

## Of Lawyers and Witnesses

Everyone is to be an ambassador for religious liberty. All of you have been called to do that. The work of God on this earth can never be finished until the men and women comprising our church membership rally to the work. Today we're having a special rally that helps us to understand what it means to rally to the work and unite our efforts with those ministers and church officers. Every one of you is vitally important in the great proclamation of this message and in the proclamation of freedom of conscience.

*Liberty* magazine needs to be sent to thought leaders. Let's see to that. But each of us also is a thought leader. Understand that it is your responsibility to be part of this great and incredibly important last-day proclamation. Now is not the time to lessen our influences on religious liberty. Now it is day, but we know the night is coming.

We depend upon attorneys and lawyers, upon legal experts, to help us to find a way through many of the challenges that we face. We're grateful for consecrated Seventh-day Adventist attorneys: honest, faithful attorneys, people who will defend individuals who are facing challenges regarding their work situation, and regarding other aspects of religious freedom.

I want to focus for just a few moments on a well-known episode in the Scriptures involving an attorney and human rights: where religious liberty is a prime focal point. It's a well-known story, but I want you to understand it from a little bit different perspective. It's found in Luke 10: "Behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested him" (verse 25).<sup>1</sup>

I'm always amazed to read how Jesus responded whenever He was pushed to the limit. Jesus is surely an example for us. We, too, are not to lash out at people. We, too, will be able to respond in direct and powerful ways when we are in connection with Him.

I want to urge you to be part of revival and reformation: taking time every day with your own connection with the Lord and the Word of God; taking time to read something from the Spirit of Prophecy; taking time in private personal prayer. We will not be saved as groups; we will be saved individually. You will not be saved because your pastor is an eloquent speaker and you enjoyed his rendition of Scripture on a Sabbath day. You will be saved by your relationship with Jesus Christ. And your relationship with Jesus Christ is based upon your interacting with Him on a daily basis in the Word of God and through prayer.

So this attorney stood up and tested Jesus. "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" he asked (verse 25). Great question: the question is still being posed to us today. Each of us is part of total member involvement doing something for Jesus. We're trying to help people by pointing them to the cross/eternal life.

Jesus said to him, "What is written in the law?" (verse 26). Well, the attorney, the lawyer, knew the law well. "What is your reading of it?" Jesus asked, turning the challenge back to the questioner (verse 26).

So he answered and said, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind,’ and ‘your neighbor as yourself’” (verse 27).

And Jesus said to him, “You have answered rightly; do this and you will live” (verse 28). Isn’t that a wonderful summation of our calling? You will have freedom if you understand and accept God’s commandments.

Now, here follows one of the words in Scripture that turns up in many different stories. It is a reply that often tells what the heart is really like. In the English it’s a short word: “But.” Oh, everything’s just great, everything’s going really nicely—*but*. You know, I really like to have dinner in our church, *but*. You know, that church member is really a very powerful person in my life and in the life of the church, *but*. If we cut out that little word in relation to each other and God’s work, I tell you, far more would be accomplished.

The greatest challenge we face in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is not some nuclear holocaust; not some persecution. The greatest challenge we face in the Seventh-day Adventist Church is self: putting self ahead of God and each other.

“But” he, the lawyer, “wanting to justify himself,” replied to Jesus (verse 29). He knew what the issue was, but he was trying to be academic. I have nothing against academics. But do not hide behind intellectual academic pursuits when you know the truth. The lawyer said, “And who is my neighbor?” (verse 29).

Then Jesus answered with a story.

Now, it’s interesting that *The Desire of Ages* tells us that this was not a parable. I encourage you to read that chapter. This was an actual story; and interestingly enough, the very people whom Jesus was speaking to and about were present in that circle of people. As Jesus tells the story, a certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves. Now, about two years ago, my wife, Nancy, and I actually had the privilege of being in Israel and visiting our church members there. There are about 800 of them. They speak many different languages, including Hebrew. They speak Russian, they speak Romanian, they speak Spanish, they speak Twi, they speak all kinds of languages. Pray for our people in Israel.

We had the privilege of standing at a particular point overlooking the main road from Jerusalem down into the Jordan Valley and close to Jericho. It’s an easy road now, although it drops rather rapidly and you might even feel a little ear pressure releasing as you drop. But in the old days the road was hard. Looking down into the valley where the old road used to go from Jerusalem to Jericho, you can see why the thieves and the bandits loved it. Not an easy journey. Now, it is important for us in the context of human rights and religious liberty to understand that the person waylaid on the Jericho road was a Jewish person. This will contrast with the person who helped him. And it says that they “stripped him of all his clothing, wounded him and departed, leaving him half dead” (verse 30).

“Now by chance a certain priest came down that road” (verse 31). A priest was a leader in the church, someone entrusted with the care of everyone, not only spiritually but physically, mentally, and socially. That is the balance that God gives to us. It is following

Christ's method alone to reach people physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. That is why pastors ought to know a lot about good health. That's why pastors ought to know how to relate to people. That's why pastors ought to understand that their role is much larger than simply preaching on a Sabbath morning or conducting a religious service. They are to train people, to focus them upon the great task that we have in these last days of earth's history. It is a balanced approach.

So a priest came by. Maybe we could see him as the president of a conference, maybe of a union, maybe the president of our general conference. He came by. But you know, we can become so busy with the meetings and the committees and all of our high-level activity that we're involved with that we might miss certain realities. The Bible says that when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. By God's grace, may you and I never be too busy to pass by on the other side.

Then in verse 32 another character appears: "Likewise a Levite." Yes, another leader in the church; maybe the Sabbath school superintendent; maybe someone who was a teacher. When he arrived at the place, he came and looked.

Now, in my mind's eye, I see this Levite coming, and he says, "Oh, how terrible. This is a tragedy, when we have all kinds of security, for this man to have been attacked and left dying on the side of the road. Where are the police? Where is the security? Where are those who will come with an ambulance and take this person to where they can professionally treat him? This man's rights, his human rights, have been violated. Why isn't someone helping him?"

At least the Levite looked on this person: but a sad commentary when it came to actually helping this person with his human rights and his liberties? It says that he "looked, and passed by on the other side" (verse 32). What an indictment for the church! What an indictment for us if we are not fully in God's hands!

Well, the Bible says, then, that "a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was" (verse 33). Now, you have to understand something. The Jewish people at that time hated the Samaritans. Had that Samaritan been in the place of this Jewish man, he never would have received any attention. But be careful about castigating that attitude of the Jewish people or anyone else, because this story represents you and me.

The Samaritan came; and he didn't stop for a moment and say, "Well, it's not a good situation. I wonder what ethnic group he comes from. I wonder what race he is of. I wonder what social economic level this person is from. If I help him, will I get something out of it? I wonder what language he speaks." No, the Samaritan, driven by the power of the Holy Spirit and understanding the fuller concept of true human rights, which is focused upon God's holy Book, jumped into action and obeyed God's commandments without thinking. What a lesson for us. The Bible says he treated his wounds; he cared for him; he clothed him; he put his own robe on him; and he put him on his own donkey. He didn't just take him to the inn, or the hospital; he even paid for care to be provided for him.

You see, you and I are that poor Jewish man on the side of the road; half dead, half naked, without the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and in great need of God's power. Jesus is that Samaritan, the one who was hated and rebuffed. Jesus has stopped to take

care of you and me. He's poured the ointment into our wounds. He has helped us to recover. He has put His robe of righteousness on us, and He has taken us to the church—not to recover and sit in the church and glory in what we have, but to tell somebody else about it.

See, the great challenge today is not to become complacent Laodicea, but to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. In the wonderful book *The Desire of Ages* we are told that “the lesson is no less needed in the world today than when it fell from the lips of Jesus. Selfishness and cold formality have well-nigh extinguished the fire of love, and dispelled the graces that should make fragrant the character. Many who profess His name have lost sight of the fact that Christians are to represent Christ. Unless there is a practical self-sacrifice for the good of others, in the family circle, in the neighborhood, in the church, and wherever we may be, then whatever our profession, we are not Christians.”<sup>2</sup> As Christians we believe in fundamental human rights for people; as Christians, we understand that it is important to treat people with fairness and respect and provide religious liberty for all. To maintain that, we must be connected to the One who truly can give us the power to be Christians, and that is Christ Himself. Christ is asking you today to be that kind of person.

You see, Christ works in a powerful way in the hearts of people. Let me tell you about Tatiana. Tatiana is an attorney. Tatiana was the vice mayor of a central Asian city in a rather prominent Muslim-dominated country. A Seventh-day Adventist pastor came to her office one day and asked for a supply of bricks. In that country, under that system, it was obligatory to go to officials and authorities and request the commodities that you needed.

The pastor came asking for his allotment of bricks to build a church, and Tatiana said, “I don't have time. Go away. Come back in three days.” He came back in three days. She said, “I still haven't done the research. I don't have time. Go away. Come back again.” I tell you, my brothers and sisters, as ambassadors for religious freedom, don't ever let any official push you away to the extent that you never come back. Our pastor came back again and made his plea. And because Tatiana didn't want to be bothered anymore, she just said, “OK, I'm going to sign your form. Get out of my office.” Our pastor was happy. He got his bricks, and built his church in this central Asian country.

Sometime later Tatiana's 17-year-old son came to her and said, “Mother, in a few days I'm going to have my birthday. I want you to spend time with me.”

Tatiana, being a very busy professional, an advocate, an attorney, a lawyer, thought, *Well, I'll just give my son some money and let him have a good time on his birthday, because I'm so busy.* I tell you, brothers and sisters, take time for your children. Respect your children, respect your spouse. We have a whole other area of human rights and liberty that we need to focus on in the Seventh-day Adventist Church family, and we should not neglect it, as some do.

In any case, Tatiana's son said, “No, I want you to spend time with me.” And so she finally agreed. On that particular Saturday she put on her scarf and went out the door with her son, and as they were walking along they came to a church. They entered the church, and Tatiana was so glad that as the vice mayor, she had her scarf so she could be hidden somewhat. They sat down in the church. The pastor preached an impassioned sermon about Christ and about giving your heart to Him. And Tatiana, the attorney, the lawyer, who

was a professional person, sat very uneasy. At the end of the sermon the pastor gave a call for people to come forward if they wanted to give their hearts to Christ and be baptized. Tatiana was shocked when she saw her 17-year-old son, on his birthday, standing to his feet and going to the front. You see, her son had been attending this church: a Seventh-day Adventist church. In fact, it was the very church that Tatiana had signed for the bricks. He had been attending, and he had been touched by the love of God's people.

The son went forward. He talked with the pastor after the service. He came back and told his mother, "Mother, we're going to a lake, and there will be a baptism; and the pastor has arranged for me to go there in a van, and he has a place for you."

"Oh, no, no, I can't go," she protested.

"Please, Mother," he begged, "it's my birthday." And so she agreed to go.

They went to the lake together. As he was about to enter the waters of baptism, Tatiana saw her son talking animatedly with the pastor and then jumping up and down and running back to her. The son told Tatiana, "Mother, the pastor says you can be baptized too." I don't know what the son told the pastor and I don't know what the pastor understood, because that is not the method that we like to use. People need to understand the Word of God. They usually need to understand fully the liberty in Christ and His full message before they make a decision.

But somehow God had other plans that day. And Tatiana said, "Absolutely not. I don't even know what this is. You have to believe something and accept it before you are indoctrinated or enter into an organization."

But Tatiana's son said, "It's my birthday." And so Tatiana was baptized. They were given two baptismal certificates: they took them home, and her son hid those certificates, because they never wanted his father to find out. In that particular country, if you do something against the wishes or without the knowledge of the father of the home, you are in big trouble.

After a while Tatiana said, "You know, I've been baptized into something. I better find out what it is." She picked up a Bible and began to read it. And as she read the Bible, she fell in love with Jesus. After her baptism she became a sweet, loving person. Jesus changed her life. The brilliant, professional lawyer, who knew how to be the vice mayor of the city, now became a much humbler individual.

One day, about five months later, her son came into the home and said, "Mother, something terrible has happened. Father has found the baptismal certificates, and he is angry." Tatiana knew, even though she was a professional, that she was facing a very challenging situation with her husband. And so after the meal that night she sat down with her husband. Her husband said, "How could you bring such embarrassment upon our home by doing something in such a way that I had no involvement in giving you permission?"

You know, the Lord has promised to give you the words to say when you have to face rulers and potentates and governors. He will give you the words to say if you are practicing, staying in contact with Him every day. Tatiana received the grace from heaven and

gave her response. She said, “My dear husband, you have the baptismal certificates in your hand. You see the dates on those certificates. If since that time I have become a mean individual and an individual who has never shown any kind of sensitivity to anyone—if I have become a worse person—I will leave this religion immediately. But, my dear husband, if you have seen that I have become a sweeter person, a more loving wife, a more attentive mother, please take that into consideration.”

There was a long pause, and her husband said, “No, Tatiana, you have become a sweeter person. You have become a more loving wife and mother.”

Never discount the young people of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Nurture them, encourage them, learn their names, help them to be part of the mission of the church. The son had stood for Christ. He had been the agent of his mother’s conversion. And now, not long after that nighttime challenge, Tatiana’s husband began reading the book *The Great Controversy* and the Bible, and then accepted Jesus and became a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. He and his wife have become pillars in the church in that central Asian country.

Each of us, regardless of our station in life, can be a powerful witness for God. “We are not doing the will of God if we sit in quietude doing nothing to preserve liberty of conscience.”<sup>3</sup> Whether you are a 17-year-old or a 77-year-old, all of us are to be part of this great proclamation of Christ’s soon coming, of the freedom of conscience and the power of choice that He has given to each of us.

What a day it will be when the Lord returns! I’m looking forward to that day. How about you? We will look up in the sky, and we’ll see a little cloud appearing; about half the size of a man’s hand, we’re told. That will get larger and larger and brighter and brighter, and soon it will fill the entire sky. All of heaven is to be poured out for this climactic event. And we will look up and say, “This is the God that we have waited for, the God who has provided us with freedom of conscience, with religious liberty, and we have chosen to love Him. This is our God whom we have waited for.”

Those people who are looking up will hear the words of our Lord and Savior as He looks down and says, “Well done, good and faithful servants; enter into the joy of your Lord.” And we will rise into the sky following those who have died in Jesus; another beautiful truth of Scripture. You sleep until that time; the next thing you know is the bright calling of Jesus, and we will follow those up into the sky and will be with the Lord forever. What a promise, what a culmination of religious liberty and the choice we have made.

Oh, I long to be there on that day. Don’t you? Are you willing to be part of those who will proclaim the wonderful message of Christ’s soon coming? He has given you a choice, the freedom of choice, the freedom of religious liberty, to worship as your conscience calls.

---

<sup>1</sup> Bible texts in this article are from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898, 1940), p. 504.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen G. White, *Christian Service* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1925), p. 162.