

Religious Liberty Sabbath Sermon Notes prepared by:  
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## **Why do Seventh-day Adventists Put So Much Emphasis on Religious Freedom?**

### ***There is more to religious freedom than meets the eye.***

The following reflection attempts to answer the question: What do we celebrate when we celebrate religious freedom?

Today, the debate about religious liberty here in the United States is dominated by perceptions related to cases like that of Kim Davis—the county clerk who refused to issue licenses to same-sex couples. And because of this, the conversation about religious freedom has narrowed and has been co-opted by political agendas. In the media, religious freedom is described as the right not to participate in any form in same sex marriages, or the right not to pay insurance that would cover any part of the process of abortion or contraception.

But there is more to religious liberty than meets the eye.

Certainly, religious liberty includes the right to worship, or not to worship. It is also the right to keep the Sabbath—to not work, or take exams, or compete—based on a conviction that the Sabbath is part of the moral law.

More broadly, however, religious liberty is the right to profess, practice, and propagate one's faith, or lack of faith. It is the right to pass it to one's children, or to people entrusted to one's care. It is the right to wear symbols, and to display them in the public space. It is the right to build institutions as an expression of your beliefs, which are designed to promote one's convictions, worldview, and values.

1. Religious freedom is a universal human right
2. It is a fundamental freedom
3. In most constitutions, there are provisions for the protection of religious freedom

4. Religious freedom is also a primordial freedom, which undergirds all the other freedoms
5. It is central to all other freedoms
6. It is a compound freedom, in that it contains the other freedoms. Religious freedom presupposes the freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, freedom to choose or to change religion or philosophy or belief
7. It is a civil right
8. It is a political right
9. It is inextricably associated with the most intimate freedom: freedom of conscience
10. It is a spiritual endowment. It is a gift from God to make covenant relationships credible in all justice and peace. No genuine and lasting peace can be achieved by means of coercion or force; therefore the need for religious freedom is not a favor from a government but a primordial gift from God.

More deeply, religious freedom contributes to what it means to be human. It is grounded on human dignity. It is motivated by the love of God. God wants people created in His image to freely enter into a covenant of love and fellowship. Love cannot be forced. Coercion cancels love but freedom is a precondition of genuine love. God's whole plan of salvation is to restore His image, His covenant, and His offer of everlasting fellowship in love. This plan is grounded on and inseparable from freedom of religion.

To promote religious freedom is, therefore, a way of participating in the restoration of the image of God in humans.

Adventists uplift religious freedom because Jesus did. He gave his disciples the freedom to choose to stay with him or to change their allegiance in all freedom.

There is a deeper biblical aspect that deserves our attention. The concept and reality of freedom best summarizes the content of the good news.

“‘Freedom’ is the central theological concept which sums up the Christian’s situation before God as well as in this world. It is the basic concept underlying Paul’s argument throughout the letter...Christian freedom is the result of Christ’s act of having liberated those who believe in him (the ‘indicative’), but this result is stated as a goal, purpose, and direction for the life of the Christian (the ‘imperative’).”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 256.

Furthermore, he insightfully stated:

“It was the gift of the Spirit which enabled the Galatians, as all Christians, to experience freedom (3:2-5). This experience amounted to a liberation from the elements of the world and their tyrannical regime of evil (1:4, 4:1-10), and included liberation from slavery under the Law and sin (cf 2:19; 3:13, 25; 4:5), from death (cf 2:20; 3:11; 5:25; 6:8), from ignorance of God (4:8-9), from superstition (4:8-10), and from social oppression and religious cultural discrimination (3:26-28).”<sup>2</sup>

The role of the Holy Spirit concerning the reality of freedom is essential. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in people’s lives that secures freedom.

Paul states in 2 Corinthians 3:17

“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

### **Profile of a Free Person According to the Apostle Paul**

A free person is a person full of the Holy Spirit. He person who walks according to the Holy Spirit; a person who bears the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

A free person is one who reflects God’s character.

A free person is one who is willing to give up his or her freedom for the sake of others if necessary. Just like Jesus, just like the Apostle Paul who said: “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more...I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel so that I may become a fellow partaker of it” (1 Cor. 9:19-22).

These words most likely inspired the reformer Martin Luther who wrote:

“A Christian person is a free sovereign above all things, subject to no one.” (by faith)  
 “A Christian person is a dutiful servant in all things and subject to everyone.” (by love)

Ellen White, one of the co-founders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, wrote about the depth of this freedom God endowed to every person.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

“It is not God’s purpose that any human being should yield his mind and will to the control of another, becoming a passive instrument in his hands. No one is to merge his individuality in that of another. He is not to look to any human being as the source of healing. His dependence must be in God. In the dignity of his God-given manhood, he is to be controlled by God Himself, not by any human intelligence.”<sup>3</sup>

“No man is to think that he is the owner of the minds and capabilities of his brethren. He is not to think that others must submit to his dictation. He is liable to err, liable to make mistakes, as every man is. He is not to try to control matters in accordance with his ideas.”<sup>4</sup>

This insight is consonant with Emmanuel Kant’s famous idea, according to which human beings should not be used as mere means to an end. God’s given dignity precludes an instrumentalization of subjects created in the image of God.

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<sup>3</sup>Ellen White, *The Ministry of Healing* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942) 242.

<sup>4</sup> Ellen White, *This Day With God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1979) 192.