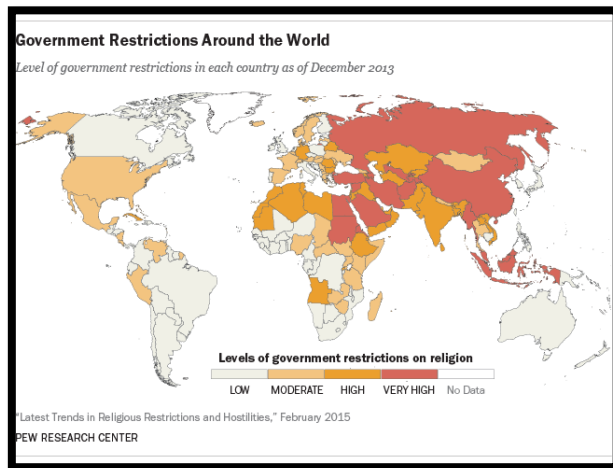


# FREEDOM OF WORSHIP

*SEVEN Biblical principles when freedom is at risk*



By Mike Burnard

According to a 2016 *Pew Research Centre* study<sup>1</sup>, **83 countries** (42%) had high or very high levels of overall restrictions on religion – whether resulting from government actions or from hostile acts by private individuals, organisations and social groups. This affected the lives of about **5.5 billion** people (77% of the world’s population).

Unsurprisingly, the study reveals the following: *“Among the world’s 25 most populous countries, the highest overall levels of restrictions were found in Burma (Myanmar), Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan and Russia, where both the government and society at large impose numerous limits on religious*

*beliefs and practices. Among these populous countries, China had the highest level of government restrictions, and India had the highest level of social hostilities involving religion. As in previous years, Christians and Muslims – who together make up more than half of the global population – faced harassment in the largest number of countries. Christians were harassed, either by government or social groups, in 102 of the 198 countries included in the study (52%), while Muslims were harassed in 99 countries (50%).”*

What was surprising was the inclusion of Western nations like the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, which showed moderate levels of both restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religious groups, ranking somewhere in the middle range of the nearly 200 countries analysed in the report.

South Africa is no exception either. In 2015, the **Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL)** started an investigation that led *Netwerk24*<sup>2</sup> to report that *“no one in South Africa will be allowed to preach without being registered.”*

**Freedom of Religion South Africa (FOR SA)** released a statement on 30 January 2019<sup>3</sup> claiming that South Africa *“is probably facing the most serious threat to religious freedom that the Church in South Africa has faced to date”*. FOR SA’s statement came after the CRL called a National Consultative Conference in February 2019 that will undoubtedly include the issue of the regulation of religion.

Because freedom of worship is such a personal matter, it often gets lost in a cloud of emotions before being fully explored in the framework within which Christians should operate. The danger is that Christians react and do not necessarily respond appropriately to the news of the possibility of “losing their freedom to worship”.

## THE EARLY CHURCH AND THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF FREEDOM

The context for how Christians are called to live in civil society and how to adhere to social customs is not only found in Scripture, but also in the way the early Church understood that weakness and persecution was always the platform for sharing the Gospel. It never depended on freedom, approval or sanction. To reinforce this platform of weakness, God put certain structures in place to ensure sustained dependency and vulnerability. The early Church understood the need to allow God to be God. These virtues were not only accentuated through suffering and persecution but also solidified. It was a new religion of “strength in weakness” and “wisdom in foolishness”. Because the earth wasn't their home, the early Christians could say without reservation, like Paul, that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/06/21/global-uptick-in-government-restrictions-on-religion-in-2016/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://m.news24.com/news24/SouthAfrica/News/thou-shalt-not-preach-without-being-registered-says-crl-20170712>

<sup>3</sup> <http://forsa.org.za/crl-national-consultative-conference-rhema-national-summit-of-religious-leaders/>

Much of what Jesus taught became the DNA of the early Church. It was not only a theology of denying yourself and taking up your cross theoretically, it was a daily exercise. Not only did the early believers teach and preach a crucified Jesus during the first several hundred years after His death and resurrection, they lived lives that reflected their teachings. Freedom to do so never entered the equation.



The early Church understood that as long as they were on the bottom and the edge of society, as long as they shared the rejected and betrayed status of Jesus, they could grasp His teaching more readily. Principles of loving the enemy could only be fully understood when they were persecuted; values like forgiveness came into practice when they were wronged and imprisoned; teachings like love for the enemy only took root when they were despised by others; and philosophies like harmony could be more easily practised when they were gathering secretly in the catacombs. Because of their position in society, their faith was untouched by empire, corruption, greed and compromise. They had nothing to lose and nothing to prove. Their strength lay in their weakness and their relevance in their irrelevance. They served from the bottom up.

But faith often has a tendency to change with a community, more so than a community changing with faith. As persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire formally came to an end in 311 AD, faith embarked on a new unexplored road of relative freedom and status. The Church now had something to lose and something to prove. In 313, Constantine (c. 272-337) legalised Christianity and it became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380. This new platform allowed believers to integrate into a new social order, where Christianity was not only accepted but now had to be defended. The Church increasingly started serving from the top down and slowly lost its free and alternative vantage point.

As the position of the Church changed, so the values changed as well. The theology of Christ was still in place, but the expression of faith took a change for the worse. The Church now had an outward appearance of freedom, but in their endeavours to preserve what they had gained, they unknowingly sacrificed the essence of what they preached. Ironically, the blessing of freedom became the biggest obstacle in advancing the Gospel. Freedom didn't empower, it weakened.

Richard Rohr describes it as follows:

*"Before 313, the Church was on the bottom of society, which is the privileged vantage point for understanding the liberating power of the Gospel for both the individual and for society. Within the space of a few decades, the Church moved from the bottom to the top, literally from the catacombs to the basilicas."*

Freedom of religion therefore disturbs the rhythm of the cross, and in the same way that the Church needs to be prepared for persecution, she needs to be prepared for freedom. Here are seven principles to consider.

## 1. FREEDOM IS A CIVIC RIGHT, NOT A SPIRITUAL ENTITLEMENT

*2 Timothy 3:12 "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*

The right to freedom of religion is enshrined in the constitution of practically every Western nation. Chapter 2 of the Constitution of **South Africa** (pertaining to the Bill of Rights) states that everyone has the right to freedom of religion, belief and opinion. In the **United States**, freedom of religion is a constitutionally protected right provided in the religion clauses of the First Amendment. Freedom of religion in **France** is guaranteed by the constitutional rights set forth in the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. The right to freedom of religion in the **United Kingdom** is provided for in all three constituent legal systems, by devolved, national, European and international law and treaty.

Challenging governments on the basis of freedom as enshrined in the respective constitutions is therefore the legal right of any citizen or organisation in that nation. The constitutions provide the platform to do so and guarantee a legal right to be heard.



But Christians should not equate this “civic right” with a “spiritual entitlement” that can be demanded on the grounds of Scripture. *“I am a Christian therefore I have the right to worship freely”* is as unbiblical as the claim to be rich or healthy because we are Christian. The one right we do have as followers of Christ is the privilege to not only believe in Him, but also to suffer for Him (Philippians 1:29). Enjoying the ‘right’ to worship Christ in freedom is a privilege – it is never guaranteed in Scripture or promised by the Lord.

According to Scripture, Christians should not claim their rights at the expense of others, but should rather take advantage of them when necessary (1 Corinthians 6:7-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:6). It is part and parcel of Christianity to prefer others and to regard others as better than one’s self (Romans 12:10; Philippians 2:3-4). Instead of “standing on our rights”, Christians are even called upon to suffer abuse from unbelievers when they can bear testimony of Christ to them and promote peace (Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 12:17-21). The Christian life is, in reality, one of “surrendering self”, “relinquishing rights”, “bearing burdens” and “carrying one’s cross” (Mark 8:34; Philippians 1:29). Therefore, in a sense, Christians have no rights—or at least they are commanded to not exercise them in most circumstances—for the sake of God’s glory, the love of God’s people, or for the purpose of bearing testimony to God’s grace in them.

It is also significant to note that religious freedom is actually an “abnormal practice” for the majority of people in the world. The *Pew* research shows that the lives of about **5.5 billion** people (77% of the world’s population) are currently affected by restrictions on worship. Christians should therefore be careful not to stand on Scripture to defend their rights, and also to not take it for granted.

## 2. FREEDOM IS NOT A BIBLICAL PRINCIPLE, JUSTICE IS

*Matthew 12:18 "Here is My servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put My Spirit on Him, and He will proclaim justice to the nations."*

What few Christians realise is that even though liberty is central in Scripture, “democracy, freedom and social rights” are not. And even though freedom is not an *un*-Biblical principle, “religious freedom” is actually foreign to Scripture.

Under the Mosaic Law, Israel operated under a theocracy. The nation’s success or failure depended on their degree of obedience to God. “Religious freedom” was not part of the Old Testament system, because God ruled over Israel directly. In the New Testament, we have a clearer picture of the God-ordained role of government. Romans 13:3-4 defines the government’s responsibilities, which are, quite simply, to punish evil deeds, reward good deeds, and render justice. So God has given the government certain duties, but enforcing a particular system of worship is not among them. In both the Old and New Testament, one principle is central: justice and equality. Where injustice reigns, freedom disappears. Freedom is only a by-product of equality and justice.

Christians should therefore be more zealous about addressing injustice and inequality in their respective nations than the right to worship freely. We need to **live** faith and not **defend** faith. It is indeed better to lose your freedom and keep your witness than to lose your witness and keep your freedom. When we seek to maintain freedom of worship in our nations, it should be as a platform to address the rights of others, not to preserve our rights and individual securities.

Two defining examples in Scripture where justice is preferred over freedom are found in Amos and Micah.

Speaking on the Lord’s behalf, Amos said in Amos 5:21-24: *“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to Me. Even though you bring Me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”*

Micah was equally blunt in Micah 6:6-8: *“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands*

*of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."*

Amos and Micah lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. This was a time of peace and prosperity in Israel. However, most of the fruits of prosperity were enjoyed only by the upper class, who assumed that simply because they performed the rituals, God was pleased with them and thus granted them freedom, prosperity and peace – sound familiar? They saw no need for social justice. However, Amos and Micah spoke out against social injustice. Amos and Micah were not against freedom and prosperity, but in the way they were implemented. They declared that doing the will of God in the Holy Place must translate to doing the will of God in the marketplace. The essence of a true spirituality is to put ourselves in the presence of God – i.e. going to church on Sunday, reading our Bibles, discussing religious issues with others, meditating etc. – so that we can be transformed by that experience and go on to lead a life dedicated to love of self, others, the world and our God.

It's not about following Christ to obtain freedom – it's about imitating Christ to ensure justice. The question we need to ask ourselves in this regard is whether we would be equally concerned when other religions face restrictions as we are about our own.

### 3. FREEDOM IS NOT FOUND IN THE LAW, IT'S FOUND IN CHRIST

*2 Corinthians 3:17 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."*

*John 8:36 "So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*



Freedom is probably one of the most misunderstood concepts in the Christian faith. Christ came to set the captives free (Luke 4:8) – not to establish religious freedom, but to impart spiritual liberty. There is little to compare between freedom to worship and freedom from sin. Matthew Henry describes it as follows: *"The condition of those who enjoy and believe the Gospel have liberty: freedom from the yoke of the ceremonial law, and from the servitude of corruption; liberty of access to God, and freedom of speech in prayer. The heart is set at liberty, and enlarged, to run the ways of God's commandments."*

The modern Church has divided the global body of Christ in two parts: the "persecuted Church" and the "free Church". Sadly, what few fully comprehend, is that the members of the so-called "free Church" have become prisoners of their own obsessions while the "persecuted Church" is in fact free – free from fear of losing what they don't have, free from protecting what they don't own, and free from keeping what they never deserved. The spiritual freedom granted to those who have Jesus can never be taken away by those who want to restrict religion.

Christians have nothing to fear when worship is restricted – this will only result in faith being enlarged.

### 4. FREEDOM IS NOT ABOUT LIBERTY, IT'S ABOUT FAITHFULNESS

*John 15:20 "Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also."*

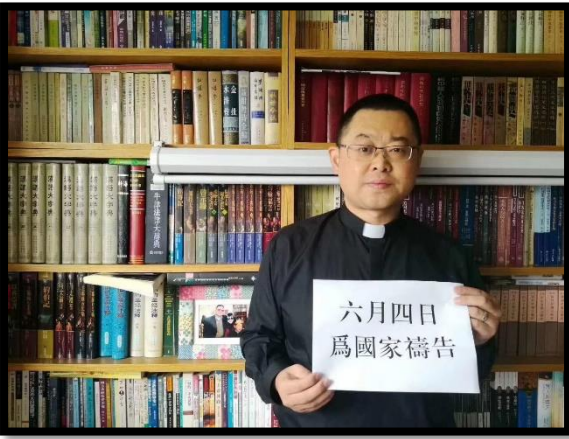
*Luke 21:12 "But before all this, they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of My name."*

The call to "fellowship" and fellowship with Christ is a life of surrender – not only a theological surrender but a practical, daily, physical surrender to pursue lives of faithfulness regardless of our circumstances.

Peter and John appearing before the Sanhedrin in Acts 4:13-20 is a good Biblical example of followers with an attitude of "freedom or no freedom, I will obey." This is the ultimate freedom – the freedom from fear.



## “Faithful Disobedience”



A modern example is Pastor Wang Yi, a Reformed pastor in China who was arrested on 9 December 2018 in the city of Chengdu by Chinese authorities. Wang issued a letter explaining the meaning and necessity of **faithful disobedience** – how it is distinct from political activism or civil disobedience, and how Christians should carry it out. Wang, his wife and more than 100 members of the church were charged with “inciting subversion of state power”. According to *China Aid*, if convicted, Wang and his parishioners could face up to 15 years in prison.

Earlier last year, Wang wrote “**My Declaration of Faithful Disobedience**,” a letter to be published by his church should he be detained for more than 48 hours. The full text of the letter can be found at:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/persecuted-chinese-pastor-issues-declaration-faithful-disobedience/>. In this letter, the significance of the principles of liberty and faithfulness highlighted by Wang cannot be overstated. In summary Wang proposes the following:

*“On the basis of the teachings of the Bible and the mission of the Gospel, I respect the authorities God has established in China. For God deposes kings and raises up kings. This is why I submit to the historical and institutional arrangements of God in China. At the same time, I am filled with anger and disgust at the persecution of the Church by this Communist regime, at the wickedness of their depriving people of the freedoms of religion and of conscience. **But changing social and political institutions is not the mission I have been called to, and it is not the goal for which God has given His people the Gospel.**”*

*... I accept and respect the fact that this Communist regime has been allowed by God to rule temporarily. For this reason, **I am joyfully willing to submit myself to their enforcement of the law as though submitting to the discipline and training of the Lord.** At the same time, I believe that this Communist regime’s persecution against the Church is a greatly wicked, unlawful action. As a pastor of a Christian church, I must denounce this wickedness openly and severely. The calling that I have received requires me to use non-violent methods to disobey those human laws that disobey the Bible and God. My Saviour Christ also requires me to joyfully bear all costs for disobeying wicked laws.*

*But this does not mean that my personal disobedience and the disobedience of the church is in any sense “fighting for rights” or political activism in the form of civil disobedience, because I do not have the intention of changing any institutions or laws of China. **As a pastor, the only thing I care about is the disruption of man’s sinful nature by this faithful disobedience and the testimony it bears for the cross of Christ.**”*

*As a pastor, my disobedience is one part of the Gospel commission. Christ’s great commission requires of us great disobedience. **The goal of disobedience is not to change the world but to testify about another world.**”*

*For the mission of the Church is only to be the Church and not to become a part of any secular institution. This is why I am not interested in changing any political or legal institutions in China. I’m not even interested in the question of when the Communist regime’s policies persecuting the Church will change. Regardless of which regime I live under now or in the future, as long as the secular government continues to persecute the Church, violating human consciences that belong to God alone, I will continue my faithful disobedience. For the entire commission God has given me is to let more Chinese people know through my actions that the hope of humanity and society is only in the redemption of Christ, in the supernatural, gracious sovereignty of God.*

*If God decides to use the persecution of this Communist regime against the Church to help more Chinese people to despair of their futures, to lead them through a wilderness of spiritual disillusionment and through this to make them know Jesus, if through this He continues disciplining and building up His Church, then I am joyfully willing to submit to God’s plans, for His plans are always benevolent and good.*

*I also understand that this happens to be the very reason why the Communist regime is filled with fear at a Church that is no longer afraid of it.”*

## 5. FREEDOM IS NOT A PLATFORM TO JUDGE, IT PROVIDES A SPACE TO BE A CONSCIENCE

Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr. said the following: *“The Church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”*



In the light of political developments in the US, the UK, France and South Africa, this is a profound statement. It basically implies that Christians should be unaffected by the conditions they face but propelled by the Christ-consciousness they share.

Conscience is a critical inner awareness that bears witness to the norms and values we recognise and apply. Providing a moral compass for a nation does not require freedom – it only requires conviction.

Sadly, from a South African perspective, the two main reasons why the CRL placed Christianity under investigation was “hate speech” and “malpractice”. It started with an investigation in 2015 to “protect religious practices” in South Africa after a series of events that included preachers forcing worshippers to eat snakes, spraying them with insect repellent, and encouraging them to drink petrol and to kiss them. More than 30 people died in different incidents of Christian “malpractice”.

The proposed restrictions were not because the Church provided a moral compass but because of the combination of malpractice, abuse and exploitation by ‘Christian’ leaders, accompanied by a deafening silence from the larger Christian community. Let’s be honest: when the news of the ‘insect repellent’ (“Doom”) pastor reached the news, we were all quick to come up with jokes and saw the incident as laughable, ridiculous and quite amusing. There was no weeping about this gross misrepresentation of a loving Christ. But people suffered and even died.

Together with malpractice came “hate speech”. In many ‘Christian’ nations, people of different beliefs, different sexual orientations and different political orientations are often demonised, ridiculed and polarised, all in the name of “truth”. The freedom to worship Christ should never be used as a platform to judge others.

## 6. FREEDOM IS NOT AN ORNAMENT, IT’S AN INSTRUMENT

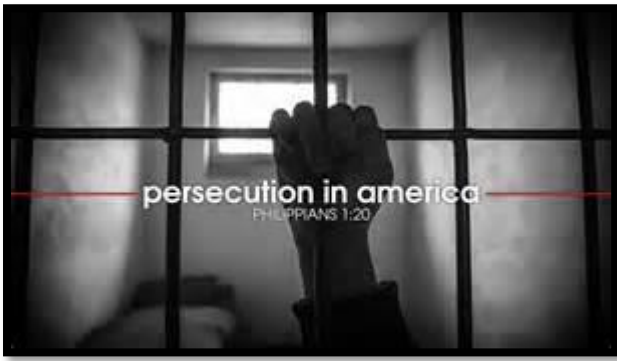
*Colossians 4:3-6 “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”*

Freedom is not something to defend – it is something to share. The ultimate commission to the Church was not to defend liberty but to share liberty, to bear witness to the One who liberates (Acts 1:8). During a recent visit to Romania, an elderly gentleman approached after a sermon and for no apparent reason shared the following thought with me: *“In a court of law,”* he said, *“there are always four role-players: there is the accuser, the defendant, the judge and the witness. Our role as Christians is not to accuse – that role belongs to the accuser, Satan. Nor is our role to defend – that role belongs to the One who intercedes before the Father on our behalf – the Holy Spirit. Nor are we there to judge – that role belongs exclusively to the Father. We are called only to be witnesses.”*

This short ‘sermon’ greatly ministered to my heart. The Church is not to use freedom as a loudspeaker, a megaphone on street corners calling out people’s sins and taking a position on the judgment seat. We are simply instructed to be WITNESSES<sup>4</sup> and, with a mandate to love God and to love our neighbour, we as the body of Christ are not to have the amplifiers blaring out from our hearts. If freedom is granted, then it should be used as a platform to witness. After all, freedom is never about freedom – it is the about the opportunities given to the Church from which to operate.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:8 *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

## 7. FREEDOM WITHHELD IS NOT NECESSARILY PERSECUTION ENFORCED



Christians who discover that the freedom they enjoyed for so many years is suddenly being questioned by secular authorities are often quick to refer to themselves as being “persecuted”.

This is a dangerous trend in Western theology – when faith is measured in relation to circumstances and not in the framework of Scripture. Social media posts often reveal the growing view that “we are entering a season of being persecuted for the sake of Christ.” This is deeply problematic both theologically and ethically. Firstly, it is always a dangerous sign when the theology of “opposition” is preached, and even promoted, as the ultimate sign of true Christianity. Christians often declare that when they face “opposition” for declaring the “truth”, it is a sign that it was TRUTH because they faced opposition. Opposition does not define truth – Jesus does (John 14:6). We sometimes face opposition simply because we are wrong, arrogant and insensitive. When Christians declare that the opposition of the government is initiating a process of persecution, it nullifies the cross and ridicules the actual sufferings of our millions of fellow believers in nations where persecution prevails. Secondly, it also creates a ‘victim mentality’ which is not only unappealing but also un-Christlike.

### CONCLUSION

The words of Landa Cope in a sermon called “The Power of One”<sup>5</sup> sums it up best: *“The Spirit of the Lord gives us understanding and that understanding gives us hope and that changes our perspectives of the world we live in. **We are not the Jews in Israel, we are the believers in Babylon.** Get over it! Our hope and our destiny is not in our nation. We have a new citizenship. And we are not aligned with the customs and traditions of the age and the world that surrounds us. We have a completely different perspective on these issues.*

*We are the Jews in Babylon; we don’t expect to be in control, we expect to serve. **We expect to be light in the midst of the darkness;** we are not afraid of darkness. We actually enjoy darkness because we look our best. So literally we don’t worry when things get dark because those are the easier times for light to function. We are here to bless the nations, we are here to bless the Babylonians. We have already won our victory, we already have our future in Christ. We are ambassadors of a culture and a lifestyle that is already secured for us forever. **We can never be marginalised, we can only believe we are marginalised.** “*

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