

Religious liberty, the relation of the state to the conscience of man and the attitude that believers should sustain toward the civil authorities

In this concise study it is hoped that a further understanding of these issues would be achieved.

First of all it must be recognized that liberty is an eternal attribute and a gift from creator to creature. 2 cor: 3:17. Joel 2:29. Hence it cannot be conferred or taken away by the state or any entity.

And when Jesus came to earth he spoke these wonderful words, “The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah is upon me; because Jehovah hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening *of the prison* to them that are bound; (Isa 61:1 ASV) and Luke 4 v 18.

If liberty and indeed liberty of conscience is to be preserved then there must be unchangeable principles of righteousness regulating the relations not only between God and man but also between man and man, which must be acknowledge otherwise liberty is impossible. And at this time and from here on in liberty and indeed religious liberty will come into sharp focus and hence the need for continuous enhancement of our understanding of these important truths.

The question of religious liberty needs to be clearly comprehended by our people in more ways than one. When we talk of religious liberty what do we mean and what do we want people to understand? So what really is religious liberty? Some understandings of it have been examined in the past hence this is not an extensive look at the subject but putting it in another context or angle.

A T Jones the 1888 messenger defined religious liberty thus, “Religious liberty, therefore, is man’s exemption from the domination of others, or from restricting circumstances: man’s freedom to make his choices and decide his conduct for himself, **spontaneously and voluntarily: in his duty to his Creator, and in the manor of discharging that duty.**

The premise and foundation of religious liberty rest on **the relationship of creator and creature**. Hence the creature owes to the creator all that he is and all that he has. Hence the first of all relationships produces the first of all duties. This first of all duties cannot be superseded by any secondary duty. Indeed any secondary duties will flow from the first of all obligations.

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. (Mar 12:30 ASV). That is consecration which brings a liberty of conscience which cannot be taken away from the experience.

God has created every intelligent creature free—free to recognize that obligation or not, free to discharge that duty or not, just as he chooses. Therefore any duty, any obligation, anything, offered or rendered to God that is not of the individual’s own freely chosen choice, can neither be of God nor acceptable to God.

Therefore when the Lord created creatures in order that that creatures should be happy in serving God, and in order that there should be liberty, love and righteousness in rendering worship to God, He created him free to choose to do so. And freedom to choose to fulfill the first of all duties carries with it, and in it, freedom to choose not to do so. Therefore, when God through his servant Joshua said, “Choose you this day whom you

will serve”, it is forever emphasize that it is left to each creature under the whole heaven to decide for himself in his own freedom what he will do; whether he will serve God or himself.

Inspiration wrote many years ago for our instruction, “After having made men free to sin, that the internal principle of love might work itself out in outward acts of righteousness **unhindered by force**--after having made men thus, has God given to any human authority the right to take away that freedom, and so to thwart His plans? He has commanded all men to worship Him and obey His precepts, and this command applies to each individual personally; but has He ever commanded any man or set of men **to compel others** to worship Him, or to act even outwardly as if they worshiped Him? To ask these questions is to answer them emphatically in the negative. *The Watchman*, May 1, 1906

The law of liberty – Preserver of liberty.

In Jas chapter I and verse 25 God's law is called the law of liberty. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth *therein*, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. Jas1:25

Further it is written, “So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.” Jas 2:12

And in Psa 119:45 this is written, And I will walk at liberty: for I seek thy precepts.

Inspiration concurs, “It is true that all liberty comes through keeping God's law, but God Himself, who wrote that law in the hearts of men in the beginning, who spoke it amid the thunders of Sinai, that all might hear and obey, who waits through the new covenant to rewrite it in every trusting soul--God Himself, who did all this, still made man as free to disobey these precepts as to obey them. Why did God allow all this fearful iniquity that man might be made free? To this there can be but one answer. It was because He knew the worthlessness of all forced obedience, and that, therefore, the freedom to sin was absolutely necessary to the possibility of righteousness. *The Watchman*, May 1, 1906

The Inspired Word calls that law a hedge. How so you may ask? “Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.” . Job_1:10. Is it that James got his understanding from this passage by God's Spirit?

And the scriptures record that Jesus “began to speak unto them by parables. A *certain* man planted a vineyard, and set an hedge about *it*, and digged *a place for* the winefat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country.” Mar 12:1. What was Christ telling us that we have missed for so long?

This thought from inspiration, “So far from making arbitrary requirements, God's law is given to men as a hedge, a shield. Whoever accepts its principles is preserved from evil. Fidelity to God involves fidelity to man. **Thus the law guards the rights, the individuality, of every human being** It restrains the superior from oppression, and the subordinate from disobedience. It ensures man's well-being, both for this world and for the world to come. To the obedient it is the pledge of eternal life, for it expresses the principles that endure forever. {Ed 76.4}.

The eighth commandment is to barricade the soul, and hedge man in, so that he shall make no injurious encroachment--which his self love and desire for gain would make--on his neighbor's rights. It forbids every species of dishonesty, injustice, or fraud, however prevalent, however palliated by plausible pretenses. The ninth commandment requires of us an inviolable regard for exact truth in every declaration by which the character of our fellow men may be affected. The tongue which is kept so little under the control of the human agent, is to be bridled by strong conscientious principles, by the law of love toward God and man. The last commandment condemns covetousness. Every selfish desire, every degree of discontent, every act of over-reaching, every selfish gratification works to the strengthening and developing of a character which will destroy the Christlikeness of the human agent, and close the gates of the city of God against him. 1888 materials, chapter 164.

From the above you can see the height of the principles of righteousness which must regulate man's action in every sphere. Many who wish to condemn the bible spread abroad that the bible supported slavery. But in fact the law of God prohibits slavery. Do you know which particular command does that?

The relation of the state to the conscience of man

And Jesus said unto them, Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. And they marvelled greatly at him. (Mar 12:17 ASV). The apostle Paul in Rom 13 re-emphasizes the principles Jesus laid out to the hearers in Matt and Mark.

These two powers Caesar and God are entirely separate. Jesus said so and in his living showed it. The civil power is the power of arbitrary force and God's kingdom the power of divine love. Hence there are two realms.

The civil power compels citizens to be at least civil since they refuse to submit to God's righteousness in order that society may have opportunity to live together in peace and with a semblance of quietness.

Jesus verily said, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight." John 18:36. Why? Because in his kingdom there are no carnal weapons.

Inspiration agrees, "Every civil law has the power of the sword back of it. If it is right to make law, then it is right to enforce it. **In denying the church the power of the sword**, Jesus therefore forbade the church to ask the state for laws enforcing beliefs and observances. Paul understood this when he said, "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds." 2 Corinthians 10:4.

The great reformer Martyn Luther was absolutely sure of that and preached against the church using the power the state to accomplish God's work.

"In a letter to the elector, after stating his purpose to leave the Wartburg, Luther said: "Be it known to your highness that I am repairing to Wittenberg under a protection more powerful than that of an elector. I have no thought of soliciting the aid of your highness; and am so far from desiring your protection that it is rather my purpose to protect your highness. If I knew that your highness could or would take up my defense, I would not come to Wittenberg. No secular sword can advance this cause; God must do all, without the aid or co-operation of man. He who has most faith is the most availing defense." G C 189

Further when visiting the children of men our saviour did include all, served all and searched for all making no distinctions showing that the entire race is truly a brotherhood. In doing that he was teaching that both the

organize state must respect the first of all obligations to God by man. Indeed the state should protect that divine right.

In Malachi it is written, "Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us? why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother, profaning the covenant of our fathers? (Mal 2:10 ASV)

The apostle Paul concurs, "and he made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed seasons, and the bounds of their habitation; (Act 17:26 ASV)

One God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all. (Eph 4:6 ASV)

"Christ found men enslaved to kings and priests. He taught that all men are brothers, sons of one Father, and therefore equal before the law--**equal in civil rights**. Rulers were, therefore, only their servants, chosen under God **to protect them in the enjoyment of their rights**. He freed us from the chains of priestcraft by teaching the absolute independence of the individual soul in matters religious, and by promising the Spirit of truth to guide each one into all truth." *The Watchman*, May 1, 1906

The attitude that believers should sustain toward the civil authorities

The apostle Peter under inspiration wrote, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: as free, and not using your liberty for a cloak of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king." 1 Peter 2:13-17.

In my view this instruction is very relevant to our time and must be fully understood to be guided by.

We have men placed over us for rulers, and laws to govern the people. Were it not for these laws, the condition of the world would be worse than it is now. Some of these laws are good, others are bad. The bad have been increasing, and we are yet to be brought into strait places. But God will sustain His people in being firm and living up to the principles of His Word. {CCh 314.2}

And the inspired apostle continues, "Servants, *be* in subjection to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is acceptable, **if for conscience toward God** a man endureth griefs, **suffering wrongfully**. For what glory is it, if, when ye sin, and are buffeted *for it*, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer *for it*, ye shall take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered threatened not; but committed *himself* to him that judgeth righteously: (1Pe 2:18-23 ASV)

We have left on record for us both in old and New Testament examples of how to relate to civil authorities. Daniel and his companions, the apostles and early Christians, the reformers and now down to our time.

Here is divine counsel through the inspired messenger. "I saw that it is our duty in every case to obey the laws of our land, unless they conflict with the higher law which God spoke with an audible voice from Sinai, and afterward engraved on stone with His own finger." (Are we able to discern when the higher law is conflicted? In the present pandemic there appear a lack of true discernment.) My own perception.

“ By some of our brethren many things have been spoken and written that are interpreted as expressing antagonism to government and law. It is a mistake thus to lay ourselves open to misunderstanding. It is not wise to find fault continually with what is done by the rulers of government. It is not our work to attack individuals or institutions. We should exercise great care lest we be understood as putting ourselves in opposition to the civil authorities. It is true that our warfare is aggressive, but our weapons are to be those found in a plain "Thus saith the Lord." Our work is to prepare a people to stand in the great day of God. We should not be turned aside to lines that will encourage controversy or arouse antagonism in those not of our faith. {6T 394.1}.

We should not work in a manner that will mark us out as seeming to advocate treason. We should weed out from our writings and utterances every expression that, **taken by itself**, could be so misrepresented as to make it appear antagonistic to law and order. Everything should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as encouraging disloyalty to our country and its laws. We are not required to defy authorities. There will come a time when, because of our advocacy of Bible truth, we shall be treated as traitors; but let not this time be hastened by unadvised movements that stir up animosity and strife. {6T 394.2}. Question brethren are not these comments by Ellen white a perfect understanding of the above passages from the apostle Peter? Hence I prefer the divine interpretation to my own opinion. According to I Cor 14 v 22 then I'm authorized to so use in this setting and so I do.

We are admonished to, “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: They shall prosper that love thee. (Psa 122:6 ASV). That is pray that civility and peace will reign in the land. In the peace of the nation the people of God would have opportunity for advancing his work. Do we follow that command to pray for governments or we have a particular party and hence ignore the command?

Seven times a day do I praise thee, Because of thy righteous ordinances. Great peace have they that love thy law; And they have no occasion of stumbling. (Psa 119:164-165 ASV).

Oh that thou hadst hearkened to my commandments! then had thy peace been as a river, and thy righteousness as the waves of the sea: (Isa 48:18 ASV). These scriptures show clearly how true Christians will relate to civil authorities.

“The time will come when unguarded expressions of a denunciatory character, that have been carelessly spoken or written by our brethren, will be used by our enemies to condemn us. These will not be used merely to condemn those who made the statements, but will be charged upon the whole body of Adventists. Our accusers will say that on such and such a day one of our responsible men said thus and so against the administration of the laws of this government. Many will be astonished to see how many things have been cherished and remembered that will give point to the arguments of our adversaries. Many will be surprised to hear their own words strained into a meaning that they did not intend them to have. Then let our workers be careful to speak guardedly at all times and under all circumstances. Let all beware lest by reckless expressions they bring on a time of trouble before the great crisis which is to try men's souls. 6T 395

Here is more timely divine counsel, “By some of our brethren many things have been spoken and written that are interpreted as expressing antagonism to government and law. It is a mistake thus to lay ourselves open to misunderstanding. It is not wise to find fault continually with what is done by the rulers of government. It is not our work to attack individuals or institutions. We should exercise great care lest we be understood as putting ourselves in opposition to the civil authorities. It is true that our warfare is aggressive, but our weapons

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Yours in the final work

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