

*Defending the Religious Freedom  
of the Black Church*

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## Acts 4: 8-21

Religious freedom is a precious right that we, as the leaders of the Black Church, must defend vigorously. It is a founding principle of this great nation, and much more than that, the God-given right of every human being. As the Apostle Peter declared when ordered by the Jewish religious authorities of his day to abandon his faith: “Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). The founding fathers of the United States of America came to these shores to escape the tyranny of religious persecution in Europe, and established a nation where every individual would be free to follow the dictates of his or her conscience, without hindrance or help from any arm of government. It is alarming to see recent developments which now put our nation’s noble traditions at risk.

While much attention has recently been focused on the question of same-sex unions, our right as people of faith to practice our religion and follow our conscience is much more expansive than this narrow issue. It is essential that we, as Americans, be free to worship and serve God as we are led to do by divine mandate and by the private prompting of our individual consciences. One critical aspect of worship in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the three major world religions, is reverence for a sacred text and faithful observance of its teachings. As 2 Timothy 3:16 states: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” However, in the current atmosphere there is a growing danger that the Word of God may be deemed hate speech. In a recent case in Canada a Christian who denounced homosexuality on biblical grounds was found guilty of hate speech despite his appeal to religious freedom. We cannot let that happen here in the US.

For many people of faith this duty to conscience, faith and a sacred text entails donning religious garb or practicing dietary restrictions. For many it leads to times set aside for worship and apart from the demands of the working world, and the observance of sacred holidays. From all Christians it requires lives of compassion based on high ethical principles. As the Bible teaches: “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the

family of believers.” This commitment to serving the poor is especially apparent in the Black church where we have fought against racial oppression and faced down police dogs and fire hoses; operated preschools and provided housing for the elderly for many decades. Our response to Christ’s call to care for all people has enriched our society. Freedom to do all this must be guaranteed to all people of faith.

While our society benefits in immeasurable ways from the principled and kindly lives of Christians and other people of faith, in particular as they serve the needy in our midst, clearly our faith also brings us into conflict with secular society. It is at this very point that the genius of the framers of the United States constitution is evident, because they designed a system that guarantees people of every faith the right to follow their conscience. The highest courts in this land have gone on to defend the right of people of faith to honor the dictates of their religion unless there is a pressing need on the part of the state to intervene. The religious freedom laws currently in force or being proposed in a number of states ensure the right of the Black Church to fulfill its calling to faithful observance of the Word of God, and the right of all other people of faith to do likewise. Surely in the United States, if nowhere else in the world, in a nation founded on the principle of freedom, all people of goodwill will rise to defend the right of people of faith to manifest in their daily lives their earnest commitment to honoring the promptings of their consciences, in accordance with the principles enshrined in our constitution.

If daily decisions, business practices and other conscientious actions consistent with the observance of biblical teaching and the principles central to the sacred texts of the major religions come under attack, then faith in these sacred texts and the texts themselves are under threat. Christian doctors should not be compelled to perform abortions, Muslims should be free to wear the hijab, and Orthodox Jews to enforce a dress code in their retail establishments. Committed Christians will, like our ancestors in biblical times, stoutly resist any government attempt to restrict our right to honor the inspired Word of God or the right of any people of faith to likewise honor their sacred texts.

Yet in this very nation demagogues have dared to accuse people of faith of promoting Jim Crow laws when they seek to safeguard their freedom to obey their conscience and follow the teachings of their sacred texts. There is no analogy between the apartheid of Jim Crow and the religious freedom laws being proposed

across this country. It is the very same faith that is protected by religious freedom laws that inspired our ancestors to lead the movement for the abolition of slavery and to dismantle Jim-Crow apartheid in the American South. It is abhorrent to demean the defense of this faith as the equivalent of the injustices that we have fought and overcome.

The drive to normalize non-normative sexual behavior has inspired some to dishonor the memory of courageous blacks who experienced the unique horrors of white supremacy, slavery, rape, terrorism and apartheid in the U.S. They do so by asserting, falsely, an argument of historical and existential equivalence between Jim Crow laws and religious freedom laws. In so doing, these partisans have declared war on the truth of the black experience as well as on the freedom of faithful Americans to follow their consciences.

A well-financed war is now being waged by the gay and lesbian community on the faith of our ancestors. Like Martin Luther King, Jr., we do not invite conflict. However, in cases where questions of conscience and religious freedom are at stake, we are prepared, for the sake of the gospel, to suffer the consequences of standing on our convictions.

As Christians we serve a God of love and it is therefore imperative that we state in the most vigorous terms our commitment to loving all people. While we unwaveringly accept the clear biblical teaching that homosexual activity is wrong, as Christians we deplore all acts of violence against people based on their sexual preferences. We stand against taunting and teasing of innocent teenagers, and reject social ostracism of homosexuals even as we staunchly defend our right not to in any way endorse same-sex unions. We are called to practice compassionate understanding in dealing with gays and lesbians and to energetically defend their rights, without compromising in any way our witness to the biblical teaching of marriage between one man and one woman.

We must also, to be faithful Christian witnesses, condemn homosexual relations even as we repudiate excessive laws criminalizing aid to homosexuals, such as those passed by some African nations. We stand with our African brothers and sisters who insist on limiting the definition of marriage to the union of one man and one woman, and we denounce efforts by Western agencies to impose secular values through grants that dictate the acceptance of these values. However, we call on our

Christian brothers and sisters in Uganda to take all necessary legislative and other steps to ensure that homosexuals and lesbians, while sinners, are treated with compassion and respect and are not intimidated or denied the best health care available. While we whole-heartedly reject the sinful behavior of homosexual relations we decry any form of discrimination against homosexuals in housing, employment or education. We insist on the duty of both government and citizens to protect homosexuals from any physical danger.

One unintended consequence of this attack on religious liberty, which comes dangerously close to being religious persecution, is actually a blessing. Resisting such attacks on our faith often functions as a process of spiritual purification and leads to renewed commitment among the faithful. Christians in the US are not alone in this struggle; our Christian brothers in Africa and China daily fight for their right to practice their religion despite the oppression of domestic regimes and the cultural imperialism of the West.

Indeed, the problem of religious freedom is much more intense among Christians in many parts of the world. Internationally as many as 80% of all acts of religious persecution are directed at Christians. Each month 322 Christians are killed for their faith. Each month 214 churches and other Christian properties are destroyed. Each month 722 forms of violence, such as beatings, rape and imprisonment are committed against Christians.<sup>1</sup> The problem of persecution of Christians is particularly bad in the Muslim world. “Since the Arab Spring and the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, which have thrown the region into utter chaos, Muslim extremists have killed thousands of Christians every year, while destroying and desecrating countless churches. Christian communities in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt have been hardest hit.”<sup>2</sup> However, for the last thirteen years, North Korea has “ranked No. 1 on the World Watch List of the 50 countries where persecution is most extreme. The god-like worship of the leader, Kim Jong-Un, and his predecessors leaves little room for any other religions and Christians face unimaginable pressure in every sphere of life. Meeting with other Christians is virtually impossible. Anyone discovered engaging in unauthorized religious activity is subject to arrest, arbitrary detention, disappearance, torture and/or execution.

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<sup>1</sup> Open Doors, <http://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/#where>. Accessed 9/9/15

<sup>2</sup> Aid to a Church in Need, [http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8431&news\\_iv\\_ctrl=1461](http://www.churchinneed.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8431&news_iv_ctrl=1461). Accessed 9-9-15

Christians who attempt to return to North Korea from China are sentenced to life in prison or executed.”<sup>3</sup>

Batima, a college student in Kyrgyzstan, is one example of the kind of persecution that Christians in other parts of the world face. A recent convert to Christianity, Batima was invited by her family for a visit. She went, not suspecting the hostility she would encounter. Her family was determined to make her forsake her newfound faith. “Her own brothers and sister brutally beat her until she sustained a concussion and lost consciousness. They then tied her up and took her phone and personal documents.” Batima escaped, found refuge with Open Doors, a ministry to persecuted Christians, and is receiving care for her wounds. She is reported to be in good spirits, maintaining her faith in Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The challenges faced by the church in the USA pale in comparison with those confronted by our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world. We must pray for those being persecuted. And we must protect the precious right to religious freedom that exists in our land. We must not be silent when Christians face persecution abroad. We must not allow our religious freedom to be eroded at home.

Ironically, the enemies of religious freedom have performed a valuable service to the church; in challenging our God-given, fundamental right to practice our faith they fuel the spirit of resistance and inspire solidarity with millions of people of faith in the developing world.

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<sup>3</sup> Open Doors, <http://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/world-watch-list/north-korea/>. Accessed 9-9-15

<sup>4</sup> Open Doors, <http://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/tag-blog-post/beaten-for-jesus/>. Accessed 9/9/15