

Religious Liberty

David Emmert

October 4, 2020

Celebration Baptist Church

Tallahassee, FL

Every election year, there are a variety of issues on the ballot that require me to do some research. Maybe local government is seeking to raise taxes to pay for new schools or roads. On the one hand, I don't want to stand in the way of progress. If a few more tax dollars can be leveraged to make our community better, I'm all for it.

But I also need to understand the current state of local schools and highways. Is there sufficient growth in the community to justify more construction? How well or poorly are existing facilities being used or maintained? These and other questions come flooding in my mind as I consider my vote. So I read as much as I can about the tax. As I look at the details, I begin to feel confidence about how I should vote. I walk into the polling place ready to cast my ballot in a manner consistent with my research.

But not all of my voting decisions are based on short term research. Often, I'm voting based on a deeply held conviction that has taken years to develop. It's a conviction that's based on my identity as a Christ follower. These are areas where compromise is just out of the question. You're probably the same way. You've got a set of convictions that you hold on to and it influences your vote no matter what.

Maybe for you one of your convictions is your loyalty to a political party. Let's go back to my example of a local tax increase for schools or roads. If the tax increase is being proposed by someone from a political party different than your own, that settles the question. It's automatically a bad tax increase regardless of what it accomplishes!

My granddad died decades ago, but I still remember how resolutely he followed his political party. It didn't matter the issue on the ballot. All he needed to see was a D or an R beside the name of the government official who was advocating for it to make his decision!

What about for us as Christians? As we think about the election that's coming up, are there bellwether convictions that as Christ followers, we should rely on to guide the way we vote? Absolutely! I believe there are some issues and values that should always be on the minds of Christian voters when we go to the polls. Over the next 3 weeks, we're going to look at 3 convictions that should be on your mind in any election. Here are the three issues: Religious Liberty, The Family, and Protecting the Weak.

So for the next 3 weeks we're going to take these on one by one. Today we'll get started with Religious liberty.

Our country's commitment to Religious Liberty is one of the things that sets America apart from countries around the world. Look at our constitution and at the bill of rights and you'll see Religious Liberty featured prominently. *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .*

When we think about Religious Liberty, we're thinking about the freedom to believe as we choose and to live according to those beliefs without fear of government interference. The perseverance of religious liberty should be important to you at every single election because this freedom benefits everyone. It doesn't matter if you're a liberal or a conservative, a democrat or a republican, a Christian, a Muslim a Jew or an atheist. Religious liberty is good for you.

So who came up with the idea of religious liberty? You might immediately assume that it was one of the framers of our constitution or another leader from colonial America, but the idea for religious liberty wasn't original to them. It was originally God's idea.

Think about the most famous passage of Scripture in the Bible:

John 3:16 "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life."

What do you see here? God extends an open invitation to anyone who is interested into a relationship with him. Then He gives them the responsibility of making a CHOICE about what they will believe.

This isn't the first time we see the idea that we are free to choose in the Bible. Think for a moment back to Genesis 1 and 2. God creates Adam and places him in the garden of Eden. I think about what that would have been like. It would have been absolutely mind blowing to see creation without any of the side effects of sin. No pollution, no drought or flood, no infestations, everything just as it should be. Then God really blew Adam's mind! He gave him a wife named Eve! Eve was so amazing, so beautiful and such a great fit that Adam broke out into poetry the first time he saw her! Guys, let me tell you, if you want to profess your love for a special lady, take a page from Adam's play book and use some amazing, theologically rich poetry! Those must have been special days. Living in a perfect place, literally with a perfect wife, in the presence of a perfect God. That sounds like paradise doesn't it? Well it was!

But God also recognized that Adam and Eve had to have the capacity to make up their own minds about what they would believe. So before he gave Adam the joy and responsibility of being the world's first husband, he gave Adam a choice:

GN 2:16–17 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree of the garden, 17 but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on the day you eat from it, you will certainly die."

I often hear people ask about this choice. They complain that it seems like a trap. But that's not it at all. It's religious freedom in its purest form. Adam and Eve could stay in the garden in His

presence and enjoy everything that he made for them or they could reject it all and strike out on their own.

Centuries later, God raises up the nation of Israel. He brings them out of slavery in Egypt into freedom in the promise land. Along the way, He invites them in to a relationship with him that's based on an agreement or a covenant.

God speaks to Moses and gives him a message for the nation. Here's what God says:

EX 19:5–6 ⁵ Now if you will listen to Me and carefully keep My covenant, you will be My own possession out of all the peoples, although all the earth is Mine, ⁶ and you will be My kingdom of priests and My holy nation.' These are the words that you are to say to the Israelites."

God says, Let's form an agreement: I've chosen you out of every nation on earth. I'll treat you like family. You'll be my people and in return, you all will live like a nation of priests — people who are on fire for my words and my commands.

Just like Adam and Eve, the Israelites have the freedom to make a choice. So Moses takes God's invitation to the people. He tells them everything that has been said,

EX 19:8 Then all the people responded together, "We will do all that the Lord has spoken."

So here, as was the case with Adam and Eve, God gives people the freedom to choose to follow him or reject him.

This has implications for government because God himself has given us the liberty to decide where we will place our ultimate allegiance. It follows that if God grants us such freedom, it's a human right and every person should be free from government demanding their primary allegiance.

Now think about the 10 commandments for a moment. Remember the first one?

Exodus 20:3 Do not have other gods besides Me. It's short. It's to the point. But what does it have to do with Religious Liberty? In this command, God frees us from being beholden first and foremost to an earthly king. We're free to place everyone else, every other form of authority, second to him.

So religious liberty is God's idea. It was the first freedom given to humanity. It allows us to choose what we will believe. If we choose to follow God, religious liberty protects us from government overreach and allows us to live our lives in such a way that we honor God first and foremost.

Religious liberty is a game changer because it makes it far easier for us as Christians to fulfill our mission and follow our conscience.

Think for a moment about Jesus' mandate known as the great commission:

Matthew 28:18–20 ¹⁸ Then Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Here Jesus commands everyone who follows Him to share the gospel, the good news that through Christ the power of God has entered in to history and made victory over sin and death possible. It's the truth that when we rely on Jesus work instead of our own for our relationship with God, His power is released in our lives. We're rescued from sin and judgement and we're brought in to fellowship with him and that fellowship isn't only for today, it lasts forever. Jesus commands us to take the message of the Gospel all over the globe.

The Religious Liberty we enjoy here in America makes it possible for you and me to follow Jesus' command to us without fear of persecution.

We've grown so accustomed to Religious Liberty being the law of the land here in America that we assume it's this way all over the world, but that's not the case.

Just 3 years ago, the country of Nepal criminalized the practice of evangelism and threatens anyone who shares Christ with fines of more than \$700 and up to five years in prison. In much of India, seeking to convert someone from Hinduism is now punishable by up to 2 years in prison.

This is a really big deal because around the world there are billions of people who have yet to have the opportunity to respond to the gospel. It's far better to be able to share about Jesus without the threat of persecution from the government hanging over your head.

But religious liberty is about more than just evangelism. Religious liberty protects us all from those times when the state exceeds its authority. By embracing religious liberty, the state is conceding that it is not the ultimate authority in the lives of its citizens. Instead, God is the ultimate authority. The state should not set itself up in such a way that it demands more sway over your conscience than God does.

This is really important because as Christ followers, we're to honor God first and foremost in everything that we do. That's exactly what it says in **1 Corinthians 10:31 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory.**

The idea that we honor God first in everything we do isn't just theory. This cuts in to the fabric of our everyday lives. It has a great impact on our interactions with government. If the government seeks to compel us to do something that we believe doesn't honor God, we're able to find protection from the government in the first amendment that guarantees religious liberty.

This is life giving to any sincere Christ Follower because what Christianity calls on us to believe and how it tells us to behave is not normal! It's incredibly counter cultural. We believe things others do not. We embrace a code that others do not. And all of this adds up. It means we're going to disagree with other people around us.

Now, we have a responsibility to disagree agreeably and in winsome ways, but that doesn't change the fact that honoring God in all that we do is going to place us at odds with an awful lot of what is widely accepted in our world today.

If Religious Liberty isn't preserved, if it isn't protected, then there will be people who will look at our differences and declare that we have no place in our society other than as an outcast. This makes Religious Liberty incredibly relevant today, because there are many people who believe that our right to disagree should be curtailed. There is tremendous pressure to restrict freedom of religion to only granting the freedom to worship. Meaning that Christians will be allowed to go to church, read our bibles, and talk about Jesus as a family, but we'll be forbidden from acting on those beliefs if they bring us into disagreement with the broader views of our culture.

So in every election cycle, every time we cast our ballot, we have to think about religious liberty. It is essential for us as Christ followers if we are to live distinctively in this world. Let's think for a moment about the current threats here in our country to religious liberty. Three really stand out.

First threat to Religious liberty: The death of absolute truth. Most people now see truth as something that is personal and subjective. In fact, a recent study found that only thirty-five percent of the American people believe that absolute truth exists.

This is in stark contrast with the views of the Bible. the Bible teaches that all Scripture is divinely inspired by God. **2 Timothy 3:16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness.** We can have healthy debate over how the Bible might best be interpreted, churches have been doing that for centuries! But that's very different than saying it isn't authoritative. Jesus also teaches us that Scripture isn't a moving target, it doesn't change. **Matthew 24:35 Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away.** Throughout history, the church has affirmed the authority and permanence of scripture as the standard by which our lives should be lived.

These convictions stand in stark contrast to the views held by many of our neighbors. It's not just that our culture believes in a different source for truth than we do, say a different holy book or code other than the Bible. It's that our culture believes that there is no objective source of truth at all. So if there is no truth -- then any effort to speak of an objective truth -- is seen as me trying to impose my version of the truth on you -- because truth is subjective, not objective. That's why in our modern context if we conflict over values of great enough importance, clinging to an absolute truth can be seen as hate speech.

Christians certainly understand that speech can be hateful. The Bible warns Christians to watch what they say because the tongue is a fire. But this is a very long way from saying that bringing up objective truth such as the Bible is hateful.

This is very difficult for us as Christians because we know that Jesus himself is truth. We believe the most loving thing that we can do is introduce someone to Jesus. But in our current cultural context, it isn't seen as loving, it's seen as hate because to accept Christ means to accept his lordship which means submitting our version of the truth to Him as the truth.

Because our culture has witnessed the death of absolute truth and as such, it is currently intolerant of the gospel which stands for absolute truth. And we need the protections of religious liberty so that as Christians we can continue to speak in the public square, or be allowed to teach in academic settings because we are living in a day when our culture is reacting against the idea of absolute truth.

The second threat to Religious liberty we should consider is **the rise of sexual orientation and gender identity rights**. Over the last decade or so, proponents of sexual orientation and gender rights have made substantial progress in bringing alternative lifestyles into the mainstream of American life. Same sex marriage is now the law of the land and health care insurance companies are expected to cover things like hormone treatment or gender reassignment surgery. Many now see sexual rights as a civil rights issue, and it's this effort to make gender equality and sexual rights take on the same status as the fight for racial equality is problematic for most Christians.

Biblically, we're commanded to treat people from different races, regardless of their gender, with great respect. Consider **Galatians 3:28 There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus**. Here the Bible makes clear that we should not allow our race, status or gender divide us. Every effort should be made to see to it that men and women from all races are treated equally.

You might look at that passage and ask, *Why should people with a different sexual orientation not be included in this call for unity?*

Because the Bible teaches that our sexual identity is given to us by God. He has created us male and female and He has also spelled out for us the right context for sexual expression.

You may remember in week one we said that God determines what is right and wrong, we decide if we will obey or disobey. We don't have to do things God's way. We're free to go a completely different direction in our choices, but this doesn't change the reality that God has given us clear guidelines on how sex can be a blessing and not a curse.

Here's a quick summary of the biblical teaching regarding sexual expression: The Bible teaches that marriage is intended to be a relationship between one man and one woman for a lifetime. If you're married, sex is for you, if you're not married, sex is not for you at this time.

That's it! The sexual ethic of the Bible is short and sweet! But just because it's short and sweet doesn't mean that it isn't complicated! Accepting this simple, biblical ethic creates a religious liberty challenge for the church, because the Bible's viewpoint on sexuality is so different than the viewpoint held by so many other Americans.

There has been an outcry that the church change its stance on this subject. Frank Bruni's opinion piece in the New York Times a few years ago summarizes this idea pretty well: ". . . *homosexuality and Christianity don't have to be in conflict in any church anywhere . . . in the end, the continued view of gays, lesbians and bisexuals as sinners is a decision. It's a choice. It prioritizes scattered passages of ancient texts over all that has been learned since — as if time had stood still, as if the advances of science and knowledge meant nothing.*"

The author is effectively saying that the church should just move on from biblical truth. It's old. It's outdated and frankly, we've learned a thing or two since it was written so let's pack up this stale belief system and move on.

So what does this have to do with Religious Liberty? More and more often, the state is agreeing with the notion that the Bible is out of date and is favoring sexual rights over religious liberty. We've seen this played out in stories of bakers and photographers who've chosen not to serve at a same sex wedding because using their artistic talents to celebrate something they believe is wrong would violate their conscience. In 2006 a woman named Elane Huguenin [Eu-gen-un] politely declined to work at such a wedding. She was taken before the New Mexico Human Rights Commission and was ordered to pay over \$6,000.00 in fees. The case made it to the New Mexico Supreme Court, which upheld the ruling against the photographer. New Mexico Supreme Court Justice Richard Bosson wrote in his opinion that *The Huguenins are free to think, to say, to believe, as they wish; they may pray to the God of their choice and follow those commandments in their personal lives wherever they lead. The Constitution protects the Huguenins in that respect and much more. But . . . In the smaller, more focused world of the marketplace, of commerce, of public accommodation, the Huguenins have to channel their conduct, not their beliefs . . . I would say to the Huguenins, with the utmost respect: it is the price of citizenship.*

The message both from our culture and our state seems to be in the same vein: jettison your biblical values, come into the mainstream, or pay the consequences.

You may be thinking, *It serves her right, she should have no problem taking pictures at a wedding.* But regardless of where you stand on sexual rights, or how you feel about bakers and photographers who refuse to serve at a same sex wedding, it should bother you that the state would seek to compel someone to jettison a time-honored belief system for the simple reason that times have changed. Because if this becomes commonplace, no belief system is safe.

Let's look at one more threat to religious liberty: **Birth control, health care laws and abortion.** Changes a few years ago to our health care system included mandates that require businesses

and organizations offer their employees birth control and abortion care as a part of their health care plans. Exemptions were made for churches, but it didn't provide adequately for the needs of other organizations or private employers with strong religious convictions. This led to a number of court battles by people of faith who believe that abortion, and in some cases, birth control or certain types of birth control, is immoral.

Two cases gained a lot of notoriety. One is known as the Hobby Lobby decision. The Hobby Lobby company is a private business owned by Christians. They didn't want to provide certain types of birth control that they saw as nothing more than abortion measures. Their refusal led to millions of dollars in fines from the federal government and ultimately a trip to the Supreme Court. In that case, the Supreme Court majority found that a closely held private corporation could not be required to offer birth control and contraception coverage if it violated religious beliefs.

The other notable case is known as The Little Sisters of the Poor. The Little Sisters is a Catholic organization that cares for thousands of the poor and elderly here in America. As a catholic group, they refused to provide birth control for their employees. Catholic views on birth control are well known, and they weren't willing to set aside these time-honored convictions in the name of health care. After a lot of legal wrangling, they were granted an exception by the federal government. But their ordeal wasn't over. The state of Pennsylvania sued to force the little sisters to comply with federal law and provide birth control.

Just a couple of months ago, the Supreme Court ruled that the federal government had the right to give the exception the Little Sisters had received. But the drama may not yet be over for the little sisters of the poor. That exemption can still be taken away by updating federal law. Abortion is another piece of this that has huge implications for religious liberty. Back in 1980, something called the Hyde Amendment went into effect here in the United States. This amendment prohibits federal tax dollars from paying for abortion in most cases. This way, a tax payer who doesn't agree with abortion doesn't have to be a party to paying for one every time they pay their taxes.

But there is a strong movement among progressives to expand federal participation in abortion and repeal the Hyde amendment, effectively forcing people of faith to pay for abortions. So what does all of this have to do with religious liberty? Well if the state can force someone to violate their conscience by telling them they have to pay for something like abortion or a type of birth control they find morally objectionable, then the state can effectively say that they, not God, have the authority to set the terms of your conscience. It reduces God to a second level consideration because you can believe whatever you want, but you're going to do what we tell you because we're the state and we're absolute, not God.

So why should you think about religious liberty every time you vote? I mean, you may be looking at the 3 threats to religious liberty we just considered and you may think, David, I probably disagree with you about all three of these issues. I get it! I would ask anyone to do

their own study in the Bible concerning these issues and others. Prayerfully consider what the Bible has to say and then seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as you draw your conclusions. But the fact that we might disagree is precisely the reason that you should care about religious liberty and why it's a primary issue for all Americans regardless of what they believe.

Religious liberty ensures that we have the freedom to disagree. It protects our right to let our own conscience guide us. If you are committed to living by scripture, you're protected. If you don't believe in God at all and utilize a completely different value set than Christianity, you're also protected.

You may not agree with the photographer or the baker who doesn't want to be a part of a gay wedding, but do you want to live in a country where they can't refuse? Do we want to live in a place where the state can force the little sisters of the poor to pay for contraception or birth control when they've been clear on their beliefs about this for generations?

Do we want to live in a place where public opinion, bereft of the leadership of the Spirit, or for that matter, even serious study, can effectively interpret the Bible for us by telling us which parts are out of date?

Defending liberty today, even if you disagree with the church on some of these issues, protects us all from future encroachments later. That's why I think about Religious Liberty every time I head to the polls.

So as Christ followers, what do we do with all of this?

First, make a choice to make God's Word a top priority in your life. Here at Celebration we affirm every Sunday that the Bible is true. We affirm that it's God's Word, inspired by the Spirit of God and that it is just as relevant today as it was when it was written. So as a Christ Follower, we choose to evaluate culture through the lens of Scripture, not judge Scripture through the lens of culture. Culture always changes, the Bible is the same yesterday, today and forever. For Christ Followers, it's our compass that always points North regardless of which way the winds are blowing.

Second, be willing to take a stand for biblical truth. When you're standing around at work and a discussion on ethics comes up, don't be afraid to identify with Scripture. We're to always have such conversations in a winsome way. We aren't to be quarrelsome or mean spirited. We're supposed to always speak with a deep love for people, but we need to be able to say, *This is who I am, this is what I believe and this is why.*

If you work for government, consider what the policies and procedures you help craft in your department might say about religious liberty. Work to make sure it's supported because Religious liberty benefits us all.

Finally, use your voice to call on both parties to clearly affirm Religious liberty. As Christians, we're growing more into the minority every day. We can't just assume that it will always be permitted for us to live out a biblical worldview. There's an effort underway to effectively change religious freedom to the mere freedom of worship. "Freedom of worship" implies that religious faith is something to be contained within the four walls of a church or home. By contrast, a healthy view of religious liberty protects the freedom to speak and to act on the basis of faith in both private and public.

Take the time to examine both party platforms and see what they say about religious liberty. Are they seeking to reduce it to freedom of worship, or are they committed to protecting our ability to speak and act according to our faith?

Research both the Republican and Democratic candidates for president. Both have spent time in political office. Both have generated a track record on the issue of religious liberty. Do your homework before you vote to make sure that Religious Liberty remains our first freedom. As a country, we've got a lot of competing interests. Most people are not interested in living biblically and that's absolutely their right. As Christ Followers, we should respect their freedom and remember that it was given to them by God himself all the way back during the days of Adam and Eve. But imagine the impact if as Christ Followers we can consistently find ways to winsomely share the good news about how real freedom is found in Christ. Imagine your friend, neighbor or coworker and how things could be for them if they came to accept his loving offer of grace. That's what's at stake with Religious Liberty. It's the freedom to have that conversation. It's the freedom to talk about something that touches eternity.

Invest in ensuring that freedom persists and pray that Religious Liberty will continue to be alive and well in our country.

And I would ask today that if you have not done so, you would take a moment right now and just consider your own life and how it might be different you considered the claims of Christ. Would you do that now as we pray together? Pray