

A Sermon for Religious Liberty Sabbath

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Focus on Freedom: Biblical Insights About a Divine Gift

From a biblical faith perspective, to focus on freedom, on religious freedom also called freedom of religion or belief, is in fact to focus on the gospel, the good news. Beyond being a legal ruling and a valuable instrument in international declarations, in national constitutional provisions, religious liberty is a spiritual endowment given by the God of freedom who created freedom for love to be possible.

Religious liberty is a foundational prerequisite for covenant with God, for covenant with others in society to be genuine. This is because love cannot be forced. It can only exist through personal decision from a free will. In fact, without religious liberty and its core component of freedom of conscience, democracy the best yet socio-political arrangement cannot be feasible.

But more importantly, freedom of religion or belief is inseparable from the good news or gospel.

The clearest content of the gospel or good news is the Advent of a Savior. It has two aspects which make it comprehensive. The first Advent and the Second Advent of the same Savior.

Moreover, from an ecclesial perspective, the heart of the Adventist identity, message and mission is the message of the Advent. This message can be called the prophecy of prophecies, consisting in two events. The incarnation of the Son of God and the coming of one like a son of man or son of humanity.

Both Advents are about freedom.

The first one which climaxed at the cross and the resurrection, the ascension and high priestly ministry in heaven is indeed about freedom. Jesus, in his discourse at the synagogue of Nazareth, specified the following:

“The Spirit of the lord is upon me
Because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18)

In this text, there is a recurrence of the reality of freedom: liberty to the captives, liberty to the oppressed, and general amnesty of the jubilee year. To these, one can add freedom from poverty, and freedom from disability.

Part of the work of liberation began to be fulfilled during Jesus’ earthly ministry. Jesus healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, healed the lame, resurrected the dead, even though that did not mean complete immunity against death, because even Lazarus died after being resurrected. It is not by chance that in the gospel of John, for example, Jesus’ acts of healing were called signs. John 2:11 puts it as follows:

“This the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.”

In Colossians 2, the Apostle Paul reminds us that at the Cross, we are forgiven, which is freedom from guilt and condemnation. Christ cancelled the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. “This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” Furthermore, “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame by triumphing over them in him” (Col 2:13-15). This is wonderful news of freedom.

There are certain acts of God, acts of liberation, which will be completed at the Second Coming and made permanent. For example, at the Second Coming we will be delivered from the fragility and vulnerability of corruptible bodies subjected to the intrusion of viruses, bad bacteria, microbes and other form of harmful pathogens.

At the Second Advent there will be freedom not only from disease but also from war, from violence and violations of people’s integrity, whether physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and social. There will be freedom from being discriminated against or criminalized because of one’s faith. It will be the real advent of peace, complete, total shalom.

However, there are aspects of liberation that we already benefit from. The first Advent secured us the following:

1. We are delivered from eternal separation from God. The assurance that the second death has no power over those who believe in Jesus Christ as He promised.
2. We are liberated to fellowship and communion with God. The new covenant has reestablished direct access to God in the name of Jesus through the Holy Spirit.
3. We are delivered from the condemnation of sin according to Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”
4. We are liberated from the power of sin.
5. We are liberated to unite with Christ. His destiny becomes our destiny. His righteousness, our righteousness, his life, our life. We have died with him and now are resurrected with him. We are officially citizens of his kingdom in heaven. Even when we pray “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” we are in fact expressing our yearning for Jesus’ Second Advent, when he will finally establish his kingdom.

The first Advent then secured freedom from condemnation, freedom from the power of sin. The Second Advent preceded by the judgment regarding the destiny of persons in reference to their relation to the savior climaxes in the Second Coming. It will secure freedom from the presence of evil, freedom from the presence of Satan, and freedom from death.

The most precious gift will be the fact it will secure freedom from alienation from God, freedom from separation from God. It will be freedom to receive the gift of eternal life, the gift of immortality and everlasting fellowship with God and with redeemed humanity, the universal people of God.

The gospel then is entirely about the Savior, God’s demonstrable love for human beings God created in God’s image.

Parsing these truths through the biblical record

The gospel or good news is about the arrival of a savior who was previously announced by the prophets.

Isaiah prophesied:

“For to us a child is born
 To us a son is given
 And the government shall be upon his shoulder
 And his name shall be called
 Wonderful, Counselor, Might God
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace
 Of the increase of his government and of peace
 There will be no end,
 On the throne of David and over his kingdom
 To establish it and to uphold it
 With justice and with righteousness

From this time forth and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 4:6-7)

The new Testament begins with a deliberate choice of titles attributed to Jesus Christ. He is the Son of David. He is Son of Abraham. Both titles are fulfillment of promises God made to David and to Abraham.

To David, God told him that his throne will never lack one of his descendants upon it. The problem is the fact that the Davidic dynasty ended with the conquest of Judah, the exile of its last king. Matthew is telling his readers that the real king, descendant of David has come in Jesus Christ.

Then son of Abraham also indicated that the descendant of Abraham, the one who would bring the blessing, has come in Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham.

But then in the gospel, Jesus repeatedly refers to himself as the son of man or son of humanity, as if to tell us that the new representative of the whole human family has come.

From a national figure, son of David, to a global cosmic figure, the Son of Humanity. Fundamentally, the gospel is the deliverance of humanity from evil, from occupation, from the invasion of evil spirits who transformed planet earth into an occupied territory.

This deliverance is enacted by God. It is God in Christ incarnate who performs this deliverance.

The Son of God is also the Son of humanity. This is the distinctive feature of the Christian faith. God has embraced the human family to show solidarity and deliver the human family. Talking about the incarnation and the mediatorial work of the high priest,

"since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death we subject to lifelong slavery. Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:14-18).

The office of the High Priest is part of the God's ministry of deliverance. This is part of the beauty of the Advent message. Prior to the Second Advent, the high priest is involved in the ministry of deliverance, deliverance from fear, deliverance from the fear of death that the devil confines those who are not connected with the High priest. This high priest as revealed in the book of revelation, speaks to his church in order to deliver all his followers from fear, from compromise, and from self-sufficiency to name but a few of the obstacles to genuine communion with God. The work of Jesus as priest is an integral part of the plan of salvation that God has devised.

Key in the plan of salvation is the incarnation of the Word. The gospel of John tells us that the Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Key among the work of the Word is deliverance from ignorance about God. John says that “no one has ever seen God, the Only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” The word delivers us from false ideas about God. Truth about God comes from Jesus. Grace from God comes through Jesus Christ. Truth and grace are integral part of the plan of salvation. Jesus brings both.

A foundational aspect of this salvation is God’s motivation as expression of God’s character. God is love (1 John 4:8). God so loved the world that He gave His unique Son so that whoever believe in Him may not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

It is then love that is at the heart of the whole plan of salvation.

It is also love that is the justification and goal of freedom. This happens to be demonstrated in Galatians 5, where the Apostle Paul stated that “it is for freedom that Christ set us free.” He made it clear that the life of freedom is inseparable from the life of being led by the Holy Spirit. He clarifies, “For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love” (Galatians 5:5-6). Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul specified that where the Spirit is there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:18).

The climax of the whole development of Galatians 5 is that the whole Christian faith is predicated upon the reality of freedom. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, the first of which is love that is the true expression of freedom. The other fruit of the Holy Spirit are equally inseparable from freedom. They are joy, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. All these fruits are predicated upon the reality of freedom.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit liberates us from hatred. The Christian faith requires love for the enemy. Without love argued the Apostle Paul even prophecy is nothing. Freedom is essential to all the fruit of the Spirit.

Only a free person can truly enjoy joy. A free person is a person of peace. Jesus said “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.” Only a free person takes patience as a virtue and wait on the Lord in order to let God be God. Only a free person takes kindness, gentleness, and goodness as due to others. Only a free person takes faithfulness as an indispensable moral virtue that displays one’s character, loyalty and commitment to God’s purpose for the world. Only a free person keeps his or her instincts, drives and desires subjugated to be in complete conformity and harmony with God’s revealed character. Only a free person is not subjected to the tyranny of self and its myriads of expectations from others.

Freedom then is willed by God. Where the Spirit is there is liberty (2 Corinthians 3:17).

When it comes to the connection of freedom with the Son of God. There are multifaceted dimensions that need to be taken into consideration.

Jesus said if the Son makes you free you are free indeed.

The ways Jesus brings freedom are multifaceted. His very name is incontrovertibly connected to freedom. His name means that “Yahweh is Savior.” In other words, it is God who saves us, not a mere creature, not an angel, a spirit, a human, but God. Only God can make us free indeed.

God's People and the Everlasting Gospel: The Gospel in the Three Angels' Messages

In the heart of the book of Revelation, a unique expression is used: the Everlasting gospel. The Everlasting Gospel is the unchangeable good news. It is a gem with multifaceted wonders. God is not caught by surprise. When God decided to create the world, he also fathomed a plan of salvation.

Jesus will tell the redeemed: “Come all of you who are blessed by the Father and enter the kingdom that was prepared for you before the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34). God has prepared a kingdom for the redeemed before the foundation for the world.

To understand the meaning of the expression “everlasting gospel” one has to take the following into consideration.

There is no stand-alone chapter or section in the book of Revelation. Everything is connected. The gospel is in full display in every chapter.

In chapter one Jesus pronounces the following doxology, which is meaningful and connected to the reality of freedom.

“From Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first born from the dead, the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom priest to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him. And all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him. Even so. Amen” (Rev 1:7).

In chapter 5, for example, without the only one worthy to open the scroll, without the only one capable of giving meaning to life, meaninglessness would have prevailed. If the lamb was not slain and standing there would be no future for our world. But the lion of the tribe of Judah has conquered. He has brought the New Covenant. He has made us priests and kings (Revelation 5:9-10). Hope has again settled overcoming the despair expressed in the Apostle's John weeping.

The everlasting gospel has multifaceted dimensions which certainly contain the good news of judgment, the hour of judgment has come, we are told. This is good news. For one thing, Babylon would not have fallen if the hour of judgment would not have come. But we do not want to miss the various dimensions of the everlasting gospel. I would like to highlight one overarching, undergirding dimension of the gospel. The gospel is about freedom.

The everlasting gospel is fundamentally about freedom, liberation from the captivity of despair and meaninglessness, from authoritarian and oppressive regimes, from the dragon and the beasts. It is also about hospitality and introduction into the kingdom of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. In the context of the three angels' messages the gospel is the following:

It is freedom from idolatry

It is freedom from captivity in Egypt and Babylon

It is freedom from sharing the fate of God's enemy and avoid total annihilation.

A. First Angel's Message

The first angel's message is in essence freedom from idolatry.

An invitation to life, to God's awareness, being mindful of God, constantly living in the presence of God which is the equivalent of piety. We are invited to a life of affirmation of God's sovereignty, God's Rights. We give God all the glory in all gratitude for his being the creator.

B. The Second Angel's Message

*Is about freedom and end of exile, freedom from oppression, it is freedom from the rule of totalitarian regimes whether political or religious. Freedom from the message and miracles of Babylon.

*When God's people were told that Babylon had fallen, they understood that it is a time of exodus, homecoming, and reunion. It was indeed the advent of freedom.

*It is the good news of home at last.

C. Third Angel's message

*An invitation to choose based on freedom

*A warning about the consequences of our existential choice

*It is also an invitation to embrace the righteousness of God. It is freedom from defilement

*It is an appeal to absolute dedication to God, a commitment to unswerving allegiance to God.

Insights into the Gift of The Sabbath and the gospel

It is crucial to state upfront that the Sabbath does not save anyone. Like the gift of grace, the Sabbath is a gift of God. There is only one savior, God's Son, Jesus Christ. God gave the gift of the Sabbath at creation and a commandment to remember at the creation of His people at Sinai. The Sabbath is the anniversary not only of creation which is explicit in the 10 commandments, but it is also the commemoration of our liberation (Deuteronomy 5: 15).

"You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath."

The Sabbath is a perpetual Independence Day, celebrated every week.

A. The Importance and Centrality of the Exodus and the role of the Sabbath

The exodus event is at the foundation of biblical religion. It informs the fundamental understanding of God's dealings with His elected people and the world. Judaism self-understanding is grounded on this event. Likewise, Christianity, and in particular the ministry of Jesus can properly be understood when seen in the light of the Exodus event. The major themes of salvation, gospel, and kingdom are inseparable from the theme of the Exodus.

Structure

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 chiastic fashion around the following themes: liberation, covenant (kingdom, law and atonement) and worship.

- I Liberation announced (1-6:27)
Oppression in Egypt, Moses' Calling
- II Liberation delayed (6:28-11)
Egyptian plagues, Pharaoh's Refusal
- III Liberation 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

VII Worship fulfilled (35-40)¹

The Thrust

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

B. The Covenant and the Gift of the Sabbath

The promotion to the status of son was sealed by a covenant and accompanied by a gift, the gift of the law. The purpose of biblical Law is to protect human beings and their relationships. At the heart of the law stands the Sabbath, a sign according to the prophet Ezekiel.

This sign was so important that God asked His people to remember it. The Sabbath was supposed to become a day of active remembrance. In Hebrew the commandment uses the Infinitive absolute, which has more force than the Imperative. God designed the Sabbath for us to remember the past on the one hand; that is to commemorate God's gracious gift of creation, redemption, sanctification, election, values, on the other hand, in giving us the Sabbath, God helps us remember the future. The Sabbath is prefiguration, anticipation and a foretaste of eternity to come.

As a sign the Sabbath signified a multifaceted jewel that helps us remember who God is, who we are, how to relate to God, and how to relate to one another.

The Sabbath is a gift at the center of the gift of the Law. It was supposed to point to what really matters to God. The Sabbath is all about relationships, relationships based on the awareness of God's ultimate values.

God's purposes of love and fellowship are signified through the Sabbath.

First the Sabbath is connected to creation. As such it signifies or points to who God is, the Creator. God's sovereignty is celebrated through the Sabbath.

The Sabbath also indicates who we are and the reasons why we were created.

Following are the signified of which the Sabbath is the signifier.

1. God is creative, that is part of God's nature. The Sabbath we celebrate God's creativity.
2. God has created us in God's image and likeness.
3. God wants to bless us.
4. God wills to be known.

¹ See E. Zenger, Israel am Sinai. Analysen und Interpretationen zu Exodus 17-34, Altenberge, 1982: cf. C. Wiener. Le Livre de l'Exode (Cahiers Évangile 54), Paris, Cerf, 1985, p. 11ss.

5. God desires to establish an everlasting covenant.
6. God invites us to reciprocate His love.
7. God offers us the joy of His fellowship.
8. God privileges us to live a life of holiness, wholly in reference to God.

As a response, we live a life of gratitude, fearing God, considering him in all our ways, warding off all evil, giving God all the glory, and worshipping Him in spirit and truth.

The recipients of God's gifts become God's gifts to the world.

Practical Implications

1. The Sabbath is a reminder of God's absolute priority
2. Creation should be given back to its rightful owner
3. Since we were created in God's image, we are not the result of a mere natural selection. We have received a supernatural election.
4. The Sabbath underlines the sacredness of the whole of life, including time.
5. Through the Sabbath God declares that human beings are sacred (there is no distinction, neither male, nor female, all one in Christ).
6. Through the Sabbath, God invites us to see people differently, not as mere entities to be used, misused, and abused, but as God's properties that should not be violated.
7. The Sabbath, therefore, is a wonderful opportunity to put respect back into our dealings with others.
8. The Sabbath is inseparable from Jesus Christ, the restorer of the dignity of God's people, the ultimate gift of God.
9. The Scripture testifies of Jesus. As Jesus experienced the Exodus as the prophet Hosea reported "I called my Son out of Egypt," Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel. The Sabbath points to His person.
10. Jesus recapitulates the history of humanity since Adam. He is signified through the sign of the Sabbath.

C. Jesus and the Sabbath

1. The Sabbath points to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the climax of the covenant. He is also the climax of the Sabbath.
2. The Sabbath is meaningful as we develop a passion for Jesus Christ.
3. As we delight in Jesus the Sabbath takes on special significance.
4. Jesus is the gate of the Sabbath. No one enters the Sabbath but through Him.
5. Jesus began His ministry in a Jubilee year which is connected to the Sabbath.
6. He fulfilled the purpose of the Sabbatical year. He provides the liberation, the rest, and the fellowship that the Sabbath festivals signified.
7. The Sabbath is connected to the heavenly Sanctuary. In ancient Israel the High Priest was involved in a special ministry the Day of Atonement. The High Priest stood in the most holy place of the sanctuary bearing the names of the children of Israel. The Day of

Atonement was a Sabbath. Today, Jesus Christ is in His heavenly sanctuary bearing our names upon His shoulders and on His heart. In Exodus 28:29, we learn that Aaron bore the names of the Israelites on the breast-piece of judgment on his heart when he went into the sanctuary, to bring them to regular remembrance before the Lord. So does Jesus today. He bears our names in His heart. What a comforting thought connected to the Sabbath. While we wait for the blessed hope, the day we will be introduced to Sabbath in eternity we can lift our eyes to the Heavenly sanctuary where Jesus is cleansing the records, while the Holy Spirit is cleansing our mentalities, hearts, and desires, sealing in us God's life for the day of final redemption. Christ is the Everlasting High Priest, the source of eternal salvation (Heb 5:8). He holds His Priesthood permanently therefore He is able to save us to the uttermost and forever (Heb 7:25).

8. The Sabbath signifies the ultimate purpose of God: everlasting fellowship in love, holiness and righteousness.
9. The Sabbath is a pre-figuration of eternity.
10. The Sabbath is a festival of joy, everlasting joy.

Recapitulations: Foundational Theses

1. The word which best captures the meaning of the Gospel is the word freedom or liberty and the concept which encapsulates the various aspects of this freedom is atonement, God's overarching work to reconcile the whole world to himself.
2. The good news is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Paul continues that in the good news the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "the righteous shall live by faith" (Romans 1:16-17).
3. The good news is the "character of God," God's righteousness which expresses God's benevolent disposition towards all human beings, God created in God's image. The reality that best expresses this character is the declaration in 1 John 4:8, according to which "God is love."
4. The "character of God" has been revealed in the one who is the expression of God's substance or the representation of God's nature, according to Hebrews 1:3.
5. The good news is the good news of direct access to God. The end of mediations. This expresses the new covenant of freedom from holy places, freedom from pilgrimages, freedom from holy objects, freedom from holy personnel who claim to be mediators between God and God's people.
6. Jesus Christ is in fact the good news of God. "For God so loved the world that He gave his unique son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Jesus' incarnation, teachings, death, resurrection, ascension, high priestly ministry, enthronement and reign as universal king is the good news.
7. Ultimately the good news is total freedom to worship God and to have access to everlasting fellowship with God in love. It is freedom to worship and to fellowship. This aspect highlights the fact that it is stealing God's prerogatives when human beings prevent other human beings from having religious freedom or freedom of conscience. Total freedom to worship according to the dictates of one's conscience is a human right. This is the reason why freedom is so essential to what it means to be human. The good news of being created in the image of God means humans should be free to reciprocate

God's love, free to decide what to believe and what not to believe. Without this prerogative and prerequisite, love cannot flourish.

God is indeed the God of Freedom. Let all who are connected with Jesus promote freedom just as he did in Nazareth.

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