

Ganoune Diop, Ph.D.
Director of Public Affairs & Religious Liberty

Champions of Freedom: The Good News of Liberty and Fellowship with God

Introduction

"The question of freedom is one of the most confused in the whole history of philosophy, a labyrinth ", said Leibniz. Not so for biblical Christian theology. Obviously these two perspectives are based on different premises and therefore different inferences.

Freedom is a fascinating core value in Scripture.

Life is inseparably associated with the reality of freedom.

In Scripture, creation is freedom from nonexistence.

The Exodus is about freedom from bondage, from oppression, and from the indignity of slavery.

The story of God's people in fact is the story of freedom from evil and from all its manifestations. The major themes of Exodus, exile, and return from exile are articulated around the concept of freedom.

The Israelites festivals are all related to freedom. (Passover, feast of unleavened bread, feast of first fruits of barley, Pentecost or feast of first fruits of wheat, Feasts of Trumpets, the Day of Atonements, the Feast of Tabernacles, and the Jubilee). They are festivals of freedom.

The weekly Sabbath is also linked to liberation according to Deuteronomy 5. In a context in which God reminded the Israelites the 10 commandments, the Sabbath takes a significant prominence. The added reason given this time for the commandment of the Sabbath is the following:

“You shall remember that you were slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out of there by the mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to observe the Sabbath day” (Deut 5:15).

The promises of God for the future of God's people are all related to freedom.

Freedom from war, freedom from harm, freedom from violence, freedom from being occupied, dominated, subjugated, submitted, freedom from exile and from being exploited.

One can say the whole of the Bible is a story of freedom. Do we not call the Bible, the story of redemption? Or the story of salvation, or the story of atonement, or the story of reconciliation. As the world has been striving after an ever elusive peace, (there are always wars somewhere) it is worth reminding the world that peace cannot materialize without freedom.

Freedom is then inseparable from peace. Freedom is a prerequisite to peace. This is true at a personal level inner peace, which is an expression of freedom from guilt. In the Bible, this is equivalent to the freedom of being forgiven by God. As the Apostle Paul puts it: “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

Also, at the societal level, freedom is a prerequisite to peace. Without the freedom to self-determination, sooner or later, strife, and rebellion, nourish the motivation of so-called freedom fighters whose aim is to overturn the yoke imposed upon them or upon their people. Peace then requires freedom.

In an attempt to understand the concept of freedom, a distinction has been made between negative freedom and positive freedom.¹ Historically, in the political sphere, the latter is connected to the so-called “Republicanism,” “a political philosophy according to which the highest values of the political commonwealth are to do with serving the common good, the readiness to sacrifice one’s own good for the good of the many, respect for dignity, integrity, heroism on the battlefield in the defense of the Republic.”²

Obviously, for Seventh-day Adventists, committed to non-combatancy, these national ideals are not accepted unconditionally. Universal values which benefit the whole human family created in the image of God are paramount. They take precedence. Early Seventh-day Adventists protested against the imposition of nationalist ideals which conflict with universal values.

¹ In the western tradition, Isaiah Berlin, popularized this distinction. See Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty*. Edited by Henry Hardy (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). *Liberty* is the new and expanded edition of Isaiah Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty*.

² Evgenii Dainov. *Politics in 40 Words: A Dictionary* (Sofia, Bulgaria: New Bulgarian University Press, 2020), 142.

Negative liberty is the model mainly embraced in liberal democracies, in which the basic values are to do with individual freedom, entrepreneurship in the economy, and aspiration to personal riches.

Extremes in both definitions of liberty create crises in communities. Faith-based biblical insights bring needed perspectives to the issue of freedom.

Political freedom is not all there is when it comes to freedom. There are incontrovertible dimensions of freedom that must be taken into consideration and embraced.

For Christians whose lives are modeled after that of Jesus, autonomous freedom is not the highest value to be branded at the expense of the good of the many, the community or the human family at large.

The depth of human solidarity for Christians is a powerful incentive to uphold the value of freedom. It is about saving lives, sustaining lives and contributing to people's lives to live in dignity and with discend living. This should expand to all the members of the human family.

There is far more to Christian freedom than meets the eye.

An Orthodox thinker delineated the issue as follows: "Theology recalls the limits of autonomous freedom, based on its experience of freedom in Christ. For the church, the human rights ethos is not the supreme ethos. The biblical commandment of love expresses a way of living and a dimension of freedom inaccessible to human rights, which are marked by the claim of "my" right: for this, the highest form of freedom is for the church that man "can freely sacrifice even his own rights in favor of another." This attitude is not a moral of resentment which stems from an existential weakness, as Nietzsche thought, but the sign of an interior vigor which is not a human work but a gift of divine grace."³

³ Constantin Delikostantis. "Vatican II et les droits de l'homme. Réflexions d'un orthodoxe sur les relations entre liberté Chrétienne et liberté moderne." *Le concile Vatican II et L'église orthodoxe. Colloque théologique Chambesy, 16-19 octobre 2013*), 212.

The Spiritual Roots of Freedom

By virtue of its intrinsic universality, freedom is not a stand-alone property. Let us consider the roots and scope of freedom from the biblical revelation.

Since we are going to begin with the book of Exodus, an overview of its content may be helpful to grasp the major themes that will be developed throughout the Bible both the first covenant and the New Covenant.

To understand the Sabbath as gift at the heart of the covenant between God and God's people it may be useful to revisit the book of Exodus to glean further insights. The book of Exodus is structured around three major themes: Liberation, covenant, and worship. The event that has shaped the whole history of Historic Israel is most certainly the Exodus from Egypt.

The Book of Exodus gives us the main themes that will be developed throughout the Scriptures. The structure of the book of Exodus is simple yet profound. It is organized in a chiasmic fashion around the following themes: liberation, covenant (kingdom, law and atonement) and worship.

- I** Freedom announced (1-6:27)
Oppression in Egypt, Moses' Calling
- II** Freedom delayed (6:28-11)
Egyptian plagues, Pharaoh's Refusal
- III** Freedom fulfilled (12-16)
Last Plague
12-13: laws concerning Passover, unleavened bread, Firstborn
Exodus, Miracle of the sea
- IV.** Covenant at Sinai (17-24:11)
Meeting with God
The Decalogue (20:1-17)
The Covenant code (20:22-23-33)
Conclusion of the Covenant
- V** Worship announced (24:12-31) The Sanctuary project revealed to Moses
- VI** Worship delayed (32-34)
The crisis of the golden Calf: Reconciliation
Ritual code 34:14-26

VII Worship fulfilled (35-40)⁴

The Thrust

The overall thrust is a transformation of status, from slavery to sonship.

The Center of Christian Freedom: God

God, The Absolutely Free One

The Reality of freedom originated in the being of God.

When God revealed Himself to Moses, they engaged in the following conversation:

“I am going to the children of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘the God of your fathers has sent me to you.’ Now they may say to me, ‘What is His name? What shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I am who I am’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel.’ “**I am** has sent me to you.” God furthermore, said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial name to all generations.’” (Exodus 3:13-15).

The name of God is inseparable from the concept of freedom. God is the One who is. The one who cannot be confined to time. It is significant that another form of the same name is rendered as the one who is, who was and who is to come (Rev. 1:4). God is the ever present one, everlasting One, the Eternal one. God is the only one absolutely free, not depending on anything in the created order.

However, God is not only the absolutely free One, not dependent on anything in the whole of reality, God is also the One who liberates. This is how God reveals Himself when He gave the 10 commandments to Moses: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery) (Exodus 20:2).

The God revealed in Scripture is the God of freedom

⁴ See E. Zenger, *Israel am Sinai. Analysen und Interpretationen su Exodus 17-34*, Altenberge, 1982: cf. C. Wiener. *Le Livre de l'Exode (Cahiers Évangile 54)*, Paris, Cerf, 1985, p. 11ss.

Biblical freedom is also born from God's love. Freedom is interrelated with, and inseparable from love. Love is indeed the goal of freedom. This is because love cannot be forced. It is the heartbeat of any legitimate covenant, whether between God and humans or between humans ourselves. God created freedom for love to be a reality.

(See galatians 5:1 "For freedom, Christ set us free. Stand firm then and don't submit again to a yoke of slavery....For you called to be free, brothers and sisters; only don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: love your neighbor as yourself.")

The Heart of the Matter.

The heart of the Torah which Jesus summarized in his teachings is connected to love.

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, The Lord is one!

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." Deut. 6:4.

Jesus calls it the great and foremost commandment (See Matt. 22:37,39)

He adds, the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Then He comments further: "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

To create the conditions for love to be possible, God created freedom. Eternal fellowship in love is incompatible with coercion, force, intimidation, or violence.

The Hope of Eternal Freedom and Fellowship in love is God's goal, purpose, and objective in God's comprehensive commitment to save humans created in God's image.

A closer look at freedom.

What the Bible calls the gospel or good news is the prediction of the liberation of human beings and creation from evil, oppression, oppressors, and opprobrium (or shame). It is about freedom.

This is what God has promised and which is the foundation for our hope. For God tells the truth. God will fulfill God's promises. As the Bible in Isaiah and in the book of Revelation puts it, God is the God of truth, the God of Amen (Isaiah 65:16). The etymology of the root of this Semitic word conveys the idea of stability, reliability, security, something, or someone you can depend on. God is someone you can stake your life on. Our security is in Him. In fact, as underlined throughout Scripture, God is the God of freedom.

The gospel is the good news of God liberating those who are oppressed, confined, or crushed by coalitions of evils.

But whether from the first stories of the book of Genesis or the inaugural discourse of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth or in the book of the book of Revelation **the gospel is always about freedom, liberation, and liberty.**

For this freedom to materialize God overcomes enemies who are oppressing his people. In this sense, the expulsion of Satan from heaven, the fall of angels from heaven, and the fall of Babylon are the result of God's commitment to the freedom of God's people. The fall of Babylon in particular, is an integral part of the good news. It frees God's people from being oppressed, possessed, dominated, and used as agents of evil spirits and their allies in social, cultural, political, economic and religious realms.

Champions of freedom should make this very clear.

The gospel is the end of the domination of human beings. It is the announcement of the advent of freedom.

It is the New covenant, available to all.

On the personal or individual level, freedom is the end of internalized dominance. No follower of Jesus and Jesus' way should indulge the pride of feeling or believing in one's superiority over others. At corporate levels, Christians cannot be complicit to systems of dominations and discriminations. The good news it is the announcement of the dismantling of matrixes of

dominations. It is the reconfiguration of all ecosystems of dominions. It is the renunciation of dominionism, a Christendom's attempt to dominate public and secular spaces. Christians should be clear about the freedom of Jesus and its implications.

The gospel is liberation from subjection. It is freedom therefore peace and security for women and girls. God has promised children will be delivered from the scourges of wars and abuses. No more child soldiers or infant and puppy trafficking. No more harm. God promised that there will be no more violence in God's kingdom. Even the animal world will be stripped of its impulses of violence. The following picture in Isaiah 9:6-9 is revealing of an era of post violence.

“The wolf will dwell with the lamb,
 And the Leopard will lie down with the young goat,
 And the calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
 And a little boy will lead them.
 Also the cow and the bear will graze,
 Their young will lie down together
 And the lion will eat straw like the ox.
 The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra,
 And the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den.
 They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain.
 For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
 As the waters cover the sea”

The gospel is about freedom from demonic spirits, those who in the end time counterfeit the three angels' messages. They go around the world spreading a counterfeit gospel. God will defeat them too. This is signified as the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16).

The gospel is also the liberation of the whole of creation, nature, our world that is, which is subjected to corruption, suffering and death (Romans 8:20).

“For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth until now. And not only this, but also, we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body (Romans 8:20-23).

In the same context as Romans, the gospel is the good news of the revelation of the children of God. This means there will be a work of restoration of what was intended from creation. It will be a recreation of the image of God, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God. Christ is the hope of glory.

But this liberation has a purpose; not only to create space for real life as God intended it but core to life is fellowship with God with the triune God who is love.

The gospel in this perspective is liberation from alienation. No more curtains of separation. It is not by chance that the New Jerusalem has no temple in it. Thanks to the new covenant of direct access to God through Jesus Christ's incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, heavenly high priestly ministry, and the Second Coming as lord of an eternal kingdom, all people of God are are priests with access credentials to the presence of the throne of grace.

Jesus the Face of Freedom.

It is not by chance that the name God chose in God's incarnation is Jesus:

Yahweh saves. The two components in the name of Jesus are Lordship and salvation. These two are condensed in the central Christian confession of faith: "Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the Savior."

Jesus is the ultimate manifestation of freedom. Freedom is inconceivable without him.

Jesus Christ is sovereign, supreme, and all-sufficient. He has become the only needed sacrifice, the only mediator, our all-sufficient savior. The lord of the whole of our lives.

This means that the expectations we have from others should never imprison us into feelings of grievances and grudges.

Others do not determine how we feel regardless of their opinions. They are stripped of the power to make us feel bad. We are free to live even with enemies. This dimension of freedom is indeed liberating.

Christian freedom is profound even stronger than death. The most extraordinary verse on the commitment to Christ is found in Rev. 12:11.

“They overcame him because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.”

For victors over the accuser of the brethren, loyalty to Christ is more valuable than their own life. Christ is the supreme value.

This shows that for Christians, freedom is not the supreme value; God is.

God’s sovereignty, supremacy, and primacy inform all aspects of life. This is the way of piety; otherwise called righteousness. The right positioning of oneself towards God in reference to everything is the hallmark of a genuine Christian life. It is called the fear of the Lord.

Championing freedom is a way of inviting people to embrace genuine freedom that comes from a relationship with the God of freedom and love.

Jesus made an enlightening statement: He said, He is the way, the truth, and the life.

The way to freedom is to direct access to God and to fellowship in love with the triune God.

In fact, Jesus declared that if He as the Son makes one free, that person is free indeed (John 8:36). “If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”

Freedom is also connected to truth. Jesus said in John 8:31 “If you continue in my word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”

Jesus brought the truth about God. God is not a solitary monad, but a communion of Father Son, and Holy Spirit. One God in three persons, a relational God, whose essence is nonetheless indivisible.

The name of God: Yahweh

The Name of God the Son: Jesus Christ

The attribution of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Freedom (2 Cor 3:18), all names of God reveal that the God of the Bible is the God of freedom, the only One: Father, Son and Holy Spirit of freedom.

The revolution Jesus brought is the new covenant of direct access to God. This also, that is the new covenant is inseparably related to freedom: The freedom to come to the throne of grace, without mediation but God's own mediation. It is the freedom to have direct access to God. A God who welcomes wayward humanity. The parable of the prodigal son is an illustration of this new revelation of the hospitality and prodigality of God who graciously and generously offers the best to those God created in God's image, the whole human family.

This hospitality and dwelling in the house of God was David was deeply yearning to experience the rest of his life.

It is the freedom to come to the house of God as David prayed in Psalm 23.

“I will dwell in the house of God, forever.”

Another vital aspect of this freedom is the desire of those who linger after a different world.

It is freedom from evil and Jesus taught us how to pray.

“Deliver us from evil.”

The spiritual dimension of freedom includes freedom from demonic influences. Earth is an occupied territory. Evil spirits have fallen to this planet according to Revelation 12.

Nevertheless, the good news of freedom is that Jesus Christ has disarmed them.

In Colossians 2, talking about the cancellation of debt of the redeemed, Paul specified,

“He made you alive together with Him having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. When He had disarmed the rulers and

authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Colossians 2:13-15).

Conclusion

Seventh-day Adventists are called to be champions of freedom. This is our deepest calling our deepest message, we share with the world. This belief in the pivotal role of freedom is predicated on the character of God, and the purposes of God for the world.

Adventists adhere to the five principles of the Reformation. The lens through which we read the principles of the Reformation is freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief which at its core undergirds all the freedoms.

For every one of these Reformation principles, Adventists highlight the undergirding gift of freedom God offers.

1. The principle of Sola scriptura highlights freedom from human-constructed traditions in favor of God’s revealed absolute will and purpose for the world.
2. The principle of Sola gratia frees human beings from depending on merits for their salvation.
3. The principle of Sola Fide underlines freedom from salvation by work through bargaining with God.
4. The principle of Solus Christus affirms the supremacy and sufficiency of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
5. The principle of soli Deo Gloria highlights the liberation from self-glorification, and hierarchicalization of people into superiors and inferiors. The end of the competition. It is freedom from self-esteem to an absolute dedication to honor God. Champions of freedom restore the understanding principles of the Reformation. There are other principles of the Reformation that are inseparable from freedom.
6. The priesthood of all believers highlights the revelation and good news of the new covenant: Direct access to God with no need for mediators. Persons, places or objects, or ritual performances

7. Freedom of conscience (conscientia fidelium) brings freedom from being dominated or domesticated. It is connected to equality and human dignity.

This freedom was difficult to integrate within the ethos of the Reformation. Reformers were not necessarily tolerant. Eg. Calvin as in the letting of the burning at the stake of Michel Servette; but also Luther himself did not show tolerance to anabaptists or to Jews.

Seventh-day Adventists by virtue of championing freedom of thought conscience and belief, restore this critical principle of the Reformation and extend freedom of conscience to all. However, we seventh-day Adventists go to the original new covenant teaching of Jesus himself. He modeled the importance of freedom in another way, in the famous Lord's prayer.

First, a secret: **The Freedom to pray.**

About prayer someone said the following:

"Prayerlessness is an insult to God. Every prayerless day is a statement by a helpless individual, 'I do not need God today.' Failing to pray reflects idolatry-a trust in substitutes for God. We rely on our money instead of God's provision. We rest on our own flawed thinking rather than on God's perfect wisdom. We take charge of our lives rather than trusting God. Prayerlessness short-circuits the working of God. Neglecting prayer, therefore, is not a weakness; it is a sinful choice."⁵

More positively, we have to acknowledge the following:

Praying itself is freedom. This is something nobody can prevent you from doing. Prayer happens from the depth of your inner sanctuary, your conscience, where nobody has access but God and you, the conscience bearer.

People cannot read your mind, they have no access to your prayers springing from the depth of your being. So prayer is the expression a freedom, impossible to prevent from happening or impossible to stifle unless they deprive you of consciousness that is unless they kill you.

So again prayer is a sign, a symbol of freedom, a covenant with the God who sees and hears everything.

⁵ Ben Jennings, The Arena of prayer.

But Jesus took a step further to teach us how to prayer.

The Lord's prayer

Outline

I. Emphasis on God

A. Primacy of Honoring God (6:9)

B. Fulfilment of God's Purposes (6:10)

II. Emphasis on us

A. Prayer for Provision (6:11)

B. Peace in Relationships with God and with Others (6:12)

C. Protection and Liberation (6:13a)

III. Emphasis on God

A. God's Prerogatives (6:13b). To God belongs the kingdom, the power and the glory.

Our Father in Heaven:

The message of Christ is unequivocally based on the unity of humanity. This is clear even in how Jesus taught us to pray. We bring the whole human family in our prayer: "Our Father in Heaven." Not our tribal God, not henotheism, the God of the clan, of the ethnic group, of the cast or of the class. No, the God of Scripture is the Universal God, the only creator of the Heavens, of the heavens of heavens, in fact of the whole of reality.

This first line of the Lord's prayer liberates us from the reduction of the Universal God into a local God, a tribal God. Jesus restores freedom to let God be God. It also freedom from ethnocentrism, or racism. We all have the same heavenly Father. Seventh-day Adventists, the people who emphasize the reliability of biblical creation should be champions of one humanity, all related.

Hallowed be thy name: This line indicates freedom to put God at the center of everything. It is to live in such a way that glorifying God, worshipping God takes absolute priority over everything else and even exclusivity.

Thy kingdom come is an indication of liberation from confusing the kingdoms of this world with the kingdom of God. It is also freedom from nationalism, tribalism, and dominionism.

Thy will be done on earth and it is in heaven. This is freedom from taking human social arrangements and constitutions, laws and policies as equivalent to the absolute will of God. These can be revised, improved, corrected and renewed, not so the absolute will of God revealed in Scripture.

Give us This day our daily bread. This is freedom from want. However, it is address to the one who is the ultimate provider of our subsistence, The God who owns everything.

Forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors. This is freedom from grudge. Freedom from holding contentious records against other people. It is freedom to let the past go and not to repeatedly revisit old wrongs and wounds one believes he or she has suffered.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. This is obviously freedom from evil. This is an Adventist prayer because it is another way to ask God to usher his kingdom a new universal order where there will be no evil (See Revelation 21:1-7) A new heaven and a new earth. The first earth has passed away. All tear will be wiped away. There will no longer be any death, no longer any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. God will make all things new he said.

This will be ultimate freedom. Free at last will be reality only then. Its fulfilment will come when total freedom will come.

For th Appeal:

In everything Jesus is our model.

At his inaugural discourse at the synagogue of Nazareth, he delineated his mission, which unquestionably is also our mission. It is about freedom.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
 Because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor
 He sent me to proclaim release to the captives
 And recovery of sight to the blind
 To set free those who are oppressed
 To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:18)