s views and in an open forum with no censorship of either side. Nearly 4,000 students and faculty attended the debate. This would be a recommended strategy to promote intellectual diversity at the seminary associated with this study.
Threats to Academic Freedom

The participants in this study described the threat of being labeled as a liberal and the consequences that could result from being branded with this label. They described vivid experiences they have had in regards to the way the word is used in their seminary and denomination. The label is usually given to individual scholars who appear to disavow a doctrine known as Biblical inerrancy that holds the Bible to be literally true. The charge of being a liberal is usually based on someone’s subjective perception of what a faculty member has written or taught in regards to the doctrine of inerrancy or other key doctrines. The term is relative and can mean different things to different people. When the term is used to label an individual the labeler assumes that his position is the correct one and everyone who disagrees with him is too liberal for his taste. To paint someone with such broad strokes was seen as unfair by the participants and can be a way of repressing dialogue and intellectual diversity on campus.

This finding and its effect on the participants are significant because they give confirmation to Diekema’s (2000) framework on the threats to academic freedom and specifically the “chilling effect.” The liberal label results in the “chilling effect” which Diekema’s describes as the subtle and informal censorship that occurs within a higher education setting. Diekema (2000) has written that some restrictions on academic freedom are often not blatant or even stated formally but come from well-meaning administrators who are concerned that the academic freedom granted to faculty may result in the offense of a constituent, resulting in a long term effect on the institution’s financial health or enrollment. The signal is sent subtly to faculty members to avoid being offensive at all costs. At the research site, faculty members were to avoid appearing “too liberal,” as not to upset or offend alumni and other constituents.
Diekema (2000) has argued that when offensiveness becomes the reason for the restriction of academic freedom “it opens the road to widespread censorship” because almost anything can become offensive to someone (p. 34). The most critical effect is not the direct penalty placed upon the faculty member whose academic freedom was violated, but rather it is the response of other faculty members who want to avoid a similar fate by refusing to address issues of controversy or unpopular topics in their classrooms or publications. Once one faculty member is publically reprimanded or labeled as a “liberal” for something he said or published, it causes a domino effect and creates a group of instructors who become hesitant to comment on controversial matters. Faculty members do not say what they believe to be true because they do not want to deal with the stress and annoyance that may result such as peer alienation, undesirable student opinions, or the fury of alumni or other constituents. They just remain silent and the “chilling effect” emerges. Diekema writes, “It is not the iron fist of repression but the velvet glove of seduction that is the real problem” (p. 34).

One participant commented on how an incident in which someone had labeled him a liberal had a chilling effect on his research and teaching. He was called before an ad hoc committee of the board of trustees in response to something he had written in a book. His belief in the sacrosanct of inerrancy was brought into question and the word liberal was used in regards to his writings. This incident has had a negative effect on his considerations about what he publishes going forward. He coped with the threat by simply refusing to consider certain topics he knew would be perceived to be dangerous to his career and employment. There is indeed a “chilling effect” at work in this particular seminary.
The manner in which this situation was handled has implications for the administrators of this seminary in that they need to establish a pre-determined process for investigating charges made against faculty members’ and their alleged violation of the confessional statement of faith. An appeal to a common sense notion of justice would demand that faculty members deserve a fair hearing among peers before they are reprimanded at higher levels by the administration or trustees. A peer review committee on academic freedom, that would publish a report of their findings, would also help to protect the faculty member under question from being unjustly branded by other members of the seminary’s constituency. It would also rally other faculty members in support of their colleague. All legitimate questions concerning a faculty member’s orthodoxy or fidelity to the statement of faith should receive a thorough and timely due process review.

The Association of Theological Schools (ATS), which has accredited this particular seminary and other like seminaries in the United States and Canada has guidelines on establishing a general due process policy and these guidelines recommend that the process include faculty, students, and the governing board of trustees:

Any challenge to the confessional or doctrinal regularity of a faculty member should be subject to open hearing before the faculty member’s colleagues and before the governing board of the school after consultation with students. When controversy arises within a religious body concerning the understanding of its confessional or doctrinal standards, the governing body of the school, which subscribes to such standards, should provide its faculty members with all appropriate procedural safeguards for the protection of their academic freedom (Association of Theological Schools, 2010, p. C-2).
The researcher would advocate to the administrators and leaders of this seminary to formulate, implement, and follow the recommendations of the ATS that a due process policy, involving a wide range of institutional constituents be enacted and followed immediately. Additionally, a faculty committee or senate on academic freedom should be developed as a part of this process to continually hear and investigate complaints concerning purported breaches of academic freedom. Faculty members ought to have a place where they can report and discuss violations of their rights. Additionally, if faculty members know they are granted due process it might give them confidence to speak about controversial matters and as a result helps to suppress the “chilling effect.” Administrators also ought to be sensitive to the “chilling effect” that repeated academic freedom cases can have on the faculty members as a whole (Diekema, 2000). The chilling effect can have lasting negative impact on the wellbeing of the seminary.

Another significant threat to academic freedom came from students. Participants shared their experiences that students, both current and former, and not the administration pose the more substantial threat to their academic freedom. The faculty members lived with the anxiety of having a student misinterpret something they have said in class.

This highlights a threat to academic freedom within seminaries that is not particularly prominent or salient in the research literature. The research literature on academic freedom has highlighted and profiled institutional threats to academic freedom coming from sources such as the government, religious organizations, political action agencies and the university administration but has not seriously addressed the threat coming from students. Diekema’s (2000) framework focused primarily on these institutional and societal threats but is inattentive to how students might be a substantial threat to faculty academic freedom in higher educational
institutions and specifically seminaries. The literature is specifically mute on how seminary students perceive and make sense of faculty academic freedom and how they understand the rights of their professors and their responsibility as students to honor the academic freedom of their professors.

Further research is therefore warranted on seminary students as a substantial threat to academic freedom. The starting point for this research area might be an exploratory qualitative study, similar in design to this study, into how seminary students understand and perceive faculty academic freedom. Student perceptions of academic freedom would appear to be an important component of understanding how academic freedom is administered and brokered in religious educational institutions as well as determining how seminary students perceive their roles as potential gatekeepers of orthodoxy.

This also has repercussions for administrators and leaders of seminaries in that an intentional effort needs to be made to instruct seminary students on the issue of academic freedom and specifically the freedom of seminary faculty to teach and publish with relative autonomy. Educating students on academic freedom and their responsibilities to honor and safeguard it might help to abate this particular threat. Students should also be educated on how academic freedom aids their learning and can assist critical thinking. The suggested training for students could take place in a forum on academic freedom, during orientation, or in the classroom. It might also be appropriate to encourage faculty members to include an institutional statement on academic freedom in their course syllabi. In retrospect, the researcher wishes he had asked the participants about any efforts at their institution to educate students on academic freedom or if they had ever had a discussion in class about this issue.
The Confessional Statement

The participants readily recognized the right of a seminary to maintain a confessional statement of faith and require faculty members to adhere to it. They argued that a statement of faith reflected the beliefs of the larger faith community of which the seminary served. The participants also indicated that the desire to teach in this seminary came from a desire to be able to freely express their Christian faith within their discipline and as such the institutional mission appealed to them and even motivated their teaching. They said they might find it difficult to express their faith in non-religious universities where openly expressing their religious faith might be received with cynicism. In this way, the statement of faith assured them that such ideas would be welcomed in the classroom and in their research. They also shared an understanding that the statement of faith was a point of reference for dialoging about the school's theological mission and ideological identity.

This is significant because it demonstrates an awareness of institutional academic freedom, the form of academic freedom that protects universities and seminaries from interference by outside forces including the government. This is a freedom applying to a group of scholars and not to individual scholars. Institutional academic freedom gives to the institution itself the right to select faculty and students, as well as what is taught in the curriculum and which courses are required in certain degree programs. Institutional academic freedom does not protect individual professors with unorthodox views from being fired by the university administration but it does protect them from being terminated by legislators or politicians (Kaplin & Lee, 2007; Swezey & Ross, 2011).
The responses of the participants in acknowledging institutional academic freedom confirms the consensus of the research literature which recognizes both types of academic freedom, individual and corporate, as legitimate forms of academic freedom (Logan, 1991; Gordon, 1994; Habecker, 1991; Kaplin & Lee, 2007; Swezey & Ross, 2011). The clearest definition of institutional academic freedom, legally speaking, appeared in *Regents of the Univ. of California v. Bakke* (1978). The court pronounced that institutional academic freedom means that the university can determine for itself on academic grounds: who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.

A thorough review of the legal literature demonstrates the legal priority of institutional notions of academic freedom over individual ones. The courts have traditionally favored institutional academic freedom over individual freedom, especially in religious institutions that receive protection under that establishment clause (Gordon, 1994). Poch (1993) writes, “Whereas the AAUP tends to emphasize the academic freedom of individuals, the courts – and particularly the Supreme Court – tend to recognize institutional academic freedom” (p. 60). Logan (1991) and Habecker (1991) have likewise viewed the institutional mission as dominant to individual academic freedom and expect that it should triumph in most legal cases concerning academic freedom. Diekema (2000) has pointed out that some religious institutions like Oral Roberts University and Brigham Young have made a point to inform their faculty in their contracts that they have little individual rights apart from their association with the institution and that the institution’s mission has legal precedence. In other words, be careful about what you say and publish because you have very little legal recourse.
Administrators and leaders of seminaries should be aware, that while institutional mission often trumps individual academic freedom, this imbalance of power could negatively impact the culture of the institution. Ericson (1991) has observed that the clout given to institutional freedom by the courts creates a situation ripe for institutional abuses and the conditions for organizational totalitarianism and tyranny. He also highlights the potential “chilling effect” that can result from such totalitarian conditions. In light of this potential drift towards tyranny, Diekema (2000) has urged administrators and leaders of religious higher educational institutions to develop a well-balanced and equitable definition for academic freedom that acknowledges both forms of academic freedom encouraging “all parties to participate in the academic self-governance of an institutional mission” which “carries with it an obligation of each professor and each person carrying institutional authority to full and contributing citizenship” in the institution (p. 80).

Another finding was that the confessional statement of faith was extremely broad and did not address many modern controversial topics in Christianity such as women in the ministry, gay marriage, human sexuality, or abortion. Faculty members, however, were not free to express their views on these non-stated issues, but rather informal forces limit and restrict what faculty can teach and believe on these subjects. The actual orthodox positions on these matters were found in the campus atmosphere and in the minds of the senior administration and even some of the senior faculty members. It was the informal manner in which these issues were administered, brokered, and interpreted that were of primary concern and could pose a substantial threat to academic freedom and intellectual diversity on campus.
This highlights the understated influence that a confessional statement of faith can have within the culture of a seminary. It is often not the result of what is explicitly written in the statement itself but rather it is what is not in the statement of faith that threatens academic freedom. In fact, religious creeds and confessional statements are generally not intended to be comprehensive, but to be a summary of essential dogmas. As a result of their generality and brevity, these statements often create a set of unintended conditions or forces, one of which is an ambiguous force that subtly erodes the freedom of expression on a number of issues because faculty members naturally understand the power of the statement rests, not in how it is written, but in how it is interpreted and brokered by those in authority.

At this research site there was alongside the formal confessional statement of faith a set of controversial doctrinal issues that went unaddressed establishing an unwritten and often undetectable body of knowledge or code, found within the culture of the seminary. This informal and unwritten code, in many ways, is the more restrictive force because the acceptable viewpoints on these issues are found vaguely in the atmosphere of the culture and it is expected that faculty should know what to teach and publish in regards to these gray matters. There is a great amount of guesswork needed to know exactly what to say and do in regards to these matters.

This is of particular interest to the researcher because he has found no published research describing or theorizing about such ambiguous forces and how they operationalize or work within the context of a seminary and in relation to academic freedom. Particularly absent from the literature is a discussion of the unique forces described by the participants resulting from a loosely fashioned informal body of knowledge, on controversial issues such as women in the ministry, gay marriage, human sexuality, and abortion. Orthodoxy on these issues is not codified
formally and there is no contractual requirement for faculty members to support particular
certain positions on these issue but it is just generally expected they will hold these positions and
espouse them in the classroom and in their publications. A further study might be appropriate to
understand the essence of this ambiguous force, how the orthodox positions are disseminated and
received without a formal document, and how faculty members perceive that this force disturbs
their performance. It would also be of interest to see if this type of force is unique to this
research site or if it is indeed found in other seminaries.

**Intellectual Goals and Implications for Research**

The researcher set two intellectual goals for this study and believed these goals were
sufficiently met. The first intellectual goal was interpretive. The researcher decoded the
responses of interview participants to understand how they experienced and attached meaning to
academic freedom. The researcher captured the language and metaphors used by the participants
to describe academic freedom providing a rich, thick description of the participants’ perceptions
and understandings of their experiences as seminary faculty members. Salient themes were
identified, described, and discussed. The interpretive findings found in this paper are significant
because they are believed to be the first findings published on how seminary faculty members
perceive and attach meaning to academic freedom. It is believed to truly be the first “insider’s
look” into how academic freedom is understood and perceived by seminary faculty.

The results of this study are relevant to a host of stakeholders within seminaries. In
particular higher education administrators in seminaries might use this study’s interpretative
findings to better understand how the perceptions described in this study impact the ways in
which faculty members negotiate teaching and research in light of the perceived degree of academic freedom in their institution. The interpretative findings from this study could also aid in the development of sound academic freedom policies that will promote and protect faculty academic freedom. It should also aid the development of necessary due process proceedings while also ensuring that the institutional mission of the seminary is furthered. This study highlighted several concerns of the participants that could be considered when developing such guidelines. It also highlights the need to include faculty, students, and the administration in the shared development of these policies. If anything, this paper ought to inspire administrators to begin a dialogue with faculty members about academic freedom.

The findings are obviously relevant for seminary faculty members. This study ought to motivate faculty members to be more engaged on their campuses in promoting and protecting academic freedom. Faculty members ought to be able to fully articulate what academic freedom means and how it is understood and applied in their seminary. Faculty members should also be familiar with the particulars of the due process policies within their institution (Diekema, 2000).

Church officials in the Church of Christ denomination might also benefit from the results of this study. This study should stimulate clergy and laypersons to advocate for more plainly pronounced policies on academic freedom within the denomination’s seminaries. Churches within the denomination have a vested interest in the quality of seminary education since their clergy are products of the seminary system. As a result, church officials ought to be concerned about academic freedom at it is a crucial component of fostering excellence in seminary education and the formation of ministerial candidates. Church officials can use the results of this
study to promote a more deliberative due process in the resolution of academic freedom cases within the denomination’s seminaries (Diekema, 2000).

A second intellectual goal set by the researcher was an exploratory goal. This study discovered and identified salient themes that ought to be considered in a possible later descriptive or experimental quantitative study measuring how a broader population of seminary faculty perceive and attach meaning to academic freedom (Maxwell, 2005). While the findings could be used to aid a quantitative study the researcher believes he has discovered and identified several possible areas for further qualitative inquiry that includes replicating the IPA design of this study to investigate how students in seminaries perceive academic freedom and their rights and responsibilities towards its protection and promotion. This proposed study would be in response to the salience of the students as a major threat to academic freedom.

Another similar study could be replicated with adjunct faculty, administrators, presidents, provosts, board of trustees, and church officials. The researcher has not discovered any such investigations in the extant literature conducted on these groups so this could be an additional area of original research for him or other researchers. The researcher envisions replicating the study in other seminaries to compare and contrast the findings of this study.

Limitations of the Findings

While this study has made a contribution to qualitative understanding of academic freedom in seminaries, limitations for the study do exist and need to be highlighted. The limitations mentioned here are in addition to the general limitations of qualitative research described in the design and methodology section of chapter 3.
One limitation of this study is that other types of seminary faculty were not included. This particular research site has other types of faculty who teach non-religious subjects such as history, organizational leadership and management, and counseling. These faculty members were not interviewed for this study. Faculty members teaching these subject matters are required to sign the statement of faith but because of the nature of their disciplines are not as inclined to speak on matters of doctrine directly or normatively in their classrooms or publications. As a result, the responses of the participants in this study might not be reflective of the experiences of other types of faculty members in this seminary.

A second possible limitation of this study is that no female participants are included. This is something that readers might notice immediately and criticize and perhaps rightly so. The researcher chose to focus on religious studies faculty members only for this study and as such there were currently no female faculty teaching religious studies courses in this seminary. The seminary has a strict policy against allowing women to teach religious studies whether as an adjunct or full-time faculty member. As a result, sadly, the voices of women were not heard in this study. In the future, as the researcher expands and replicates this study, he will certainly attempt to include female religious studies faculty from other seminaries in his investigations. The voices of all types of seminary faculty need to be heard on this matter.

**Conclusion**

The researcher believed that the findings of this study are significant because they contribute new knowledge to the body of research literature on academic freedom particularly because they uniquely describe the lived experiences and perceptions of faculty members within
a Church of Christ seminary. Seminary faculty members are a group of educators within the higher education system that have not received much documented research with regards to how they perceive and make sense of academic freedom. This paper provided the first “insider’s perspective” (Conrad, 1987, p. 22) into seminary faculty and their perceptions of academic freedom. There has been little qualitative research and specifically phenomenological research to document the shared experiences of any type of faculty members in regards to academic freedom let alone seminary faculty members. This research described the participants’ experiences and its influence on the way they teach and publish in their roles as educators. As a result, this study contributed to the qualitative literature on academic freedom and how certain individuals make sense of it in their unique contexts, specifically in the context of religious higher education institutions and seminaries.

The results of this study are only a first step in the understanding of academic freedom in seminaries from the perspectives of those who experience its many effects. The researcher, in this final chapter, has identified several possible areas for further qualitative inquiry including replicating the design of this study to investigate how students in seminaries perceive academic freedom and their rights and responsibilities towards its protection and promotion. Another similar study could be replicated with adjunct faculty, administrators, presidents, provosts, board of trustees, and church officials. An additional area of possible further research was identified in regards to the phenomenon of dogmatism. The researcher has already suggested the measurement of the prevalence of dogmatism within a seminary or religious institution in predicting the level or amount of academic freedom present. In other words, do higher rates of
dogmatism among individuals within an institution have an effect on the degree of academic freedom found?

Getman & Mintz (1998) have stated, “For those of us committed to the protection and expansion of academic freedom, these are confusing times” (p. 12). The times may indeed be confusing, but with diligence, research, advocacy, and sensible policy development, academic freedom can be protected and expanded in our educational institutions and seminaries. The researcher hopes this study will initiate a serious conversation about academic freedom issues within his denomination’s seminaries and perhaps, in his little corner of world, clear away some of the confusion.
Appendix A
Table displaying superordinate and sub-themes from the analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describing Academic Freedom</td>
<td>1.1 <em>Nebulousness</em>: “Academic Freedom is nebulous.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2 <em>Social Progress</em>: “Current ways of thinking about any given topic may not necessarily be correct.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1.3 <em>Diversity of Views</em>: “Christians should not be afraid of the truth.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. The Threats to Academic Freedom</td>
<td>2.1 <em>The Big “L”</em>: “If someone accuses you of being liberal, they’re essentially saying you are not a part of the denomination anymore.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.2 <em>It’s Not the Administration, It’s the Students</em>: “My experience has been that it’s elements of the school's constituency, especially students, who raise objections.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.2 <em>Broad</em>: “The statement does not address many ‘hot button’ issues.”</td>
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Appendix B
 Unsigned Participant Consent Document – Northeastern University

Northeastern University, School of Education
Investigator: Joseph McNabb,
Student Researcher: Aaron Burgess
Title of Project: Academic Freedom & Religious Control: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis into How Seminary Faculty Make Sense of Academic Freedom

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

I am inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but I will explain it to you first. You may ask me any questions that you have before the study begins. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
I am asking you to be in this study because you are a seminary faculty member.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand how you and other seminary faculty members make sense of the concept of academic freedom.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you to answer a series of open-ended questions about how you understand, define, and articulate the concept of academic freedom. I want to know how you perceive academic freedom.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will be done at a neutral and private location. The interview will last approximately one hour.

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<tr>
<th><strong>Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?</strong></th>
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<td>A main priority for me, as the researcher, will be the protection of your identity and keeping our conversations confidential.</td>
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<th><strong>Will I benefit by being in this research?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help to improve our understanding of how seminary faculty understand and make sense of academic freedom.</td>
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<th><strong>Who will see the information about me?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researcher on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. The researcher will make every effort to prevent anyone outside of himself from connecting individual subjects with their responses. You will be audiotaped but I will be the only one who has access to the recordings. The data will be recorded on a digital recorder and in all its forms (digital and transcribed) will be kept in a secure location. I will be the only who will access the data or analyze it in its raw form or when it is associated or linked with you. Signed informed consent forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet, and unavailable to anyone except the researcher in the approved study. The consent forms will be destroyed three years after the study is concluded.</td>
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<th><strong>Can I stop my participation in this study?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.</td>
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<th><strong>Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>If you have questions about this research project you can contact me: Aaron Burgess, 15 W. Fourth Street, Cincinnati, OH 45202, Phone: 513-746-0726, Email: <a href="mailto:burgess.aa@husky.neu.edu">burgess.aa@husky.neu.edu</a></td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?</strong></th>
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</table>
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be paid for your participation, nor will it cost you anything to participate.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

You must be at least 18 years old to participate unless your parent or guardian gives written permission.

**I agree to take part in this research.**


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<th>Signature of person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<th>Printed name of person above</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
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| Printed name of person above |
Appendix C - 
Email Sent to Participants Requesting Participation

Dear Potential Participant:

I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my doctoral degree in Higher Education Administration and I would like to invite you to participate. I am studying how you as a seminary faculty member make sense of the concept of academic freedom. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me in a private location for an interview. In particular, you will be asked a series of open-ended questions about academic freedom. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and should last about 45-60 minutes. The session interview will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by me who will transcribe and analyze them. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. Although you probably will not benefit directly from participating in this study, I hope that others in the community/society in general will benefit from your answers. Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings but your identity will not be revealed.

Taking part in the study is your decision. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to participate. You may also quit being in the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 513-746-0726 or by email at burgess.aa@husky.neu.edu.

Sincerely,

Aaron Burgess
Appendix D – IRB Approval From Northeastern University
Appendix E – Primary Interview Questions

The following is a list of pre-prepared open-ended questions the research planned to ask to each the participants. In some of the interview sessions not all questions were asked.

1. How do you define academic freedom and what are its chief features?
2. In what ways do you perceive that academic freedom might differ in your institution from other institutions that do not have religious control documents such as a confessional statement?
3. In what ways do you perceive that the confessional statement at your institution influences the way you teach and publish?
4. How do faculty members know when they have violated the confessional statement at your seminary?
5. What happens to faculty members when they are accused of violating the confessional statement?
6. Can you describe an occasion when you or someone else was deprived of academic freedom?
7. In what ways should academic freedom be limited in a seminary or religious higher educational institution?
8. What actions should be taken by the administration to further promote academic freedom in your seminary?
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Edwards v. California University of Pennsylvania, 156 F.3d 488 (3rd Cir. 1998).


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University of Michigan Press.


U.S. Const. Bill of Rights, amend. 1 § 1.