

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AS A HUMAN RIGHT:  
LESSONS FROM THE TRENCHES

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A possible subtitle for my address might be, “Now there was no law against a man’s belief, for it was strictly contrary to the commandments of God,” which comes from Alma’s great encounter with the antichrist Korihor (Alma 30:7). It has within it a key element of the gospel. This element is central to the atonement and to the very role that we play here on this earth.

It also is the key to understanding what comes next and what is perhaps the most central injunction in all the scriptures: “Choose ye this day whom ye will serve.” This is a ringing call to all of us—a call to service, but, as I hope to explain, a call to a particular sort of service.

To understand what I mean by this and its relevance to all of our lives, I would like to take you on a little journey. Not an epic journey, not a *Lord of the Rings* journey, nor an *Iliad* or an *Odyssey*—though it has certain elements of those—but rather a much smaller, more personal journey. But one that has meaning for me, nonetheless, and I hope there might be some small meaning in it for you as well.

It does have some of the elements of a great journey. Like all great journeys, for example, it starts with an accidental traveler. I am, indeed, the epitome of the accidental traveler, as I will describe. Like many important journeys, it has its moments of being dark, difficult, challenging, and discouraging, causing us to wonder at times whether we will prevail. And, indeed, like many journeys, if I had known how difficult and discouraging it would be from time to time, I am not at all sure I would have embarked upon it.

But like all great journeys, it also is one from which I have learned a great deal—about the subject of the journey, about myself, and especially about my relationship to the gospel. Like all great journeys, it is transformative in the most important ways, all the ways that really matter. Like all great journeys, when it is successfully completed, it gives us a new heart, just as Saul was given a new heart by the Lord when he was called by Samuel; it gives us a new heart and it makes us new. Like all journeys, it is, in the end, filled with hope.

But perhaps most importantly, like all epic journeys, it does not really end. The apparent end of the journey is merely an invitation to a new journey—one that I must take for what time remains for me on this

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earth, but one I also hope some of you will be willing to take as well. And my promise to you is that as we all become “new men and new women” and as we all are given “new hearts,” we will be better able to take the journey and better able to meet its challenges.

So let us start the journey, exploring, in turn, each of its elements. The first is the necessity of an accidental traveler, and, indeed, I am the epitome of the accidental traveler. It started in 1989 when I was invited by President George H.W. Bush to serve in a position in the U.S. Department of State. I was asked to serve because I have some background and exposure to Japan and some international experience in the area of trade law. Like all good government service experiences, however, while I joined with the intention of doing Japanese-related and trade-related work, the very first assignment I received was to work on German unification.

Now, I had never been to Germany and spoke absolutely no German. I knew where Germany was; I could pick it out on a map, but I knew very, very little about it. So, of course, over the entire first year, I worked virtually full-time drafting and negotiating the treaty that reunified Germany.

Based on that work, I was then asked to conduct negotiations on behalf of the United States under the auspices of an international organization that was then called the “Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe” or the CSCE. The CSCE was established to allow the western countries—Europe, the United States and other NATO countries—to negotiate issues of importance with the Soviet Union and those countries under Soviet control (the Iron Curtain countries). It was a very successful organization because it reached what is probably the most important breakthrough in history in the area of human rights: the Helsinki Accords. The Helsinki Accords did something no other human rights treaty had ever done. Prior to the Helsinki Accords, when countries were asked about their treatment of their own citizens, they would say, and under prevailing international law were entitled to say, “That is a matter of domestic politics; it is none of your business. How we treat *other* people in countries other than our own, what we do across our borders—those can be matters of concern for the international community—but what we do internally to our own citizens is not the business of other countries.”

The Helsinki Accords challenged that basic, long-standing principle, establishing for the first time that it is indeed the business of the international community to monitor how countries treated their own citizens. From this simple reversal of the basic presumption of international law, the true power of the human rights movement was really born.

In all events, because of my work on German reunification, I had the privilege of conducting some negotiations under the umbrella of the CSCE and learning for the first time of the importance of the human

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rights movement. That is the genesis of the accidental first step on this journey.

I then returned to Columbia University in 1993, where I had taught before, and was immediately enlisted into the human rights movement by one of my very close colleagues, Professor Louis Henkin, a wonderful man who is one of the founders of the international human rights movement and its discipline as an academic subject. To this day, Lou Henkin's casebooks are among the leading casebooks in the country. The human rights programs he has started around the country remain among the best and most successful.

Lou invited me to join him in starting a human rights program upon my return to Columbia. He came to me and simply asked, "You did human rights negotiations while you were in the government, didn't you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Good," he said. "Come to my office, and we will talk."

Hence, we began a program that was designed to bring together the political power of the human rights community with the conceptual power of the religious liberties movement. Let me give you a little background to explain why this is significant.

There exists in the United States a vibrant human rights community, which is largely based on the secular human rights documents that derived out of the United Nations and the Helsinki Accords. But honestly speaking, this community has historically mistrusted the notion of freedom of religion. There exists among many in this community, a sense that those who propound the importance of freedom of religion are largely people who are trying to impose their religious beliefs on others.

On the other hand, the religious liberties community—that is, those who champion the cause of freedom of religion around the world—sometimes mistrust the more secularly-based human rights community. Religious liberties advocates, often coming from a faith-based perspective, believe and fear that the human rights community really mistrusts religion and is trying to make the world safe *from* religion, not safe *for* religion. And so, to put it mildly, the human rights community and the religious liberties community are often at odds.

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Lou thought this tension was unfortunate because each community had so much to contribute to each other. Consequently, he proposed that we establish a program in international human rights and freedom of religion. Through this program, we hoped to encourage the more secularly based human rights community to include freedom of religion as one of its central tenets and to encourage the religious liberties community to work more closely with the human rights community and harness its great power and political clout to its ends. And, in the bargain, we planned to bring these communities together.

In the execution of this program, we brought human rights activists—particularly religious liberties activists—from all over the world to Columbia and spent a semester teaching them about the basic intellectual and legal underpinnings of human rights, as well as how to be effective human rights advocates. Our mantra was that we would take people who were irritating to their governments and make them more irritating. We were largely successful in that enterprise. But, frankly, in the final analysis, we were not very successful in ever bringing the two communities of human rights activists together.

However, the consequence of that work and my prior work in the federal government—both of which were accidental—propelled me into a position of prominence on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. This commission was created by statute in 1998 by Congress as a federal advisory commission to advise the President, the Secretary of State, the National Security Advisor, and the Congress on ways in which our foreign policy could be structured to better encourage freedom of religion around the world. I served on that commission for about eight years, variously as chair and vice chair most of the time. But my appointment on the commission was directly a result of my work with Lou Henkin and, in turn, my work with him—and here is the key—was not only because I had done human rights negotiations, but also because I was an observant, faithful member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Lou was an observant Jew, and it was important for him to get someone of faith, someone who came from a faith-based background, to work in this program. Lou believed that only people who had both worked on human rights from the secular perspective and were themselves religious could possibly begin to bridge the divide between these various human rights communities. So my faith was as important as my government experience.

And so my journey did not actually start in 1989 when I went to the State Department. Rather, my accidental journey started many, many years earlier, in November of 1829, when John Young took two of his sons—Joseph and Brigham—to visit his third son, Lorenzo Dow Young, who was my great-great-great-great grandfather. They, along with Heber C. Kimball, took Lorenzo Dow Young a copy of the Book of Mormon and the story of the restored gospel, and two years later Lorenzo was baptized. He admitted at his baptism that since he “had believed the gospel for some time, and preached as a Mormon elder, I thought it was time I was baptized.” That characteristic of being a slow learner is also part of my heritage, but it is what, in the final analysis, makes me the supreme and ultimate accidental traveler.

I returned to Columbia University and had the opportunity to create a major program on freedom of religion—not because I had been on the

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Harvard Law Review or a clerk on the U.S. Supreme Court, but rather because I had just happened to arrive at the State Department two weeks before the Berlin Wall came down and, more importantly, because I had been blessed by birth with membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (because John Young decided to visit his son on the way to Pennsylvania to meet the saints). All of this led directly to an appointment and work on the commission, from which most of the stories that I will talk about today are derived.

But the point of all this, although it is a bit of a lengthy lead-in, is to understand that I believe that, in my life, as will certainly be true in your lives, if you are doing the things the Lord wants and are prepared and if you are faithful, and if you take advantage of the positions in which the Lord puts you and the opportunities the Lord gives you, the Lord will put you in positions to do the things that He needs done for his Church. And you will have the opportunity to build the kingdom in ways that you and only you can.

So while I call myself the supreme accidental traveler, perhaps that is a misnomer because, I suspect, there are very few accidents in the Lord's kingdom.

I was, of course, not one who started out sitting where you are sitting today, saying, "I think I want to advance the cause of religious freedom around the world." But the Lord works in mysterious ways and guides and directs us to places and positions necessary to advance His work and to build His kingdom. And we must be sure and ready to respond when He guides us.

At times, the journey of which I speak today was also dark, difficult, and discouraging. While serving on the Commission, I met people who had been the subject of extraordinary religious persecution. I saw and spoke with survivors of the most extraordinary atrocities that people can commit against their fellow beings. I met these people, talked with them and saw first hand the atrocities to which they had been subjected.

From that experience, I learned many important lessons. First, I learned of the importance of religion in geopolitical matters. Not just the importance of religion in our own lives, but also the important impact religion has across the world and across time.

Some of these effects are very good. The role of the Catholic Church was very powerful in bringing down the Iron Curtain, particularly if you look at the Solidarity Movement in Poland and the role of the Catholic Church in Hungary. But you can also see this in Germany's unification. Thursday night candlelight vigils were all conducted around the Lutheran Church and organized by that church. These were powerful geopolitical movements. Even a cursory study of history will also reveal the pivotal role of the Black churches in our own civil rights movements. Taylor

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Branch's "Parting the Waters" offers an extraordinary history of the civil rights movement in the United States. After reading this, you will see with absolute clarity that the civil rights movement simply would not have happened without the political and organization power and the moral force of religious institutions. The same is true in the pre-Civil War abolition movement in the United States. In addition to the power of religion in our personal lives, one cannot help but see the enormous transformative power of religion on a grand geopolitical stage.

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But one also sees religion for ill as well. As a student of Japan, I look at the manipulation of Shinto in the run up to World War II and the way in which Japanese leaders transformed Shinto from a local, family, and nature-oriented set of low-key worship experiences to a powerful and virulent form of nationalism, leading to ideological and political control. You can look at the use of religion in the Middle East today. Afghanistan under the Taliban is a graphic poster child for the very worst that religion can do. You can look at religious oppression in Saudi Arabia where the government has entered into an unholy alliance with the Wahabi sect of Islam and allows that sect to impose itself in the most repressive way in exchange for the support of the leaders of that sect to the Saud family.

Look at Nigeria and see what is happening in the five northern provinces where Sharia Law is being imposed, even on those who are not Muslim. Look at the conflicts on the front pages of the newspaper almost every day and you will see Ethiopia and Somalia. And, of course, there is Sudan, first with its long-running, though now settled war between the Islamist North (with the government that controls the capital city, Khartoum) and the largely animist and Christian South, and now with the terrible genocide in Darfur. You can see the suppression of religious freedom by many Orthodox Churches in Russia, and even Greece, for that matter, which, though a supposedly enlightened Western country, has a very bad human rights record on freedom of religion.

So one sees the centrality of religion on a global political scale. Understanding that is crucial to understanding the world.

At the same time, however, in the middle of my journey, the most dark and discouraging discoveries were those horrendous abuses committed against individuals. Sometimes these were perpetrated by governments, sometimes by rival religious groups, but all were done in the name of, or against religion. China, Vietnam, and North Korea are among the very worst offenders. In these countries, one can see at a very personal level the worst that humans can do to their fellow beings.

In my capacity as chair and vice chair of the Commission, I participated in hearings, took trips and met both the victims and perpetrators. I met a Vietnamese pastor, an elderly man in his eighties, who has been imprisoned and tortured simply because he spoke of his belief in our

Lord Jesus Christ. I met an 80-year-old Chinese woman who had been imprisoned and beaten simply because she had secreted in her house small pieces of paper inscribed with her favorite Bible verses. These were discovered and she was imprisoned and tortured. I met Muslim survivors of a Hindu-led slaughter in India. In this religiously motivated rampage, people had been hacked and burned to death simply because they were Muslims. I met Sudanese who had left the Nuba Mountains or had left their refuges to secure food and supplies being transported by train under the direction of the United Nations. As these people approached the trains, the government of Khartoum sent airplanes to strafe those trying to get supplies. In South Korea, I interviewed a North Korean man whose family had gone across the Yalu River to China for refuge. The Chinese government then allowed the North Korean military to come into China and take his family back into North Korea. They were then taken to a camp. He escaped, but his family was not so lucky. They received, he told me, the “short haircut.” I was very confused by this and asked, “What do you mean?” He said, “Well, my six-year-old sister had a small cross that she was wearing at the time of our capture. It had been given to her by a Christian priest in China, and because she was wearing this small trinket, the entire family was taken and given the ‘short haircut.’” I thought tonsorial adjustments were an odd way to treat violations of the law in North Korea, but he explained. The “short haircut” means their heads were cut off. His entire family had been beheaded because a six-year-old girl had been given a small crucifix by a kindly, well-meaning priest.

This is the world in which we live. And this is what I mean when I describe my journey as dark and discouraging and dismal.

But all great journeys teach us. So what did I learn? First, I learned the centrality and importance of religion on the geopolitical level. Through almost all the major national and international events I have witnessed during my lifetime, and as I study history, the centrality of religion absolutely amazes me. Religion is used and abused. It is sometimes a causal variable and sometimes a caused variable. It is sometimes a pretext and sometimes real. But it is always, always, always central. Looking as far back as early Chinese history, the great empires of the Persians, the Meads, the Syrians, the Romans, the Ottomans, and the Byzantines, and our world wars, the centrality of religion is immediately and decisively evident, if one just pays attention.

But once I realized the centrality of religion in the great geopolitical events of all ages, something else became glaringly obvious. If religion is that important, we should not only take it seriously and make it a matter of great study in our own personal lives—for our own personal

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edification and the edification of our family—but we should also take it most seriously as an intellectual and academic pursuit.

I want to strongly urge you to think about that. To be perfectly honest, the academies and the great universities of the world have, to some large extent, failed you by largely writing religion out of the curriculum. And I do not necessarily mean religion as theology, as important as that is. Rather, I mean religion as it relates to economics, political science, sociology and law, and on and on. We are even discovering how it relates to medicine. If we do not study that, we really study the world with one hand tied behind our back. It may be a causal variable, it may be caused, it may be pretext, it may be real, but it is always important.

Although it has been a long wind-up to the pitch, the second suggestion I give to you is to think seriously about ways in which you can make religion, in the context of whatever discipline you are studying, an important, indeed a central, intellectual pursuit. Insist that your professors do it and make it an important part of your intellectual journey. And I think you are well-positioned to do just that, particularly at this wonderful university where religion is already a central part of all you do. You are in a terrific position to make it a serious part, not only of your moral and personal spiritual journey, but also of your intellectual journey.

But religion is important on a geopolitical level because, of course, it is important to people individually. Political groups are formed and act largely on the basis of the amalgamation of individuals' feelings within the group. For the vast majority of the people in the world—not just members of our church and not just Christians—I want to testify to you that religion matters enormously, perhaps more importantly than anything else. And the reason is very simple. It deals with those matters that are most important and fundamental to people: Who am I? How should I live my life? What is the most important thing for me to be doing in my life? What is the purpose in my life? What is life's meaning? How should I raise my family? What should I teach my children? What happens to me when I die? Will I ever see my loved ones again? It is not just those of us who sit in our churches on Sunday and think about these matters. The vast majority of the population thinks about it constantly. Across time, across peoples, across cultures, histories, backgrounds, the questions are the same. Let me give you just one small example of what I mean.

I have spent many years in Japan and much of my career studying about Japan. During those studies, I was, of course, exposed to Buddhism. You would think Zen Buddhism is about as far from Christianity as you can imagine, but let me read a passage from one of the most famous Zen masters, Katsuda Sekida. He writes:

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I had naturally believed that if I only got *kensho* [*kensho* is the enlightenment that you seek in Zen, which makes the meaning of the universe clear], the secret of the universe, the problem of death, and everything else would be solved instantly, once and for all... Where I am from, whither I shall go, the true nature of reality, eternal life, and everything else will be understood as clearly as looking at a picture.<sup>1</sup>

So Master Sekida embraced Zen to answer precisely the same questions that we send missionaries into the world to answer. And he then goes on to say something very interesting: “Even if my life is taken at this moment, I shall not be grieved so long as I have understood the secret.”<sup>2</sup> Like virtually everyone else in the world, he yearned for life’s most basic questions and was willing to give his life to find the answers.

We know this desire from our own faith background. Aaron, one of the great missionaries among the sons of Mosiah, speaks to King Lamoni’s father in the twenty-second chapter of Alma. The king asks, “What shall I do that I may have this eternal life of which thou has spoken?” “I will,” he says, “give up all that I possess, yea, I will forsake my kingdom, that I may receive this great joy.” (Alma 22:15).

As we were riding up here, we stopped in Malad, Idaho. As I was standing there, a fellow looked at me and said, “Did you hear about the fellow who just won the lottery?” I said, “No.” “He won 200 million dollars and he is 84 and he will never have a chance to spend it,” he responded. The man then proceeded to describe at some length what he would do with the 200 million dollars. And not much of it was to pay tithing, as nearly as I could tell. As I was listening to him talk, I was thinking of what King Lamoni’s father, who must have had the equivalent of more than 200 million dollars, said: “I would give it all away to know this.”

Christ himself taught this in typical parable fashion. He says in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew:

Like unto a treasure hid in a field, that the which when a man hath found he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buy the field.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls. Who, when he hath found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-45)

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Therefore, it is not surprising that religion moves us in a global sense because it moves us in an individual sense. But we must take both the global and individual perspective seriously in both senses, and we are enormously blessed because of the truth that we have.

But that blessing alone is not enough because it is both a blessing and a call to service. I am often reminded, when I think of how fortunate I

am to be a member of the Church, of the great coach who once said that “many people are born on third base and think they have hit a triple.”

I feel like that sometimes; that I was born on third base and think I have hit a triple. But if you are on third base, it gives you the obligation to run home. That is what the gospel gives us the privilege of doing, but it gives us an obligation as well.

To put the matter slightly differently, freedom of religion, or religious liberties, is very, very important. It is sometimes called the first freedom. And I think it is called that not simply because it is listed first in the Bill of Rights. It is called the first freedom because it is fundamental in so many ways. It goes to that thing that is most important to us as human beings. Religion is what defines us. Religion is what helps us understand our relationship to the universe and therefore it is an essential part of what it means to be human. Respecting the dignity of religion and our ability to make our own choices regarding religion and our belief system must be the first thing that governments do.

Protecting religious freedom is a moral imperative of the most profound sort, but, at the same time, it is also very practical, with very significant teleological components as well. This is because protecting one’s freedom of religion necessarily and inescapably presupposes the propriety of allegiance to something higher than that government. Any government that respects freedom of religion must necessarily wrestle with, and accept, its own limitations. If you believe that a government must provide freedom of religion, then you must also believe—and that government must also believe—that there are appropriate limits to government power, that there are parts of our lives into which a government cannot intrude. Such governments, when they provide that protection, are more likely to earn the adherence and loyalty of their own citizens and to allow those citizens to reach their full potential as human beings and as members of the world community. This is the great principle of John Locke and, unfortunately, one that is lost on so many governments in the world. Nevertheless, it is of the very highest importance.

Now, precisely because it is that important and precisely because it bespeaks the propriety of an allegiance to something higher than the state, it also is very often the first right governments try to suppress. If you see a government trying to suppress and control freedom of religion, then you know trouble is on the way. It is like the canary in the coal mine. It is the first signal that a government is beginning to abuse all the human rights or soon will.

This has generated another of the great lessons I learned on my journey. Not only is religion important to me as a personal matter and I should do all I can to follow the dictates of my Heavenly Father; and not only should I study religion as an academic matter to better understand the

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role it plays in world and human affairs so I can better build the kind of world our Heavenly Father wants; but the ability to believe and worship freely is so important to all people that I ought to do all I can to ensure its protection all over the world.

But as I learned these lessons and contemplated these experiences, I began to wonder what my own religion teaches about freedom of religion. As a citizen, I believe I have an obligation to protect it. But what obligation and responsibility do I have as a member of our Church? As a follower of Christ? So I began to study more carefully just what our own religion teaches us about the importance and centrality of this concept.

Certainly I anticipated that as I read the scriptures, I would discover that it would be a wise and prudent policy and a good idea. But the more I studied, the more surprised I was to learn how central this doctrine is to the core of the Church and that fighting for religious freedom and guaranteeing that right not only to ourselves but to others is critical not only as a matter of history, political theory and political practice, but even more importantly as a matter of doctrine.

Let me speak for a few moments about precisely what I mean by that. Look in the thirtieth chapter of Alma in the Book of Mormon. Contained in these verses is a brief comment that I used to consider almost a throw-away line in a longer story and discourse, but now I have come to understand this idea is much more central to the gospel than I could have ever imagined.

Remember, this is a discourse where Korihor, the antichrist, came to preach “against the prophecies which had been spoken by the prophets” (Alma 30:6). As the Book of Mormon makes very clear, however, his dissenting opinion was not a concern of the law. It makes that point abundantly, indeed excessively clear. Even before we learn how pernicious Korihor’s teachings were, or even what they were, we learn that, “the law could have no hold upon him,” whatever his beliefs (Alma 30:12).

Now that might sound like an interesting principle of governance, a sound and prudential way to structure the legal system. But what is interesting is that this principle is so much more. Establishing a law that regulated a person’s beliefs was not just unsound as a matter of governance, but “it was strictly contrary to the commands of God” (Alma 30:7). This was not a prudential majority decision. Rather, this kind of a law would have been contrary to the commands of God. Why? Because such a law would have “brought men onto unequal grounds” (Alma 30:7).

Both parts of that sentence are very interesting. First, the absence of a law dictating one’s beliefs was not to be left entirely to the decisions of the judges or the legislators; rather, it was established because that law would have been contrary to God’s law. Secondly, any law like that would have brought men onto “unequal ground.” And why is that relevant?

The prophets tell us in the very next verse, “For thus saith the scripture: Choose ye this day, whom ye well serve” (Alma 30:8). In other words, without the capacity or freedom to choose, we cannot make the choice to serve the Lord, and that, in turn, deprives us of the most important opportunity of all: the opportunity to choose to serve the Lord and to choose salvation.

So it is contrary to God’s law to do anything that might inhibit the capacity for our fellow human beings to choose. The laws and governments must be structured to give ample scope to that capacity to choose. Anything else is contrary to the commands of God.

Now, in case we miss that—we might be a little dense, as I certainly was when I first skipped through these verses—the prophets restate that basic principle again and again for three more verses. The judges cannot and more importantly “should not” do anything to Korihor through application of the law. So, in the end, they take him to Alma, who has an interesting prophetic way of dealing with him.

Another confirmation of this most basic and profound principle is found in the sixty-first chapter of Alma. This is Pahoran’s remarkably restrained, noble and temperate response to Moroni’s accusations. If you read Moroni’s accusations and what was going on with Pahoran, you would think Pahoran would have had the right to be a little upset with Moroni. Moroni, who never pulled his punches either in war or in writing, excoriates Pahoran, obviously without a full grasp of the facts. But Pahoran responds very temperately and in a particularly interesting way. He says he understands the Lamanites are knocking at the door and that Moroni desperately needs more supplies. But, he continues, he cannot provide them because there is this rebellion being prosecuted by some grasping Nephites who are using the war as an occasion to obtain control and power. So Pahoran invites Moroni back to repress the rebellion, while urging him to continue to prosecute the war against the Lamanites. And here is where his letter really gets interesting. Pahoran urges Moroni to leave Lehi and Teancum with adequate power and authority to prosecute the war appropriately and to give them “power to conduct the war according to the spirit of the Lord” (Alma 61:15). Now for a religious people with a prophet in charge, that is not such a surprising injunction. But then Pahoran tells Moroni to instruct them—and this is the phrase that is so interesting—to “conduct the war...according to the spirit of God, which is also the spirit of freedom which is in them” (Alma 61:15).

This equation that links the spirit of God with the spirit of freedom does not seem accidental or casual. And remember any time the writers phrased something wrong or inelegantly in the Book of Mormon, they went back and rephrased it to get it precisely right. Thus, this linkage seems purposeful, pointedly making the connection between true liberty

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and Heavenly Father's spirit. And, again, this should leave absolutely no doubt in our minds regarding the centrality of the concept of free will in our Father in Heaven's plan. That most fundamental principle gives us the freedom to choose our own way of life. It even—and perhaps especially—gives that right to Korihor, someone with whom we disagree most strongly. The scriptures even enjoin us to give that right to someone who would, if he could, take that very right away from us. The scriptures challenge us to give that right to precisely those with whom we disagree the most and who, if they had the chance, would take it away from us.

What is the lesson that I drew from all of this? It is that, at least for me, there are not only practical, prudential, and emotional reasons to work to provide true freedom for all people, but, more important, there is an essential doctrinal imperative that also forces me to champion the cause of liberty for all. That task is essential to ensure my freedom, as well as the freedom of my children and my family to be sure, but it is also essential for me to advance that cause to ensure my own eternal salvation.

So this leads me to the end of my journey, though an ending that is truly just a beginning. Religion is still greatly suppressed around the world; there is much to do. And I invite you to join me. This is an extraordinary journey, where people of goodwill can truly transform the world in which we live, creating an environment in which people can truly choose this day whom they will serve.

I am often struck by Joseph Smith's injunction that there would come a time when the Constitution would hang by a thread and be saved by the elders of the Church. I suspect many of us considered that and decided it was going to be through the training of righteous LDS lawyers. I am all for that—of course, you can never have enough lawyers. But at the end of the day, I do not think that is what he meant. When Joseph was talking about elders, he was almost invariably talking about people who went out and preached the gospel.

What guarantees the protection and preservation of the basic principles on which this great country was founded is not more laws, but more righteousness. And our capacity to create an environment in which people can realize their own righteousness and can choose this day whom they will serve becomes absolutely essential to the mission and the quest which I think is our responsibility. It is an essential principle, without which our Father in Heaven's plan cannot be fulfilled. To allow others to be blessed by this plan, we have to make it possible for everyone. We must create an environment in which all can choose, in which all have this fundamental precondition of salvation available to them. This really hastens not only the day of their salvation, but I also believe provides the opportunity to preach and is the precursor of our opportunity to teach

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them the gospel and the true principles. In other words, it hastens the day of our own personal salvation.

Some years ago, when I was stake president in New York, I had a wonderful Area President, Elder Loren Dunn. I met with him frequently, and at the end of every meeting and every discussion, he would always say, “President, remember you are on the Lord’s errand.” I do not think I fully appreciated what he really meant by that until some years later. But the more I read the scriptures and the more I wrestle with life’s challenges, both professional and ecclesiastical, I think I begin to understand what he was telling me. When we are on the Lord’s errand—and what I want to convince you of today is that helping all have the blessings of freedom is indeed the Lord’s errand—the Lord will give us the strength to do it.

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Remember what Elisha showed his servant when all the Syrians were amassed in front of him. He opened the servant’s eyes and showed him the angels that were standing by to protect them and to fight their battles. Elisha concludes: “Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them” (2 Kings 6:16). As Ezekiel told the Israelites, “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you” (and here is the really interesting part) “and cause you to walk in my statutes and *ye shall keep* my judgments and *do* them” (Ezekiel 36: 26-27).

The promise of the atonement is not just that we will be blessed if we manage to repent and become perfect. It is the promise that the Lord will give us the power to become perfect if we desire and if we rely on him.

This came to me very clearly one day as I was talking to someone who has now become quite a good friend—Alex Smith, who played football for the University of Utah and has since gone on to a career in the NFL. I remember talking to Alex one day about the NFL draft, and it occurred to me that because of his abilities, Alex would likely go number one in the draft. I, on the other hand, with all the work in the world, could not (and never would be able to) run the forty-yard dash under 4.1 seconds, throw a 70-yard pass, or evade an NFL defender. Alex can do that, but I never could do that.

Is the atonement like the NFL draft? Is the Lord telling me that once I can run the forty-yard dash and throw the pass seventy yards, I will make it to Heaven? If so, the promise is entirely illusory because I can never do that. But the atonement is not an illusory promise. Ezekiel tells us that, “He will cause us to walk in his statutes” (Ezekiel 36:27). As John told us at the very beginning of Christ’s ministry, “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (John 1:12). Isaiah promises that, “He giveth power to the faint and to them that have no might he increaseth

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in strength” (Isaiah 40:29). We know if we have, as Joshua is instructed, the courage to obey, then, “As I [the Lord] was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee...for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (Joshua 1: 5 & 9).

I want to leave you with a testimony that I do believe that we have the privilege and the opportunity and the capacity to create an environment in which people can truly choose this day whom they will serve. I also testify that we have a moral imperative and an obligation to do precisely that. But I also testify that if we work to that end, then the Lord will go with us whithersoever we go. And I bear this testimony in the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ☸

#### NOTES

- 1 Katsuki Sekida, *Zen Training* (Weatherhill, 1975), 215.
- 2 Ibid.