

Week 29

Religious Liberty

Key Verses

Acts 17:25-28 and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they would seek God, if perhaps they might feel around for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist...

+ Introduction

In colonial Virginia, neighbors did not always agree. Some backed the patriotic ideas of George Washington and Patrick Henry; others were loyal to the crown of King George.

For example, in 1770, a mob of Anglican parishioners attacked a Baptist meeting and hauled them to jail for disturbing the peace. Virginians disliked the preachers' calls to repentance, and they were offended by their biblical morality. Besides that, it was illegal to preach without a license from the Anglican church in colonial Virginia. The preachers were flogged and held in a mold and flea-infested jail for four months. Of course, they continued proclaiming the Gospel behind bars.¹

Eventually, Washington and the revolutionaries defeated the crown, and Virginia was no longer under a state religion. Religious liberty would be a hallmark of the new republic in America.

+ Liberty Is Given By God – Not By Governments

Religious liberty was not invented by America's founders, constitutional framers, or political philosophers. Those men recognized religious liberty as an "unalienable right" because it is given by God – not by a country or government. We can see the evidence and nature of this God-given freedom in the Bible.

a. Created to be In Relationship

GENESIS 1:27 declares "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them."

This first description of humanity shows that people are created for a “vertical” relationship with God and “horizontal” relationships with others.

Vertically, to be created “*in the image of God*” is to be like Him and, therefore able to relate to Him (Genesis 1:26) – at least in some ways.² At the very least, it means people possess a unique potential to glorify God (Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Psalm 86:9). God does not give His glory out lightly (Isaiah 42:8),³ but in creating people, He “*crowned*” them with “*glory and majesty*” (Psalm 8:5).

Being “*in the image of God*” means every person is “hard-wired” for a divine-human relationship. We must return to this truth often because it defines us more than anything else. It is part of our DNA. More often than we look in the mirror or at our phones, we should remind ourselves that we are “in God’s image,” made to give Him glory. Fittingly, the first major section of Scripture ends with a picture of this truth as people “*began to call upon the name of the LORD*” (Genesis 4:26).

Genesis also reveals horizontal human relationships with the words, “*male and female He created them*” (Genesis 1:27). This male-female distinction shows God’s good and perfect plan for people to live in relationship with one another.⁴ It also indicates God’s plans for lots of people to live in the world (see also Genesis 1:28: “*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...*”). All of this happens in the first 11 chapters of Genesis! Over time, human relationships would indeed multiply from the first family to various kingdoms, language groups, and nations.

Knowing that God created people to be in both vertical (divine-human) and horizontal (human-human) relationships helps us understand our place in the world. But we must remember that our relationship with God comes first. As Anthony Hoekema writes:

Man is a creature who owes his existence to God, is completely dependent on God, and is primarily responsible to God. This is his or her first and most important relationship. All of man’s other relationships are to be seen as dominated and regulated by this one.⁵

To summarize this point, spouses, children, parents, friends, neighbors, bosses, colleagues, employees, business partners, acquaintances, and governing authorities all have a place in the horizontal axis of our lives, but only God gives us “*life and breath and all things*” (Acts 17:25). For this reason, a person’s unique potential to relate to and glorify God is the most precious thing about them.

b. Relationship Killers

The Bible reveals our precious potential to glorify God, but it also reveals how we can ruin it. Genesis 3 and Romans 1 show us how people can corrupt their potential to glorify God by glorifying themselves and other creatures instead. Since Genesis 3, this corruption usually takes three forms:

Idolatry: Trying to replace a relationship with God with a false god, gods, or religious system is called idolatry, and it typically involves someone entrusting their soul to something they can see (i.e., a statue, a picture, a community, or a set of rituals). But the Apostle John warns people against the “*desires of the eyes*” and commands people to “*guard yourselves from idols*” (1 John 2:16, ESV; 1 John 5:21).

Ignorance: A growing number of people in America profess no religious belief, attend no religious gatherings, and have no knowledge of the God who created them. Instead of knowledge, they are living by their feelings and instincts. This is a life of ignorance. However, ignorance of God, like ignorance of traffic laws, has deadly consequences (Ezekiel 45:22; Psalm 73:22; Romans 10:3; Acts 17:30); John warns against this ignorant, instinctual approach to life, calling it “*desires of the flesh*” (1 John 2:16, ESV).

Insurrection: Ignorance may be a growing problem, but many people in the United States have still heard of God and the Bible. They may have even attended a church, heard the Gospel, and read the Bible, yet they are rejecting a relationship with God in favor of their own way (Isaiah 53:6). Like Adam and Eve, they are insurrectionists against God. Instead of living as creatures in God’s image, they seek to “*be like God*,” imagining themselves to be their own life’s creator (Genesis 3:5). This is pride, and John warns against “*the boastful pride of life*” (1 John 2:16).

We can see that just as every person has the potential to glorify God, every person equally can rebelliously ruin his or her potential.⁶ This rebellion makes us more than broken people in need of fixing; it makes us enemies of God in need of saving.

Sadly, the bad news does not stop there. When people ruin their vertical relationship, their horizontal relationships begin to decay. So, idolatry, ignorance, and insurrection toward God lead to difficulty, pain, and oppression in marriages, families, communities, organizations, and governments. This has gone on for so long that some people in the last century gave up on the possibility of a vertical relationship.

c. God has the Liberty to Restore Our Relationship

Some might wonder why God does not keep humanity on a tighter leash. Why does He allow so much idolatry, ignorance, insurrection, and rebellion?

Questions like that fail to consider God’s vast personal liberty and exhaustive plans. If God’s only plan were to show His glory as a Creator and Life-Giver, those questions would be troubling. But God demonstrates an even greater glory: He is a Redeemer. His plans are not frustrated by human rebellion. He is free to show mercy and grace toward rebels (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 103:8-14), and He delights to seek and find people who have lost a relationship with Him (Isaiah 62; Luke 15).

For all people, at all times, God answers the world’s lies with the Truth: Jesus Christ (John 14:6; Ephesians 4:21). Scripture makes this clearest in Acts 17 when Paul was addressing a group of pagan Greeks. The logic of Paul’s sermon is as follows:

- i. He acknowledges that the Greeks are “*very religious*” in their idolatry and explains that they are worshiping “*in ignorance*” (Acts 17:22-24).
- ii. He declares that people were created to “*seek God*” (Acts 17:26-27).
- iii. He calls the Greeks to “*repent*” of their idolatry and ignorance because the resurrected Jesus Christ will judge every person (Acts 17:29-31).

Jesus is God in the flesh. He is the only human who enjoyed a perfect vertical relationship, and through Jesus' death and resurrection, He offers reconciliation with God for anyone who repents of their idolatry, ignorance, and insurrection. Jesus is the Redeemer who restores rebels into a relationship with God. He is the Savior who sets people free from slavery to sin and the fear of condemnation. As Jesus, Himself says: *"Everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin... So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:34,36).

To summarize, the Bible reveals that conversations about religious liberty must come under a bigger conversation about God, creation, the fall, and redemption. If we do not understand these categories, we cannot understand what liberty is or why individual people and nations should tolerate differences of belief. Put another way; if we do not recognize the vertical relationship, horizontal relationships will never make sense.

+ Liberty Is Recognized By Good Governments

a. Two Kingdoms

Another Bible category that will help us understand religious liberty is the Kingdom of God. Just as Jesus Christ bought our salvation, He also taught about the Kingdom of God, and the two go hand-in-hand.

The Kingdom of God is not a physical place, not yet at least. It is God's righteous rule, or "government," over the lives of saved people through the Lordship of Jesus Christ (Isaiah 9:6). Think of the Kingdom of God as the proper name for a restored vertical relationship with God.

In God's Kingdom, He leads people by the Holy Spirit, who indwells every single believer and communicates God's instructions by His Word (Romans 8:9; 1 Timothy 3:16; Colossians 3:16). The best human evidence of this kingdom, or government, is churches, which are like outposts of God's Kingdom. Someday, He promises to return and rule His people in a new creation physically, but God's government is primarily spiritual until then.

Other governments exist, too: human ones. They define our horizontal relationships. At the highest level, they might be called kingdoms, republics, colonies, or even "autonomous zones." At smaller levels, they might be called families, tribes, or organizations. They all help us relate to the human authorities in our lives.

To be a Christian is to live under two governments or "two kingdoms." ⁷ Vertically, Christians live in the Kingdom of God. Their *"citizenship is in heaven"* (Philippians 3:20). Horizontally, they live under any number of human governments. They belong to families, neighborhoods, schools, clubs, workplaces, organizations, cities, states, and nations.

Jesus acknowledged the existence of these two governments in a person's life when He commanded people to *"render to Caesar [human government] the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's"* (Matthew 22:21). So, according to Jesus, people have obligations to both

their human authorities and to divine authority. Religious liberty makes room for people to fulfill their divine obligations without hindrance.

b. When the Two Kingdoms Clash

The most challenging dilemmas—and most brilliant moments—in human history have resulted when these “two kingdoms” have clashed. Scripture teaches that when they do, God must be obeyed above human authority. The apostles express this clearly in Acts 4.

ACTS 4:19-20 *“Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; ²⁰ for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.”*

Moses, too, under God’s authority, called Pharaoh to *“let my people go, that they may serve Me,”* because God’s kingdom was more important than Pharaoh’s (Exodus 8:20).

As the King of Kings, Jesus comforts His people when they face dilemmas like this, saying:

JOHN 16:33 *“These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”*

With Jesus as the ultimate Ruler and Judge, Christians have always argued that human rulers should make as much room as possible for their people to “give heed” to God.

Going back to the 3rd and 4th centuries, Christians like Tertullian and Lactantius advanced ideas of religious freedom in the crumbling pagan Roman Empire. Later, some medieval Christians argued in defense of their Jewish neighbors even as the ruling authorities harassed them.⁸

In the 16th century, Martin Luther famously expressed the essence of religious freedom when he was ordered to recant his Biblical teaching or face ex-communication and death at the Diet of Worms. He said, “I cannot and will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me! Amen!”⁹

The pages of history are filled with men and women who bravely chose to seek truth and obey their consciences rather than human authorities. From escaped slaves and emancipators to revolutionary heroes and reformers, people often recognize times when a higher authority must be obeyed above human authority. For this reason, the best human governments allow the most space for their people to live freely in two kingdoms.

✦ Liberty For Living and Letting Others Know

Over the last 500 years, Baptists have been big advocates for religious freedom. English Baptists like Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams worked for religious liberty before Enlightenment philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke wrote about it. Williams even founded the Rhode Island colony as a haven for Jews, Catholics, Quakers, and Native Americans to practice their religious beliefs free from government interference.¹⁰

Baptists defended religious liberty while other Christians like the Congregationalists of New England or the Anglicans of Virginia enforced religious uniformity because religious liberty flows from the Bible. Baptist Historian Nathan Finn summarizes their position:

- a. The Bible teaches that God alone is Lord of the conscience and the ultimate judge of our actions (2 Corinthians 5:10).
- b. In the Bible, God does not give human governments the authority to determine ultimate truth, coerce right beliefs, or punish unbelief.
- c. Therefore, a “free church in a free state” is the ideal arrangement for ensuring people’s religious liberty.¹¹

They also argued for religious liberty because of painful experiences. Baptists were (and are) church people who want to let God’s Word, not a national church, guide them in life and worship. They were also eager to spread the Gospel to anyone who would listen.¹² Their “nonconformity” to the official practices of the Church of England made them a target for bitter persecution. Baptists understood how human authorities could stifle religious faithfulness and hinder people from experiencing life-change through Jesus Christ.

These ideas influenced the founders of the American republic and laid the foundation for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. We must see that they emerged from a biblical worldview and from Christians seeking to live faithfully before God and their fellow men.

✦ Applying These Truths

Right now, we are living in another challenging dilemma, where the “two kingdoms” appear to be clashing in American society. As a result, two forces at work in the world are militating against God’s rule in the lives of Christians.

Moral Decay - As in every age, evil people are going “*from bad to worse*” (2 Timothy 3:13). Greed, injustice, oppression, immorality, and the above-mentioned idolatry, ignorance, and insurrection against God are at all-time highs. The Bible teaches us to expect this to happen.

Social Isolation - Never in human history has a people been as socially isolated as in modern America. Americans relate mostly to themselves and their technology; they relate little to other people and even less to God. This is the opposite of how we were created to live in Genesis 1, and the outcome of such radically lonely life patterns is yet to be seen fully.

Like a toddler left to play in a junkyard, lonely people living in moral decay are not free. They are fearful, self-justifying, and in great peril. However, it is still possible to walk back from this perilous moment:

- a. Civil authorities should respect religious freedom as much as possible. Christians and non-Christians must be free to hold and exercise their beliefs privately and publicly without fear of being silenced or sued.

- b. Christians – all Christians – should be sharing the Gospel. Some Christians are especially gifted in evangelism, but all Christians have a story to tell. God gives people the potential to exercise faith **to** believe and have life in His name. This is why one of the greatest texts in support of religious liberty is *“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you...”* (Matthew 28:19-20). If everyone has the potential to glorify God, then everyone should have the freedom to be baptized, be taught, and publicly observe Jesus’ commands.
- c. People should seek the truth. Jesus spoke to unbelievers when he told them that the *“truth will make you free”* (John 8:32). If people want to be free from this lonely, morally decayed moment in our society, they must start seeking the freedom that comes from knowing a Truth that goes beyond their personal desires.
- d. Churches should joyfully exercise their religious liberty. Publicly gathering, preaching, singing, and praying God’s Word are not government-given rights; they are God-given obligations. Churches should be bold but respectful in their posture toward the world: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.”* (Philippians 4:5).

+ Conclusion

In the early 1770s, a young Virginia aristocrat passed by those preachers proclaiming God’s Word behind bars in Culpeper County, Virginia. The man was enraged that the law allowed these preachers to be mistreated for publishing their beliefs.

The young Virginian was none other than James Madison, and he never forgot that scene at the Culpeper County jail.¹³ In the 29 Federalist Papers, he penned, and in the United States Constitution, Madison ensured that America would be a land that respected every person’s God-given potential to know God and live a life in relationship with Him. That is our challenge and opportunity even today.

Sources

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¹ Robert B. Semple, *History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*. Wipf and Stock, Eugene, OR, 1984; p. 24-37.

² Theologians call the divine attributes that God shares with people His “communicable” attributes. These include intelligence, morality, creativity, and spirituality (Acts 14:16; Genesis 4:1-2; Genesis 4:17-22). There are also many attributes that God does not share with people. These are called “incommunicable” attributes, like omnipotence, omniscience, eternality, immensity, simplicity, and impassivity.

³ Isaiah 42:1 also indicates that God “delights” in glorifying His son Jesus Christ (see also John 17:24). John 16 reveals that the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus too. Since God glorifies Himself in triune relationship, the “chief end” of human beings has always been to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” See the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, 1:1.

⁴ Some have argued that “male and female” has something to do with the “image of God”—as if God has both male and female qualities. This is unlikely since animals are also made male and female “after their kind,” and animals are not made in the image of God.

⁵ Anthony Hoekema, *Created In God's Image*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986, p. 75.

⁶ The obvious exception to this statement would be unborn babies, young children, and some mentally challenged people. The Bible teaches that each person will be judged “according to what he has done, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10), and that some “little ones” (i.e., children, but also people with the cognition of children) have “no knowledge of good or evil” (Deuteronomy 1:39).

⁷ St. Augustine famously called this concept “two cities,” explained in his masterpiece, *The City of God*.

⁸ <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/06/76161/>

⁹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/sola-scriptura.html>

¹⁰ Nathan Finn, “A Theological Defense of the Liberal State,” in *Public Discourse*, June 7, 2021, accessed June 10, 2021: <https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2021/06/76224/>; Williams is an enigmatic character in America’s early history. Although he associated with Baptists and helped found the first Baptist church in America, he was not a member of a Baptist church, and sometimes expressed errant theological beliefs.

¹¹ Finn, “A Theological Defense of the Liberal State.”

¹² The modern international missionary movement began among Baptists in London, who sent William Carey to spread the gospel in India.

¹³ <https://tifwe.org/madison-baptists-religious-liberty/>