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Ideas, Suggestions, and Material for a Sermon on Religious Liberty day

Shared with the trust in your ability to adapt the content to your own circumstances.

**Title: Ambassadors of Freedom and Truth: God’s Agents of Reconciliation**

**Introduction**

The Sabbath of religious liberty is an opportunity to help people everywhere develop capacity in understanding that religious freedom is a fundamental human right that must be promoted and protected. Much is at stake. Obviously this includes the freedom to worship on the Sabbath, and the right not to work or not to take exams on a given day in harmony with one’s conscience and religious or ideological convictions. But there is much more to the issue. Religious freedom is a compound freedom that includes all the other fundamental freedoms.

**I. A brief reminder of the meaning and scope of religious liberty:**

Religious Liberty is essentially the freedom to live in accordance with one’s conscience or belief.

Freedom of belief is one of the foundational principles behind the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed upon in 1948. Article 18 states:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

Professor Heiner Bielefeldt has helpfully highlighted key aspects that are at times contested but are an intrinsic part of freedom of religion.

“Human beings have the freedom to adopt or change a religion or belief, to persuade others by engaging in non-coercive missionary activities, to hold worship and other ceremonies either alone or with others, to abandon a religious community, to manifest their convictions in private or in public, to educate their children in conformity with their own faith, to import religious literature from abroad, and to communicate across state boundaries.

If people join together in old or new religious or belief communities, these communities should be able to undertake important functions, such as owning property or employing staff, which may require a status of legal personality that should be accessible without undue bureaucratic burdens.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The 2014 USCIRF report expands:

"These include: wearing religious dress or symbols; observing dietary restrictions; participating in rituals associated with certain stages of life; possessing property rights regarding meeting places; and maintaining the freedom to manage religious institutions, possess, publish, and distribute liturgical and educational materials, and raise one's children in the religious teachings and practice of one's choice."

Religious freedom is further defined as follows:

“Religious freedom, …is the right, protected by law, to engage in the religious quest, either alone or in community with others, in private and in public. It begins with an interior right to believe or not. It typically carries the believer into relationships with others of like mind and spirit and, ultimately, into associations that have both private and public services, the purchase or sale of property, investment of funds, building houses of worship, training clergy, and inviting others to join the religious community.

Some religious acts, by individuals or communities, represent a public pursuit of religious obligation, or witness of truth claims, in civil society: for example, the establishment of religious hospitals, schools and colleges, homes for the aged, soup kitchens, or immigration services. Some carry religious actors into political discourse and competition, forming religion-based political arguments for or against laws and policies.

Religious freedom is the civil right of both individuals and communities to perform these acts on the basis of full equality under the law.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Freedom of religion is explicitly recognized in international law through:

* The UN Charter
* The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
* The Helsinki Accords
* The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief
* The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

In essence, the three pillars that sustain the whole UN system are connected to human rights. They point to the need for security and peace, justice and development, and human rights in terms of individual liberty, personal equality, and human dignity. The individual liberty pillar translates in freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity. The concept of freedom therefore plays a central role in what people need. Seventh-day Adventists have emphasized the concept of religious freedom in particular.

**II. A Seventh-day Adventist Contribution: Biblical Roadmaps on Freedom**

For Seventh-day Adventists there is more to the issue than defending religious liberty. We bring more to the conversation, a biblical and spiritual dimension of religious liberty.

**A. Our Context and Need**

Jesus sent all his followers into a world that had lost God’s way. He came to proclaim liberty to the captives. To those who were restricted physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, economically or politically, he came to proclaim the good news of freedom, which he articulated as blessings in the Sermon on the Mount. Our world today is all the more in need for such a mission. It is a world where freedom, justice and peace are becoming a privilege but for a few. Every part of the world is plagued with injustices and a variety of violations of human dignity and human rights.

Three illustrations of global evils can serve as introductory remarks: Poverty, violence, and restrictions to religious freedom

**Poverty**

At the United Nations the first millennium development goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. The challenge is that in spite of the dedication, the work and the enormous progress because of the endeavors of many people of good will, in governmental and non-governmental organizations, the world is not succeeding.

40 to 60 millions starve to death each year

29,000 to 40,000 children starve to death.

**Violence**

In America, it is reported that

Every 12 seconds a woman is beaten

Half of the women beaten are pregnant

Every 8 minutes a woman is raped

Every 6 hours a woman is murdered

Domestic violence is the number one cause of hospital emergency room visits

One could add that in many countries inhumane treatment of prisoners is a daily reality.

The sight of children soldiers and children working in mines are utterly deplorable. Human trafficking and forms of contemporary slavery are an assault to our human sense of dignity.

**Restrictions to religious liberty**

In January 14, 2014, Pew Research reported that religious hostilities reached a six-year high. The overall level of restrictions – whether resulting from government policies or from social hostilities is that more than 5.3 billion people (76% of the world’s population) live in countries with a high or very high level of restrictions on religion, up from 74% in 2011 and 68% as of mid-2007.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**B. Objectives of the sermon of this year’s religious liberty day**

To contribute to reverse this tide, this coming Religious Liberty day we will focus on the ambassadorial functions of every follower of Jesus Christ.

Jesus calls every disciple salt and light, with the specific mandate to mingle and to point people to God, his kingdom and righteousness. These are some of the ideas connected to the mission of ambassadors for Christ.

Scripture informs our concept of the functions of an ambassador; however, a look at a general understanding of this activity might be helpful.

**III. Understanding the Nature and Functions of an Ambassador**

**A. Etymology and meaning**

The etymology of the word ambassador has occasioned many discussions, The Latin word *ambactus*, which means servant,is evoked as the root of the word. But it may not be necessary to dwell on inconclusive discussion in the context of a sermon. What is undisputable is that the meaning the word ambassador in today’s global culture is not difficult to delineate.

**The following definitions or the word ambassador and related expressions present in most dictionaries are generally assumed:**

An ambassador is:

1. A diplomatic official of the highest rank, sent by one sovereign or state to another as its resident representative **(ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary)**

2. A diplomatic official of the highest rank sent by a government to represent it on a temporary mission, as for negotiating a treaty.

3. A diplomatic official serving as permanent head of a country's mission to the United Nations or some other international organization.

4. An authorized messenger or representative

When the word ambassador is used in compound expressions it has the following nuances:

1. **Ambassador extraordinary and plenipotentiary;** a diplomatic minister of the highest rank, accredited as permanent representative to another country or sovereign

2. **Ambassador extraordinary,** a diplomatic minister of the highest rank sent on a special mission

3. **Ambassador plenipotentiary,** a diplomatic minister of the first rank with treaty-signing powers

4. (**US**) **ambassador-at-large,** an ambassador with special duties who may be sent to more than one government

**B. Biblical Input on the Nature, Foundations and Functions of an Ambassador**

**The word ambassador is used in significant texts which help delineate its meaning**

1. Ambassadors of peace (Isaiah 33:7)
2. Ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20)
3. Ambassador in chain, referring to the Apostle Paul and to the difficulty of carrying the work of an ambassador (Eph. 6:20)

Each usage gains to be considered on its own; however, suffice it to indicate in that the Bible uses the concept of ambassador in various contexts. But for the sake of the sermon of the religious liberty day, the focus is on being an ambassador of freedom. In this perspective, the person and function of an ambassador is best understood when seen in the light of the person and mission of Jesus Christ himself.

**The main thought that every preacher/presenter should highlight is the following**: Jesus is the ambassador of freedom par excellence. This is the foundation and justification for the mission of an ambassador.

Jesus came to this world as an ambassador. Repeatedly he insisted that the Father has sent him (John 5:23, 36, 37; 6:44, 57; 8:16…). The kind of ambassador he was was essential to the place he was sent to minister, planet earth. In essence, he came to mediate a covenant, a new covenant.

1. The ultimate outcome of his ambassadorial mandate is that He came to reveal who God is. He did that by revealing who He was: God in human flesh (John 1:14, 18).
2. He came to bring grace and truth says the Apostle (John 1:17).
3. According to the Gospel of John Jesus came to bring life, freedom, joy, justice and peace (John 10:10; 8:36; 15:11; 14:27).
4. The Apostle Paul revealed another perspective: Jesus Christ “became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption so that, just as it is written, ‘let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:30).
5. Jesus had also the specific mission to reconcile the world with God (Col 1:19)
6. Jesus came to personify the kingdom of God. He was the demonstration of what the citizen of God’s kingdom looks like. He was the demonstration of what the righteousness of God looks like. It is then understandable that Jesus invited his disciples to seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness (Matthew 6:33). At an essential level, this was equivalent to asking them to seek him, Jesus, who embodies the character, values, and will of God.

In association with Jesus, the Christian ambassador reveals God is an instrument of grace and truth. He or she testifies, as a witness to Christ, of God’s life, freedom, joy, justice and peace. He or she lives according to God’s wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. He or she is an agent of reconciliation. He or she is a subject of God’s kingdom, participating in God’s character, values, and obedient to God’s will.

All the followers of Jesus are called to join him in His ambassadorial roles and functions. They promote his kingdom, a kingdom in which no coercion has a place, and a kingdom where the joy of freedom is the prerogative of everyone. For without freedom no peace is possible, and without freedom no joy can be genuinely experienced. Jesus’ insistence on freedom demonstrates the importance of such concept. There is legitimate justification why Adventists while not neglecting justice and peace, insist on freedom in general and freedom of religion in particular.

**Key thought: All Adventists are called to be ambassadors of freedom**.

Every Adventist institution church, conference, Union, Division and General Conference

would gain to have an official ambassador of freedom.

In general this mandate has been associated with the department of Public Affairs and religious liberty.

**IV. Adventists Contributions to the Awareness of the Importance of Freedom: Ambassadors of Truth and Freedom**

Adventists have historically and to this day insisted on Freedom of religion with the understanding that freedom of religion is a precondition to the covenant God came to offer. Only counterfeit powers coerce people. In the setting of the book of Revelation a counterfeit trinity, (the dragon and the two beasts) try to restrict religious freedom and persecute those who want to remain loyal to God (See Revelation 13).

A key function of Jesus’ ambassadorial work was that of restoration. He came to deliver the captives (Luke 4:16). He came to reveal the truth about God, about humanity, about God’s purposes and human destiny.

God has given a specific mandate to His end time people. They are a restorationist movement after Jesus himself. Even though freedom of religion is a key component to this restorationist agenda, the mandate to restore freedom is part of a comprehensive mission. It is never freedom of religion alone. It is about freedom and truth.

Ellen G. White elaborates on this issue with much clarity:

“The banner of **truth** **and religious liberty** held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God’s witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His Word. We are to receive this Word as a supreme authority. We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation. A “Thus saith the Lord” is not to be set aside for a “Thus saith the church” or a “Thus saith the state.” The crown of Christ is to be lifted above the diadems of earthly potentates. (Ellen G. White. *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 68, 69. – {ChS 161.3})

We are not doing the will of God if we sit in quietude, doing nothing to preserve liberty of conscience …

Let there be more earnest prayer; and then let us work in harmony with our prayers.

Ellen G. White. ***5T*** pp. 713,714

All followers of Christ are ambassadors of truth and freedom. These two are inseparable. The freedom we promote is in a deeper way connected to the truth of knowing who God is and who we are.

True freedom from a biblical perspective is the capacity to renew with one’s true humanity, which is created in the image of God. We have been created with a freewill which is constitutive to our identity.

This is the freedom that allows us to decide to enter into God’s covenant and be his moral agents for the good of all people God created in his image.

**Further Perspectives:** The overarching goal of God is to restore his image in humans.

The central theme of the Bible, the theme about which every other in the whole book clusters, is the redemption plan, the restoration in the human soul of the image of God. From the first intimation of hope in the sentence pronounced in Eden to that last glorious promise of the Revelation, "They shall see His face; and His name shall be in their foreheads" (Revelation 22:4), the burden of every book and every passage of the Bible is the unfolding of this wondrous theme,--man's uplifting,--the power of God, "which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." 1 Corinthians 15:57. {Ed 125.2}

He who grasps this thought has before him an infinite field for study. He has the key that will unlock to him the whole treasure house of God's word. {Ed 126.1}

“The coin, though lying among dust and rubbish, is a piece of silver still. Its owner seeks it because it is of value. So every soul, however degraded by sin, is in God’s sight accounted precious. As the coin bears the image and superscription of the reigning power, so man at his creation bore the image and superscription of God; and though now marred and dim through the influence of sin, the traces of this inscription remain upon every soul. God desires to recover that soul and to retrace upon it His own image in righteousness and holiness. (COL 194.6)

“The true object of education is to restore the image of God in the soul. In the beginning, God created man in his own likeness. He endowed him with noble qualities. His mind was well balanced, and all the powers of his being were harmonious.

But the fall and its effects have perverted these gifts. Sin has marred and well-nigh obliterated the image of God in man.

It was to restore this that the plan of salvation was devised, and a life of probation was granted to man. To bring him back to the perfection in which he was first created is the great object of life, - the object that underlines every other. (CE.63.3).

“Today God gives men opportunity to show whether they love their neighbor. He who truly loves God and his fellow man is he who shows mercy to the destitute, the suffering, the wounded, those who are ready to die. God calls upon every man to take up this neglected, to seek to restore the moral image of the creator of humanity” (CCH 283.1)

Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). Promoting the truth of Jesus Christ, his person, identity, message and mission of salvation is inseparably connected to mandate of every ambassador of freedom. Obviously, this is not something that we impose on people. It is witnessing, entering into conversation with people about what matters and what matters most, about the mystery of life, the meaning, value or worth of human existence.

**V. Deepening our Understanding of the Mission of An Ambassador**

**A. Old Testament Foundations**

The nature and functions of an ambassador appear in creative ways in the Old Testament scriptures. A corporate aspect is underlined through the prophetic ministry of Elijah.

**Malachi 4:5-6**

The last prophecy of the Old Testament is about a mission of reconciliation.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.”

**B. New Testament and End time Applications**

The mandate: The words of Jesus Christ to Every Disciple

**Jesus’ Teachings on Reconciliation: An Ambassadorial function**

When Jesus came, his teachings were woven with the motif of reconciliation.

The message of reconciliation is inseparably woven with key themes of Jesus teachings such as righteousness, justice, freedom, justice and peace.

The main thrust of the teachings of Jesus to his disciples as articulated in the Sermon of the Mount is about reconciliation.

The righteousness that is necessary to enter the kingdom of God is measured in terms of the ability to reconcile with others, not only with brothers and sisters but also even with enemies.

**Reflections and Meditations on the Words of Jesus As Recorded in the Matthew: A Closer Look at the Beatitudes: The Blessing we share: The reconciliation with God**

Blessed are those who affirm their dependence on God

Not addicted to materialism

**God is our sufficiency**

Blessed are those who come to God for comfort

Not addicted to substitutes to fill the longing of their inner beings

They do not by all means,

and at all cost, Shun from the pain and suffering of the world

They wait on the Lord

**God is our comforter**

Blessed are the meek

Those not addicted to violence

They do not violate others’ integrity

or dignity

To gain advantage of any kind

**God is our supreme good**

Blessed are those who seek righteousness

Those not addicted to injustice

They give to others their due

**God is our righteousness**

Blessed are the merciful

Those who open their hearts and hands

Those not addicted to revenge and grudge

**God is our righteous judge and intercessor**

Blessed are the pure in heart

Those not addicted to defilement and integrity

Their eyes are fixed on the Lord Jesus

**God is our holiness**

Blessed are those persecuted because they chose Jesus, and His Cross,

His resurrection, His ascension, His session, and Coming as King of kings and Lord of lords, the center of their faith, hope and love.

Those not addicted to fame,

Those who would rather be shamed than defame the character of the Savior

Those who would rather loose their lives than betray the Lord of their lives

**God is the Supreme Value, the desire of our hearts and mind.**

In essence,

Blessed are those who sufficiency is God

Those whose supreme value is God Himself

**Ambassadors of God’s Righteousness**

**Matthew 5:20-26**

The Righteousness that qualifies for the kingdom of God is inseparably woven with the theme of reconciliation. Every ambassador is commissioned to be an agent of reconciliation. Jesus’s first discourse focused on this theme.

20 “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

21 “You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’ 22But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, ‘You good-for-nothing,’ shall be guilty before the Supreme Court; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

23Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, 24leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. 25Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison.

26Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.

Reconciliation is not only for with the brother or sister but also with an opponent at law or enemy.

Moreover, followers of Jesus, because of the freedom they receive from God as a gift, they do not people into boxes. They do not murder, insult, or demean anyone. They are involved in liberating people. Religious freedom has this component of being an ambassador of freedom, embodying freedom, embracing freedom as a lifestyle. This means valuing people, showing it in how we deal with every person. It means thus avoiding using people as instruments, as means to one’s own agenda, promotion, prestige or popularity.

Religious liberty calls us back to the basic values of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Religious liberty puts others at the center. They well being, their interest comes first. The function of an ambassador highlights this aspect. Ambassador wants the best for all the citizens. The best in this life is reconciliation with God. To facilitate this reconciliation, God sends ambassadors for Christ.

**Agents of Reconciliation: Ambassadors for Christ**

2 Corinthians 5

17Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed

away; behold, new things have come. 18Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,

19 namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

If Christians are mandated as agents of reconciliation, it is because we participate in Christ’s own mission of reconciling the world to God.

**A Closer Look at the agents of reconciliation**

The identity of ambassador is rooted in the life and teaching of Jesus: The one who came to reconcile us with God.

**Colossians 1**. 19 For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. 21 And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 22yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.”

The followers of Jesus Christ who have the corporate Elijah identity, mission and message are ambassadors of reconciliation.

**Concluding Reflections on the functions of ambassador and their applications**

* To represent one’s country resonates with the fact that every disciple of Jesus Christ is a representative of God’s kingdom. He or She is a representative of God’s kingdom, a citizen of heaven as the Apostle Paul intimates.
* To uphold the covenants, treaties between two countries, and to the international communities in order to protect common interest between countries. This function resonates with every Christian being a ambassador of peace.
* To work to secure the interest of the citizens of one’s country of origin. The ambassador of Christ shows solidarity to all human beings because every person is created in the image of God according to His likeness.
* To uphold the law of one’s country. All followers of Christ have a heavenly citizenship according to Paul. The law of God’s kingdom includes affirmation of God’s sovereignty through the celebration of the Sabbath as anniversary of God’s creation, commemoration of God’s liberation, an independence day, sign of sanctification and prefiguration of fellowship in eternity.
* The Law of Extraterritoriality: To contribute by his or her very presence to guarantee the applicability of the law of extra-territoriality the ambassador of Christ is a mobile embassy. The place where the embassy is located belongs to the country of origin of the ambassador. Every place where the follower of Jesus is in mission belongs to God and his kingdom.
* To live as witness who testifies about the character, will, the principles, policies and practices of his or her country of origin. The country of origin of ambassadors of Christ is the everlasting kingdom of heaven, for they are born from above. All ambassadors for Christ are like temples of freedom. People to whom others come to find wisdom, knowledge, and insights into the matters of life. Ambassadors for Christ develop competency that qualifies him or her to teach the Word of God, to explain biblical prophecies. Ambassadors of Christ function as spiritual advisors, and protectors of other people’s dignity. A pastoral function is therefore intrinsic to that of an ambassador for Christ.

All that is said is applicable at an individual level, but also at a corporate level. Every church should have an official ambassador that oversees the Church members’ engagements with the larger community. That is one of the possible functions of a public Affairs and Religious Liberty (PARL) representative.

For this aspect we recommend the manual “Church Ambassador” that Dr. John Graz has written.

To encourage members who may feel intimidated by such awesome responsibility, it might be useful to remind them the experience of Jacob who was bold enough to bless Pharaoh.

Appeal: Jacob’s Mission and Conviction: The Boldness and the Blessing

Gen 47:7 “Then Joseph brought his father Jacob and presented him to Pharaoh; and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.”

“Not long after their arrival, Joseph brought his father to be presented to the king. Jacob was a stranger in royal courts, but he had been close to a mightier Monarch in the grand scenes of nature. Now, in conscious superiority, he raised his hands and blessed Pharaoh. (Ellen G. White, BOE 111.3)

1. Heiner Bielefeldt, “Misperceptions of Freedom of Religion or Belief.” in *Human Rights Quarterly* Number 1, February, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Bigquestionsonline.com) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See http://www.pewforum.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)