



## FREEDOM<sup>1</sup> John 5:4-5

---

1 Peter 2:16(NIV) Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

Freedom is intrinsic to being human—to be human is to be free. God created us in His image with a freedom to choose for or against even God.

But throughout history freedom and liberty have been elusive. The Civil War has been over 150 years, yet we still live with the fall out of slavery and then segregation.

One of the prominent features of the United States Constitution is the Bill of Rights. It is a statement of certain fundamental rights of the individual that cannot be encroached upon by the Government.

At its first session in 1789, Congress submitted to the states twelve Amendments placing express limitations upon the powers of the National government. Ten of those were ratified, and are known as the Bill of Rights.

Tomorrow is Independence Day (July 4). All of the articles in the Bill of Rights are very important, but none more so than Article I; consider...

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Of the 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution in 1789, I believe none is as essential to what America is and how it lives as this First Amendment.

In a mere 45 words, this first article of the Bill of Rights forever separated both the function of the government and the rule of government from religion.

Look at it! It guarantees us freedom of speech, allowing us to say what we want. It guarantees the press to print what it wants. It allows for all time the right of we the people to assemble in a peaceful manner.

And finally, it always calls the government to be accountable for its actions. We ought to know these things.

Consider our Religious Liberty: We strongly believe in it, don't we? We support it; we get very defensive when we think the right is threatened; and we're ready to fight for it.

But the question is why it is so important to us? Two years before he wrote the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote, "The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time."

He was stating a truth that is as old as Adam and Eve. The first two chapters of the Bible are the story of creation. The crowning achievement of creation was when God formed people.

Genesis 1:27-29(NIV) 27So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. 28God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." 29Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food.

Not only did God give humans dominion over the earth with instructions to be fruitful and multiply, but Scripture also clearly shows that God made people to reciprocate His divine love.

And for reciprocity to be true, it must be free. Freedom is intrinsic to what it means to be human. The authors of the Constitution and this amendment understood this.

So they made sure to put into the Constitution that all American citizens are free to worship as they see fit, or not to worship, if that is their choice.

They were well aware that many nations expected or demanded their citizens to pray and worship in a particular faith, sometimes forcing such worship under threat of severe penalties.

At that time in the history of the world it was unique when people were allowed to worship or not as they pleased. The Founding Fathers had studied and understood lessons written in blood from decades of European religious wars.

Madison and the others were very aware of world history as they wove religious freedom into the fabric of the Constitution.

They realized that ensuring religious liberty for all people was the only way to prevent a similar calamity in America. I'm sure they also remembered the earliest colonists here in America.

Some of the earliest settlers on the northern Atlantic shores came to America seeking religious freedom for themselves. They came here for religious freedom, but it was their freedom, not others', they cherished.

They were so protective of their own sort of religious beliefs, that they were intolerant of others. This is why Massachusetts Congregationalists persecuted the first American Baptist, Roger Williams.

It's why Virginia Anglicans imprisoned Baptist preachers. It's why another Virginia Baptist, John Leland, influenced James Madison to ensure religious freedom by listing it first among the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

It was a long and sometimes painful 170-year road from prejudice and discrimination to when the Bill of Rights' authors could say, and even legislate, "There is no state-favored religion."

They proved to be right. No matter what faith the leaders in government are, they cannot impose nor legislate their religion on us.

Following the ratification of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, religious wars continued across the globe. And if you have even a smidgen of understanding of world events today, religious wars still continue to plague our planet.

But America peacefully absorbs people of every conceivable faith, as well as no faith. In America religious liberty flourishes like never, and nowhere before.

This amendment forbids our government—both on federal and state levels—from interfering in any way with people's religion or non-religion, or promoting any religion.

This is why our Founding Fathers actually wrote it into our nation's foundational laws—each and every citizen is free to worship or not in the faith of their choice.

What does this mean to us in the 21st century? As far as our government is concerned, it's very simple—it means "Hands off!" Our Government is doing a good job in this respect.

The problem is us—you and me. We the people keep bringing religion into American politics.

Ah yes, politics. I had to bring that up. It's here that the issue gets tricky. We tend to want our politicians to act and sound like us—to think like us, talk like us, and to believe like us.

This is understandable, but it is also easily exploited. And believe me; our politicians know how to do that.

Some of them contend that any arguments or talk about faith is out of bounds in public discourse. From the argument of religious liberty they say faith is private and removed from the public square.

On the other side are those who claim they are being persecuted if others disagree with them. They are like the early colonists who protected their religious liberty by punishing all other expressions of faith.

Thank God, whether religious or not, millions of Americans embrace religious liberty for practical reasons—they seem to instinctively realize that their religious liberty cannot be separated from the religious liberty of people of other faiths.

Other rights are guaranteed in the First Amendment. In the same Amendment are other rights and guarantees. Each is important to religious liberty.

This First Amendment guarantees our right to speak, write, and print whatever we want so long as we do not slander or libel others or advocate the overthrow of the Government by force.

You and I are free to express our thoughts and never be afraid of the government stepping in and telling you that you cannot say that or print that.

You have the right to publicly speak about your faith. If you have no faith or religion, the Bill of Rights guarantees that also.

If you disagree with your government you are free to say so. If you think the government is infringing on your religious rights, you can say so.

You can print a newspaper or a book or a magazine that disagrees with whatever official government policy is at the time. The First Amendment guarantees you that right.

You have the right to assemble with people of like faith to worship your God. You also have the right to show up in a group or a crowd—peacefully—and support whatever or whomever for whatever cause, or to protest whatever or whomever.

Whether authorities like or dislike the cause, the speakers or the supporters—the right to gather is absolute. And as long as there is reasonable effort to remain peaceful and nonviolent, people can publicly state their causes and opinions.

And think about the final 10 words of the 1st amendment: ... and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

After centuries of a king's or queen's will being absolute, these final 10 words give all of us the absolute right to freely and fearlessly approach our congressmen and women and senators—our hired hands in Washington and in our state capitals—to ask for new laws or to get rid of or change old ones.

No collection of words in history ever acknowledged our rights to pray freely, speak freely, gather freely and freely seek governmental change.

We are free to dance, to pray, to report, to text and to tweet. Thanks to the First Amendment, you can be whoever and whatever you want to be.

These freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution. Thank you, Founding Fathers for this wise provision.

But liberty must always be responsible freedom. We sometimes forget that liberty does not mean the right to do whatever we want. Remember the words of Peter:

1 Peter 2:16(NIV) Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.

We are becoming a nation of individuals who selfishly insist on our own rights, make unfair demands on others, and do not think of other's welfare.

Worst of all, in all our clamor for personal freedom, we hear very little about the rights of God.

I don't believe the founders of our nation and those who wrote the constitution ever intended that our freedoms would lead to license to criminals, to perverters of moral character, and to those in oppositions to the plain teaching of the Holy Scriptures found in the Bible—upon which our nation was founded.

The founders gave me the right to say that. They gave you and me the right to tell our government when it is wrong and work to make it right.

In the very first inaugural speech, George Washington said, “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the Invisible Hand, which conducts the affairs of men, more than the people of the United States. Every step by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation seems to have been distinguished by some token of Providential agency.”

There have been more amendments since, but do you know your constitution? Here’s a brief description of the first ten; remember, these are our guaranteed rights under the Constitution:

The Bill of Rights:

- Article I. Freedom of Religion, Speech, and the Press; the Right of Assembly.
- Article II. Right to keep and bear arms.
- Article III. Right to refuse to quarter troops.
- Article IV. Limits to the right of search.
- Article V. Guaranty of trial by jury; private property must be respected.
- Article VI. Rights of accused persons.
- Article VII. Rules of the Common Law.
- Article VIII. Rights against excessive bail, fines, and unusual punishments.
- Article IX. Rights retained by the people.
- Article X. Powers reserved to States and people.

Article IX, Rights retained by the people, is interesting. It simply means that the Bill of Rights enumerates or lists certain rights, but it would be impossible to list all the rights