

MICHAEL CHERENKOV

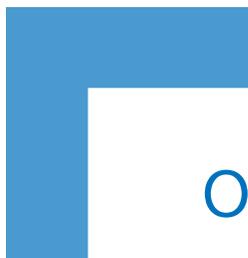
# LESSONS

## ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



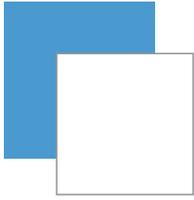
*for the Life and Ministry of Evangelical Churches in Eurasia*

Michael Cherenkov



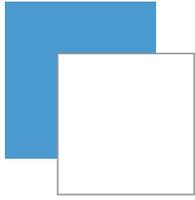
# LESSONS on Religious Freedom

*for the Life and Ministry of Evangelical Churches  
in Eurasia*



# Table of Contents

Foreword	3
Introduction	4
1. Freedom as a Principle of Christian Life and Ministry	7
2. Freedom of Conscience and Freedom to Preach	11
3. The Right and the Responsibility to be Active	15
4. New Challenges to Our Freedom and Faithfulness to the Gospel	20
Conclusions and Lessons	26
Appendix: Interesting Opinions and Important Documents	35
Electronic Resources	40



# Foreword

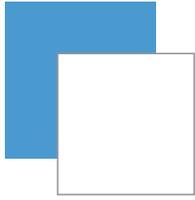
**R**eligious freedom is of great value to believers, and we should be grateful for it, seek to comprehend it, use it wisely, and we should, unquestionably, fight for it.

I grew up in the Soviet Union, and I remember well how believers were treated then. It was a strange mixture of hatred and envy, contempt and respect. One who holds firm to their faith will always be an object of interest, even to his enemies. Our freedom, love for it, and readiness to pay any price for it will always be cause for amazement and delight.

My parents were a good example of faithfulness to the principles of freedom. My father spent time in prison for the sake of freedom of conscience and the right to preach the Gospel, while my mother sacrificed her university degree. And that is just a small part of what they were prepared to sacrifice for the freedom to believe and remain faithful to their faith. Many of our brothers and sisters have sacrificed even more, even their lives.

Since then, much has changed dramatically, however freedom is still in danger, and its price is still high.

I am grateful to God for the good example of previous generations of believers, who kept their freedom even in prisons and camps, in deprivation and persecution. This experience is priceless for the modern Church and young generations. I very much hope that the next generation will not only carry on the baton of ministry, but also the baton of freedom and faithfulness.



# Introduction

**F**or almost thirty years, post-Soviet Evangelical churches have lived in relative religious freedom. Not all have learned to value it and take advantage of the opportunities it offers, but everyone has gotten used to it and considers it normal. All of these years we have taught a new generation of leaders how to live and serve in conditions of freedom, how to become influential outside Church walls, how to change society. We have gotten used to considering religious freedom natural and inarguable and we have not taught how to live, survive, serve, and remain faithful when the pendulum swings back from freedom towards repression and restrictions.

Why is the topic of religious freedom so important for the Evangelical Church in the post-Soviet sphere?

Evangelical believers stand out in two ways: their emphasis on a personal relationship with God, and their active missions work. Clearly, these two features are directly connected with the topic of freedom, and with its Evangelical understanding – internal freedom in a personal relationship with God and external in preaching the Gospel to the world.

At the same time, the modern world is obsessed with its own freedom – freedom from principles and values, from faith in God and mentions of Him. Therefore, assaults on freedom are justified in the name of freedom – persecution of Christians, religious discrimination, legislative limits on missions' activity. Meanwhile Christians have a right and a God-given responsibility to proclaim the truth of the Gospel, without which freedom turns into its opposite.

Evangelical churches have a wealth of experience in life and ministry in conditions of limited freedom. They will survive in any situation. However, a preparedness to overcome difficulties does not mean that these difficulties are normal and inevitable. Christians are responsible for standing up for the principles of religious freedom not just for themselves, but for others and for society as a whole.

Religious freedom is at the foundation of a peaceful and fulfilling community life, and is one of the first conditions for the existence of a society of unity in diversity. Where religious freedom is valued and respected, all other forms of freedom thrive: civil, economic, creative, political. And where religious freedom is restricted, a war between correct and incorrect behavior begins, in other words, of everyone against everyone.

It is important to understand that religious freedom is valuable in and of itself. It cannot be sacrificed for the sake of public safety. Or for the sake of the most ancient or only right religion. It cannot be entrusted or handed over to the government, or a political party, or a religious organization.

Both individual and general freedom need to be preserved because my freedom is protected and respected only where the freedom of others is valued as well.

Freedom is directly linked with justice. In the context of religious freedom, justice presupposes equal degrees of religious freedom for all people and groups, the same standards, equality before the law, and respect for differences. In that context, division of religious groups into “traditional” and “nontraditional,” “normal churches” and “sects” is an injustice, a selective application of the law, a double standard, and a violation of the rights of believers to freedom of faith.

For Evangelical churches, religious freedom is one of the most important principles, as it justifies and protects their right to exist alongside larger, older, and more influential religious confessions. In many ways it is the inheritance of the European Reformation, which made personal faith and freedom of choice fundamental to church and community life.

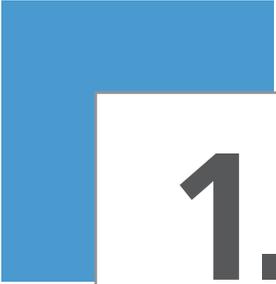
Religious freedom has a special significance in the post-Soviet space, where freedom was always limited, and where churches have gotten used to surviving without it. And while Evangelical believers have defined their ideal as “free Church in a free country,” churches still exist in conditions of extremely limited freedom, and often tend to justify these conditions, sacrificing their ideal for “reality.”

The only positive in all of this is that religious freedom is now being talked about and discussed. As a rule, the driving force behind this are the younger generations. They ask, “Must we obey laws or regulations which deny fundamental human rights? Can we raise our voice against injustice or violence? Is it worth listening to the government when it gets involved in the church’s internal disputes?”

It is important to understand that religious freedom is not just freedom of belief, but freedom to live by faith, in accordance with your inner convictions. It is not only freedom of religion, it is freedom for every life choice, based on religion. It is a freedom to choose your particular lifestyle, based on your personal beliefs. In other words, religious freedom includes the freedom to apply your faith to a variety of spheres of life and situations, and also to share your faith with others.

In this expanded understanding, religious freedom – living and believing according to your convictions – must become an essential topic for the spiritual and personal formation of Christian leaders, and also for the formation and socio-theological positions and missions’ strategies among Evangelical churches in the post-Soviet sphere.

In the context of our course we will examine four key questions, which will help determine our understanding of religious freedom and draw some practical lessons for the life and ministry of Evangelical Christians and their churches.



# 1.

# Freedom as a Principle of Christian Life and Ministry



*“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2-3).*

The God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a God who frees.

The first of the Ten Commandments reminds us that He freed us from slavery to kings and idols. The commandments warn us to protect our freedom and stay faithful to our God as the only true God.

It is no coincidence that God told Pharaoh to “Let my people go” (Exodus 5:1), encouraging many generations of believers and civil activists to fight for that freedom, which is given and guaranteed by God, which no kings, presidents, leaders or dictators can take away.

The Exodus story is God’s revelation and an important life lesson for each of us, living under the authority of earthly powers. In this story the authority of kings is not disputed, only its absolute character. No one has the right to turn human beings into possessions. No one has the right to deny people the right to go and worship God. No one has the right to behave like God.

This story was an important part of God’s revelation to the ancient world. Until then, the Pharaoh’s power had seemed absolute, and even the slightest hint of freedom was considered a fantasy. And even God himself seemed to many to be a heavenly copy of Pharaoh – unattainable and cruel. People thought that God was on the side of Pharaoh,

that he supported this state of affairs. People trusted the Pharaoh and considered him a partial deity.

As we see from the Biblical narrative, God hated such beliefs, as He does any restriction on human freedom and dignity. God hears the cries and groans of His oppressed people, steps in for them, punishes the cruel Pharaoh, and frees his slaves.

The story of Exodus is not only the story of a freed people, but it also teaches us to understand and value our freedom, and to have a right picture of ourselves, Pharaoh, and God. What do we see in these lessons?

First, lack of freedom is an unnatural state. It can be born, but cannot be considered normal, let alone justified as God's will. People were created free. God gave freedom from the beginning and wants to return it to those who lose it. When people get used to a lack of freedom and are prepared to continue bearing it, God wants to teach us not only patience, but also boldness, decisiveness, responsibility, and fullness of life in freedom.

Secondly, kings and other earthly authorities have limited powers. They must be limited by laws and public opinion. But in places where this doesn't work, God gives people the right to disobey. This applies to cases of public injustice, violence, and religious bias on the part of the authorities.

Thirdly, God is the source of authority. He gives authority to people for a time, and in certain circumstances, and He demands on account for how those people use that authority.

Every real authority is from God, and every yearning of the people for true freedom is also from God. God reveals Himself as the God of order, but also freedom and justice.

His warnings and punishments extend not only to the Egyptian Pharaoh, but also to more likeable kings. His judgment has come down on the kings of Israel and Judah, and on "Christian" rulers and "leaders." The God of the Bible is not a hypocrite. He is not on the side of Israel versus Egypt. He is not on the side of Christians against everyone else. He is not on the side of the people versus kings. His standards, law, and justice are the same for everyone.

In the Exodus story God gives the Egyptian Pharaoh a chance, as He did with the people, to return to a normal life, built upon freedom and justice, i.e., on God's law. God teaches

rulers to recognize and respect the freedom of each, and teaches people to value their freedom and fight for it.

What does this freedom consist of and what is it built on? The essence of our freedom is having a special relationship with God as those created in His image and likeness, redeemed and called to serve Him and only Him. This freedom is based on our submission to God as Creator, Savior, and Lord. God's slave is more free than any king.

The one who serves God can never be the slave of people, because He will always have the first place in their lives. Kings cannot grant freedom, because it is already ours, a gift of God. Not only our freedom, but everything else in the world, all the kingdoms of the earth, belong to Him. Therefore, worshiping anyone else other than God is not only a sin, but it is humiliating and pointless.

The Gospel story of Jesus being tempted in the desert reminds us of this:



*“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Away from me, Satan! For it is written: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only”” (Matthew 4:8-10).*

**Worship is the willing rejection of your freedom in favor of a conscious and whole-hearted submission to a higher power. This should only be directed to God.** No goal, no matter how “holy,” can justify directing this to a person. Freedom is preserved in the relationship between people and God, and is lost outside of that relationship.

The Book of Revelation paints a wonderful picture of God's faithful suffering and dying a martyr's death for their refusal to worship the beast, but then rising again and ruling with Christ:



*“I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They[a] had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4).*

The price of freedom is high – deprivation, suffering, and even death. But the reward is incomparably more. Therefore, the Church is faced with an important call to be faithful, worshiping God and serving only Him:



*“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor’s crown” (Revelation 2:10).*

### Questions to think about:

1. *What does the first commandment mean for our understanding of freedom?*
2. *How is the topic of freedom connected to worshiping God?*
3. *When was the last time you heard or preached a sermon about freedom? How important is this topic for our churches?*

### Discussion question:

- *How applicable is the story of Exodus to modern situations? What does it teach us?*





## 2.

# Freedom of Conscience and Freedom to Preach

**F**reedom of conscience is the foundation for all other freedoms. It is the internal freedom to be yourself, be faithful to your convictions despite outward pressure and the opinion of the majority.

But **religious freedom is not confined to the internal, it inescapably manifests itself publicly** – church gatherings, missions work, public proclamation, spiritual art, and cultural symbols.

Usually in their efforts to control religious freedom, totalitarian regimes begin with outward expressions, which are then followed by efforts to reach the inward territory of faith.

Freedom of conscience is the most important, and it must be preserved first. When authorities do not allow public expressions of religious freedom, you can be sure that the limitations extend much further. And if they make the Church's continued existence dependent on no longer allowing visitors, children, or youth, as well as ceasing all outreach activity, then there is no doubt that the final goal is to liquidate the Church and religious freedom generally.

It would be very naïve to agree that religious freedom can be limited to the personal space, adapted strictly for personal use, while relinquishing freedom for churches and other religious organizations to gather, teach, and overall support people in questions of faith and life by faith.

We must remind you that **the Christian understanding of religious freedom directly ties freedom of conscience to freedom to preach the Gospel.** That is why anti-missions' laws are actually anti-Church and anti-religious laws.

You can't give up witnessing about your faith and sharing the Gospel and hide your faith and freedom within yourself, keeping it hidden in the depth of your being. Jesus spoke about this in the Sermon on the Mount:



*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:10-16).*

If we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, then there is no way we can hide our saltiness or our light. We will be noticed everywhere, recognized from afar, in order to persecute and speak badly of us. And while it is a blessing to be noticeable and useful, we should also not be afraid to be persecuted, instead we should rejoice and be glad over it.

Therefore, inner freedom to know the truth implies external freedom to testify to the truth and be persecuted for the truth.

The Apostle Paul writes to young Timothy that he preaches the Gospel even when his freedom is restricted, and that he was willingly imprisoned, that God's Word would spread even more:



*“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel, for which I am suffering even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But God's word is not chained. Therefore, I endure everything for*

*the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself” (II Timothy 2:8-13).*

This passage speaks about how the Gospel cannot be confined to the inner world, which is why freedom of conscience and freedom of expression are two sides of the same freedom, which thirsts to believe and share one’s faith with others.

The story of Peter and John, recorded in the Book of Acts, can serve as a good illustration of why Christians cannot shut themselves up in their own hearts or homes, in order not to speak of the Gospel. Remember, they had been told “not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus,” to which Peter and John replied in holy disobedience,



*“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).*

And this statement is not just personal courage or foolhardiness. Seeing their example, the entire Church, “of one accord,” prayed thus:



*“Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness” (Acts 4:29).*

Speaking is important. Not just studying and knowing, but speaking, imparting, sharing.

This is why **Christians cannot agree with this half-hearted interpretation of religious freedom, in which the entirety of religion and freedom come down to one’s inner life, and in which religion is an entirely personal or internal affair, inappropriate and forbidden to be publicly demonstrated and discussed.**

## Questions for thought:

1. *Why can't religious freedom be limited to personal life?*
2. *Can the Church, which yesterday taught that "every Christian is a missionary" today (in response to anti-missionary laws) give up its active external witness and limit itself to church services, and still remain faithful to God's calling? Giving up on missions in order to preserve the Church – are such compromises possible?*
3. *Can you say with confidence that in all matters of Christian life and ministry you are guided by the principle "Listen to God rather than people"?*

## Question for discussion:

- *In a small town, believers built an open playground next to a home where church services took place. Many children gathered there, Christians organized day camps and other activities for the children, Christian films were shown, along with discussions of spiritual or moral topics. Authorities demanded that they stop this "illegal missionary activity attracting children to a sect," threatening fines and confiscation of property. What would you do in response to these demands?*





# 3.

## The Right and Responsibility to Be Active

If we understand religious freedom as the freedom to believe and act in accordance with our faith, then it inevitably comes into conflict with governmental and societal structures that work against freedom: limiting it, submitting it to their own narrow interests, and distributing it at will.

Freedom is natural. We are created free. God Himself guarantees it.

At the same time, human authorities try to assume the right to give and take away freedom. That which belongs to man by natural right, authorities are trying to sell. That which God has put into human nature, they are trying to present as a favor from the government.

There is a constant battle for our freedom – over its narrowing or expansion. As a result, we will have as much freedom as we can defend.

Submission and trust in God in the midst of limited freedom does not mean that we should stop working towards greater freedom and fighting for it. On the contrary, submission to God gives us new powers to resist outward structures restricting freedom.

**We have the full right to defend our religious freedom, i.e., our way of life based on faith.** Not everyone is capable of actively defending freedom, therefore many prefer to accept the amount of freedom given them by government or by those in any type of authority over them.

We have the right to endure limitations to ourselves, but we do not have the right to not defend others in their search for freedom. We do not have to actively defend our own freedom, but we cannot refuse to be active in defending others' pursuit of freedom.

Cases of mass and large-scale restrictions should mobilize Christians to defend freedom. Today that might be the freedom of someone far away, tomorrow, someone close by, and the day after, me personally.

If we watch passively as someone in our society is attacking the freedom of individual groups, we become co-conspirators in crimes against freedom. And when our turn comes to be a victim, no one will be there to defend us.

This was said well by Pastor Martin Niemoller:

“First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out – because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me – and there was no one left to speak for me.”

The inaction of simple and good Christians helped Hitler destroy the lives of millions of people and the trust of millions in the Church.

Today, when post-Soviet countries are committing many crimes against freedom, Christians frequently remain silent because of apathy or fear of repression (“that has nothing to do with us,” “we don’t have all the information,” “they wouldn’t do that for no reason”).

Theological misunderstandings are also to blame, which grant authority a sacred status and justify any of its decisions and actions. In this context, defense of religious liberty from attempts to encroach on it by authorities is interpreted as disobedience, rebellion, revolution, or even turning against God.

It is important to understand, that **the well-known passage from Romans is not speaking about the authority of “special” people over “ordinary” people as much as God’s authority over everyone and the submission of human authorities to God:**



*“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1-4).*

If any justification can be found here for authorities, it is only for those that follow God’s ordinances, and only to the one in power who is “God’s servant.”

On the contrary, if the authorities do not follow the order established by God, if the leader punishes the good and praises evil, then all of them are in opposition to God and His people, and basic good sense.

Scripture teaches us to give to earthly authorities what is required by law, but no more.

John the Baptist warned law enforcement officials to not take more than they were supposed to, and not to abuse their authority, i.e., not to expand their freedom at the cost of others’. “Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely” (Luke 3:13-14).

Christ teaches us to be careful about what and whom we give to:



*“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”  
(Matthew 22:21).*

We have no right to give to Caesar what belongs to God. Other than our taxes, we don’t owe Caesar anything.

The Apostle Paul summarizes the principle this way:



*“Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor”*  
(Romans 13:7).

It is important not to mix it up and give to people that which we should only give to God – our freedom, our worship, our faith, and our faithfulness.

At the same time, by giving the authorities our taxes, we have the right to demand from them that they fulfill their responsibilities. This was fair during the time of the Roman Empire and even more so now in the age of democratic governments.

The Apostle Paul took advantage of all of the opportunities available to him through Roman citizenship in order to defend his rights and freedoms and put to shame the authorities who violated them:



*“As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, ‘Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?’”* (Acts 22:25).

How can our active position be expressed today?

By drawing attention to restrictions on religious freedom, raising our voice on behalf of the victims of these restrictions, showing practical solidarity with those who have suffered and groups that are discriminated against.

In order to demand obedience to laws, the government must fulfill its own constitutional and international responsibilities.

At the same time, we can condemn attempts at limiting freedom and justice through public statements and acts of peaceful civil disobedience.

What else could we add here?

## Questions for thought:

1. *What forms of defense of religious freedom and resistance to attempts to limit it might be accessible and effective in modern Christian practice?*
2. *How do you understand the verse, ‘Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them’ (Ephesians 5:11)? Is it enough to simply not participate in order to stay true to yourself?*
3. *Is it possible to maintain a neutral, apolitical, sidelines position regarding the problem of religious freedom?*

## Discussion questions:

- *Have you read the Constitution of your country? Do you know what it says about religious freedom?*
- *How would you build your defense in a discussion of the new anti-missionary law controversy, relying on the Bible and the Constitution?*



# 4.

## New Challenges to our Freedom and Faithfulness to the Gospel

**E**vangelicals in post-Soviet countries have not yet forgotten their history of persecution in the Soviet era, and many of them are experiencing similar difficulties today. They know that faith and faithfulness to Christ will be challenged by suffering and a loss of freedom.

The Apostle Paul also did not consider all of this strange, but rather natural, therefore he wrote,



*“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have” (Philippians 1:27-30).*

Paul does not teach how to escape persecution, but how to remain faithful in the midst of it: live worthily, one in spirit, with no fear of enemies.

Modern Christians are not just threatened by open persecution. New technology allows us to lose our freedom and voices without any direct physical action.

In the early years after the fall of the USSR, believers remained ready to return to totalitarianism and persecution of the church. And they have returned, but in a different, hybrid form.

No one was ready for the fact that the weapons of mass destruction would be information, that social media outlets could do more to limit freedom than all of the gulags put together.

New challenges to religious freedom come not just from aggressive secularism, where strong religiosity was overcome by passionate anti-religion, but from the side of aggressive relativism, in which **any strong position, any conviction, any faith and faithfulness to that faith are taken as a sign of intolerance** and a threat to “peace and safety.”

Thereby freedom is reduced to a game of weak, non-binding ideas, when “nothing is righteous and everything is allowed.” Clearly strong Biblical truths and simple words about sin, hell, repentance, and holiness are highly suspicious and even banned.

Thereby **restrictions and persecution are replaced by manipulation**, propaganda campaigns, “brainwashing;” government terror is replaced by unexpected attacks, bombing with messages and comments in a spirit of hate from unknown “users” or bots. Now it is not only the department of intelligence working against religious freedom, but also “troll factories.”

After an unsuccessful atheistic experiment, **they are no longer trying to destroy religion. Instead they are actively trying to minimize the space for religious freedom**, leaving the main centers, channels, and spheres of influence to the government. All the while they are not giving up on their attempts to submit all religious communities to themselves, putting “their” people in all key positions. Here the governments follow the well-known principle of, “if you can’t beat them, then lead them.” As a result, instead of lifeful religious communities, you frequently find “religious communities” that are under the complete control of the government.

They are not only trying to narrow freedom by submitting the religious sphere to government control, but also by creating artificial conflicts between confessions and individual groups. Thereby the government begins to divide believers into traditional and non-traditional, “normal churches,” and “totalitarian sects.” It is not difficult to notice that for Christian churches the path of governmentification, accommodation,

compromise with the authorities is always more dangerous than choosing to go the underground route.

It is worth remembering that **separation of Church and state does not mean separating the Church from society**, rather the opposite. When freed from the too tight embrace of the state, the Church can once more position itself among regular people, in the thick of societal life. For post-Soviet reality this is still an unexplored path – the path of overcoming Church marginalization and historically-based separation from society through new spiritual-cultural, charitable, and civil initiatives in the spirit of a “Church without walls.” In other words, the Church expands its religious freedom and religious activity not through humiliating requests and bowing before the government, but rather by working together with civil society to expand to new social territories beyond Church walls.

The future of religious freedom in the post-Soviet world will be determined by how much Christian communities can overcome their inner-Church interests and dependence on the government in order to earn a position in society.

Unearned territory for freedom is not to be found in government offices, but in ordinary families in homes, on the streets and squares, in university lecture halls, and the workplace. In each of these spheres religious freedom must find an appropriate form, and in each of these it must answer a series of stereotyped objections and propaganda clichés. This path is more difficult than traditional attempts to “make a deal” with authorities, but is more in line with Biblical principles of life and ministry.

The horizontal between interpersonal and Church-society relationships should always be preferable to a vertical state-Church relationship.

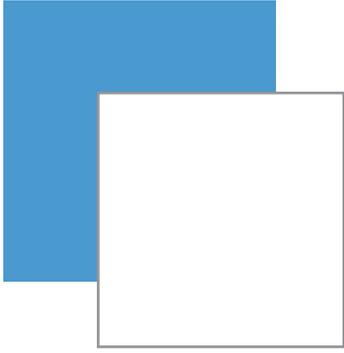
## Questions for thought:

1. *What possible threats to religious freedom do new technologies pose?*
2. *Can a dialogue between religious traditions serve to strengthen religious freedoms? In what circumstances is a dialogue between Christianity and Islam, or the Orthodox Church and Evangelical Protestants possible?*
3. *How are propaganda and force connected? What should the Christian response be to information warfare and provocation?*

## Discussion questions:

- *In many countries in Eurasia Jehovah's Witnesses are facing increasing persecution. Most Christians do not agree with their beliefs. But what about religious freedom? Do you agree that their belongings can be confiscated, their homes be unceremoniously searched, their families intimidated, and their leaders put in prison as real extremists?*
- *Have you ever reacted to the repression of one persecuted religious group or another?*





# Conclusions and Lessons

**T**he four lessons outlined above can help us evaluate the importance of religious freedom, understand its essence and Biblical and theological rationale, and also methods of defending it.

First of all, before defending religious freedom, we must learn to understand and value it. Therefore, the most important task for Evangelical believers is to rethink how they carry out their ministry and their position in society, reflecting the belief that freedom in God is foundational and fundamental, and not an optional addition to our Christianity.

Secondly, religious freedom begins with internal freedom of conscience, and then expands to include all of life and all spheres of society. Therefore, efforts to limit freedom to certain territories or religious buildings, closing Christianity up in a temple or the soul, banning public speech about faith and the ability to live by faith fully and publicly, are a crime against freedom and religion. Public witness about God is a natural and required expression of faith for all Evangelical Christians.

Therefore, we must always fight for the right to preach the Gospel everywhere and always, “even to the ends of the earth,” and “the end of the age.”

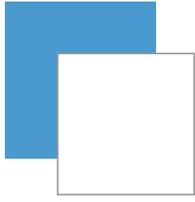
Third, religious freedom presupposes not only church opposition to government attempts to limit the scope of freedom, but also an active civil position. It is important for the Church to understand that, besides prayer and other weapons for our spiritual arsenal, there are also an array of legal tools and societal resources available for protecting freedom and rights.

Fourth, religious freedom in the post-Soviet sphere is very delicate and vulnerable because until now, little action has been taken in civil society and churches to defend freedom, while the influence of the government and “state” religions in this sphere has always been dominant and aggressive. Instead of “negotiating” with the government, churches should learn to work together with the emerging civil society to stand up for the value of freedom, including religious freedom.

These lessons call for serious, long, responsible homework.

What can we do now to ensure that religious freedom becomes a true value and the reality in our lives?

- Preach and teach about the Biblical understanding of religious freedom.
- Value, care for, and defend our own freedom.
- Raise our voices in defense of freedom near and far.
- Be a voice for the martyrs, standing up for the defenseless.
- Teach the next generation in a spirit of freedom and faithfulness.
- Record facts and evidence of discrimination and persecution.
- Show solidarity in prayer and offer practical aid in life and ministry to persecuted Christians, families, and churches.



# Appendix: Interesting Opinions and Important Documents

## Personal Opinions

### Pastor Yuriï Sipko (Russia) on Evangelical faith as freedom:

Freedom of conscience as the basic personal freedom is almost a forbidden topic in our society. And strangely enough, and bitter as it is, freedom of conscience is not a popular topic in the Protestant world. However, the entire Evangelical faith can be expressed in one simple word: FREEDOM.

Personal freedom assumes one's maturity: ability to make decisions, take responsibility, critically evaluate a whole spectrum of worldviews, and spiritual, religious, and social practices. A free person does not need a nanny. A free man cannot be manipulated. A free man cannot be compelled to act against his conscience, and cannot be forced to slander his neighbor.

A free man may be unnecessary to political structures. To a society, where lies are the basis of all of life, a free man is dangerous.

If that is so, then we, as coworkers with God, are called to help make freedom attainable to everyone. Sometimes, of course, it seems that we are afraid of freedom and consider it a luxury. But how are things really?

The second article of the statement of faith of the Evangelical Christians – Baptists states, “Absolute freedom of conscience for all.” I admire the courage of the brothers who, over one hundred years ago, not only spoke out so boldly and clearly, but also recorded it. Then our fathers, through suffering, prison, banishment, and deprivation, fought for the right to believe in God in the way their conscience dictated. And they based their claims on the Word of God. The principle of freedom of conscience then stated that the state had no right to forcefully impose any faith. And existing religious organizations had no right to force people to accept one faith or another.

I find myself asking, “If I remain silent, when my conscience demands that I raise my voice in defense of a suffering person, persecuted for his convictions, is my conscience free? Or do we not know how to respect the freedom of conscience of our neighbor. I am convinced that when advocating for “freedom of conscience for all,” we must show Christian solidarity with all those suffering for their faith in the world. My idea is that, based on the principles of religious freedom for all, I build my relationship not on a search for mistakes, not on a search for insults, but first and foremost on respect. I respect the person. I acknowledge his right to believe as he does. And only by respecting and acknowledging his right, can I enter into dialogue with him.

I am afraid to admit to myself that that is not how things are. A century of semi-underground existence formed a climate of surveillance, collective consciousness, a fear of freedom, so that even thoughts of freedom are presented as sinful.

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The state is, first and foremost, the people, the citizens of a country. And the authorities should merely fulfill their responsibilities in such a way, that citizens are comfortable in the fields of business, religion, and recreation. But the state’s goal is to seek its own comfort. The authorities are afraid that someone somewhere will speak the truth and expose them. It is a model in which citizens are left with no rights and no freedoms. Therefore, they need experts in cults, they need control, they need the detention facilities, camps, courts, secret services and special forces.

## Pastor Mykola Romanyuk (Ukraine) on the “hermeneutics of freedom:”

We act according to our beliefs. And our beliefs are based on how we interpret and apply Scripture. Our Baptist and, in a significant measure, also Pentecostal hermeneutic is determined partially by Anabaptist influence, and partially by the experience of the totalitarian pressure of an empire. That is where the fear of Christian leaders comes from, and their desire to avoid seeing, responding to, or being part of social processes. That is where their lack of knowledge and lack of desire to know their own constitutional rights as citizens come from. Even though the Apostle Paul took advantage of his rights as the citizen of an empire. I haven't even mentioned the prophets' criticism of kings and government officials, from Moses to John the Baptist. We must return to a deep study of Scripture when it comes to this question. We must move from a declarative theology to a realistic one, because we cannot be more holy, good, or peaceful than the Lord Jesus, John the Baptist, and the apostles. According to the New Testament, spiritual leaders are responsible for confronting the sin not only of simple people and not only within their own church, but they are also called to chastise kings, the elite, and entire nations. Holy Scripture teaches us that the pastoral responsibility is to be especially close to their people in times of trouble and injustice.

When political leaders pass laws which are against the interest of the people, I think of Queen Esther. She overcame her fear and stood up for her people. The words of her mentor and teacher are more relevant today than ever:



*“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14)*

## Pastor Sergey Golovin (Ukraine) on civil protest and submission to authorities:



*“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God” (Romans 13:1).*

I have heard many entitled bureaucrats (or even more often, their devoted followers), operating from the height of their spirituality, crush any expression of discontent from the people who gave them their authority with this verse.

By doing so, in democratic countries, which have abandoned the monarchical system, they silence the holder of all government sovereignty and their sole source of power – the people. And to them each public servant should submit, from the doorman to the president. That, at any rate, is what is written in the Constitutions of each of these countries. And almost anyone who has received any kind of government authority, even if it takes second place to his own interests, calls upon a higher law.

It is the people, through their means (as taxpayers), that temporarily hire these people in turn to fulfill certain responsibilities. The people are the ruler, while the leaders are their employees.

The people choose government managers from a number of candidates not because they are perfect, but because they are most in keeping with the expectations of the majority which voted for the candidate. We are often forced to vote not for someone as much as against other alternatives. No one is perfect, and there is no escaping compromise here. But, when receiving the power delegated by us, politicians take on the responsibility of fulfilling our expectations, and we submit to them in the context of their powers, given them by the law (first and foremost by that same Constitution).

But at the same time the power of the people in a democratic society, in accordance with the above verse, is established by God, and the choice of the people is not always right. The “collective Caesar” is prone to mistakes no less than the individual Caesar of the monarchical system of rule. I doubt the residents of Sodom would have chosen Lot as their mayor. Therefore, there is a reason why the Mosaic Law warns,



*“Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd” (Exodus 23:2).*

So what should citizens do if they do not agree with the policy of the government chosen by a majority of their equal citizens?

1. The first means of influence of the minority on legally elected political actors is a mass expression of their opinion in accordance with the law of the land, based on their Constitutional rights to freedom of speech, of gathering, of movement, etc. This type of protest requires no other foundations. Biblical examples of similar civic actions could include Israel’s request to Rehoboam to lower taxes (I Kings 12:3-4), the people’s demand that Jesus be crucified, and the rally in support of traditional crafts in Ephesus (Acts 12:29-40).
2. The next type of civic protest is civil disobedience. In this case, citizens openly and knowingly break the law and are prepared to bear the consequences in accordance with the law. The basis for such acts, is, first of all, the restriction by leaders of the inviolable rights of the people. These include natural rights, which man is granted by the Creator from the beginning, before the existence of states and governments. Generally-accepted inalienable rights include the right to life, to freedom, to family, to the pursuit of happiness, to the sanctity of the home, etc. But an equally valid cause for civil disobedience could include the passage of unjust laws, unjust judicial decisions, and also lawlessness on the part of the rulers.

Biblical examples of civil disobedience include the actions of the Jewish midwives in Egypt (Exodus 1:15-19), the prostitute Rahab in Jericho (Joshua 2:3-6), Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel in Babylon (Daniel 3, 6); Peter and John before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:18-21, 5:27-41), and others. The openness of the act and the readiness to bear the consequences are what differentiate civil disobedience from simple lawlessness. Queen Esther expressed the principle this way: “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish” (Esther 4:16b).

3. And finally the last, most extreme form of civil protest is civil resistance – a confrontation between citizens and authorities. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls resistance to tyranny and repression the final means of

citizens' defense of their own rights. The basis for such actions is the purposeful, conscious, and consistent encouragement by leaders of evil actions towards the people, and punishment of good actions.

The source text of this essay (Romans 13:1) continues,



*“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:3-4).*

Encouraging good deeds by law-abiding citizens and the punishing evildoers are the qualifications for leading the people as God’s servant. If he does not fulfill those requirements, then he is no longer that, but rather a current example of the second meaning of the phrase in Romans 13:1, which, in the original, literally writes, “for there is no authority unless it is given by God,” – if it is not given by God then it is not authority. Removing such a ruler is not a violation of God’s principles and constitutional order, but rather it restores them.

Biblical examples include leaders of Israel who walked this path, including the aforementioned Rehoboam (I Kings 12:8-15), and Ahab under the influence of Jezebel (I Kings 21).

What is the role of the Church in all of this? Christ’s disciples live simultaneously in two dimensions – Caesar’s and God’s. In the first, they are equal, responsible, and law-abiding citizens and should do what their civic responsibility and sense of justice dictate. In God’s dimension the Church is a prophetic voice to a dying world. And therefore we are called to unhyprocritically call good and evil by their names, whatever side they may find themselves on, and should call all participants in the political process to peace, in keeping with justice and mercy. And most of all to repentance.

## Pastor Nikolai Svinko (Belarus) on The Responsibility of the Leader to Side with the People:

My place as pastor is alongside the people - that is my duty. When I was told to tell my people not to attend protests, I responded, "When the people stop protesting so will I." Woe to those who call evil good! And I won't say that killing Belorussians, beating them in police vans is normal. If I did that I would have to retire as a minister. I will not do so. Protesting injustice is a human quality given by God. I am almost 55 years old, and I won't reject my faith, my integrity, justice, or the truth. I go to sleep peacefully and get up peacefully, and I am not ashamed of myself or before others. Someday everything will change, but for now the powers of Satan and injustice and lawlessness try to keep people living in fear. I did not tell the Church whom to vote for, and I can't watch from the sidelines when we are told what to believe, how to live, and what to say.

## Pastor Taras Telkovsky (Belarus) on what we must remind those of, who judge our freedom:

Today I went to court. I was tried under a popular article for violating the established procedure for holding an assembly, rally, street procession, demonstration, picket, etc.

Of course, I do not agree with the accusations. I went into town in order to peacefully express my disagreement with the use of force in questions of constitutional rights, and to pray for Belarus as a church leader.

The judge asked whether I had anything else to say, and God gave me clarity of mind to remind the court that:

1. All power belongs to God, and He partially delegates it to the government.
2. Believers must submit to God, and therefore to the government.
3. BUT! God hates evil. The government is His instrument against evil. If the government encourages evil and punishes the good, then it loses its God-ordained function.

4. The Church is the moral outpost of society. Therefore, believers should call on their governments to repent of evil.
5. God loves life. The government is His tool for providing life. Woe to him who takes life away.
6. Believers must live according to the Gospel and subject to Christ. Sometimes this means protesting. Christ is Lord, not earthly rulers.
7. God is just, righteous, and loving. The government should reflect these qualities in their actions.
8. Christians are called to transform society through their participation in it.

After I personally witness election falsification, the moral and physical abuse of people close to me for participating in peaceful protests, unjust arrests, and government representatives ignoring all heavenly and earthly laws, I have no moral right to remain silent and apathetic, even if it means spending a few days in prison or paying a fine.

## Alena Baltseva (Belarus) on why it's wrong to "stay out of politics:"

I am part of the Church. I am not "outside of politics."

A few days ago someone, who is still holding onto power in Belarus, screamed hysterically that the Church should stay out of politics, and explicitly threatened denominational leaders who speak out against the lawlessness, which is taking place in our country right now.

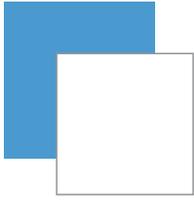
In other words, a self-described Orthodox atheist started to worry that we are not praying enough in our churches.

"Do not follow the lead of these renegades," was what he said about believers, who had the courage to speak out against violence and lawlessness.

This idea, that the Church should remain “outside of politics,” was successfully driven into the minds of Protestants (and others) throughout the USSR by the KGB, and we still haven’t been able to erase it. As though it were possible to live life and successfully avoid all aspects of political life like a minefield (Spoiler: you can’t).

Alas, I have been forced to observe how (fortunately, not too many) brothers and sisters in faith condescendingly toss around phrases such as,

- “All authority is given by God” (though let’s take into account that the current authorities, given their practice of election fraud, have no authority whatsoever);
- “Our job is to pray” (as though we should tear all the pages out of the Bible with calls to demonstrate our faith by our deeds);
- “Christ didn’t attend protests” (just a second, all of His public appearances gathered unsanctioned meetings);
- “It’s your own fault” (as if bad things only happen to bad people);
- “Nothing unusual happened – there has always been violence” (as though Christ went to the cross thinking, ‘this is really no big deal’);
- “But what about, ‘love OMON [special forces]’?” (as if Christian forgiveness does not demand uncompromising condemnation of sin and does not call sinners to repentance).



# Documents

## From the Barmen Declaration (Germany, 1934)



2. *“Jesus Christ has been made wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us by God”* (1 Corinthians 1:30).

As Jesus Christ is God’s comforting pronouncement of the forgiveness of all our sins, so, with equal seriousness, he is also God’s vigorous announcement of His claim upon our whole life. Through Him there comes to us joyful liberation from the godless ties of this world for free, grateful service to his creatures.

We reject the false doctrine that there could be areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through Him.



3. *“Let us, however, speak the truth in love, and in every respect grow into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined together”* (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The Christian Church is the community of brethren in which, in Word and sacrament, through the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ acts in the present as Lord. With both its faith and its obedience, with both its message and its order, it has to testify in the midst of the sinful world, as the Church of pardoned sinners, that it belongs to Him alone and lives and may live by His comfort and under His direction alone, in expectation of His appearing.

We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.



4. *“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to have authority over you must be your servant”* (Matthew 20:25-26).

The various offices in the Church do not provide a basis for some to exercise authority over others but for the ministry with which the whole community has been entrusted and charged to be carried out.

We reject the false doctrine that, apart from this ministry, the Church could, and could have permission to,

5. give itself or allow itself to be given special leaders vested with ruling authority.



5. *“Fear God. Honor the Emperor”* (1 Peter 2:17).

Scripture tells us that by divine appointment the State, in this still unredeemed world in which also the Church is situated, has the task of maintaining justice and peace, so far as human discernment and human ability make this possible, by means of the threat and use of force. The Church acknowledges with gratitude and reverence toward God the benefit of this, His appointment. It draws attention to God’s Dominion, God’s commandment and justice, and with these the responsibility of those who rule and those who are ruled. It trusts and obeys the power of the Word, by which God upholds all things.

We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the State should and could become the sole and total order of human life and so fulfil the vocation of the Church as well. We reject the false doctrine that beyond its special commission the Church should and could take on the nature, tasks and dignity which belong to the State and thus become itself an organ of the State.



6. *“See, I am with you always, to the end of the age”* (Matthew 28:20);  
*“God’s Word is not fettered”* (2 Timothy 2:9).

The Church's commission, which is the foundation of its freedom, consists in this: in Christ's stead, and so in the service of His own Word and work, to deliver all people, through preaching and sacrament, the message of the free grace of God.

We reject the false doctrine that with human vainglory the Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of self-chosen desires, purposes and plans.

## From An Open Letter from Theology Professors to the Christian Community in Ukraine (Ukraine, December 2013)

The independence of the Church from the state (the seventh Baptist principle) does not mean separation of the Church from society, or an apolitical or asocial existence.

As citizens of their nation, Baptists respect the choices of others and their freedom to defend those choices through peaceful protests. Evangelical Christians can't remain "neutral" when authorities abuse the powers granted to them – when they shed the blood of students, when courts pass illegal judgments, and when the police protect the state instead of the people.

Participation in protests is the personal responsibility of believers, and it is a responsibility that is inseparable from faith and expresses it as a civic position. The churches of the Union of Evangelical Christians – Baptists are not calling believers to political action, least of all to violence, but we encourage responsible personal choices, and to intercede for victims and the falsely accused, to help those in need, to pray actively for peace, justice, and the good of their nation. We can show our care for others in many different ways, but we cannot remain apathetic.

## From An Appeal by the Evangelical Protestant Churches to the Nation of Belarus (Belarus, August 2020)

Authority given by God is not absolute – it is limited and must serve concrete tasks of confirming justice (I Kings 10:91). Destruction of principles established by God, or abuse of power hurts everyone and pushes society into lawlessness, violence, and chaos.

We believe that the main reason for tensions in Belarusian society today is a crisis in trust of authorities, which was made worse by illegal activities and inexplicable cruelty on the part of the structures of power towards many citizens of our country.

In light of this we call on those in power to do everything possible in order to:

1. Put an end to violence towards peaceful citizens, and also torture of those detained, arrested, or unjustly charged.

This overly cruel and inhumane treatment and torture of defenseless and innocent people, which many witnesses have testified to, cannot be justified by anyone, ever – not even in the case of the most dangerous criminals, whose guilt has been established in court. In the case of innocent and defenseless people it becomes an outrageous crime against the laws of our state, and against God's commandments.

In using violence against these people you not only abuse your power, betraying the trust of your people and turning them against you, but you leave yourself open to the risk of retribution (Proverbs 21:7), and you also hurt your eternal souls and become hateful to God (Psalm 10:5).

2. Free the illegally detained, arrested, and convicted.

Justice is a foundation, established by God for the normal functioning of a state. You may not detain, arrest, or convict people in defiance of the law of the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus (Deuteronomy 25:1).

Everyone arrested in the course of peaceful protests should be freed. The individuals responsible for the illegal detentions should be punished in accordance with the laws of the Republic of Belarus.

3. Prove the fairness of the official results of the presidential elections for the Republic of Belarus.

#### 4. Restore the reign of justice.

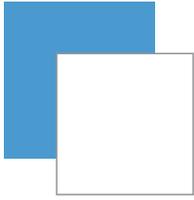
It is crucial to restore the faith of the people of Belarus in the justice of the state and its judicial system by freeing people who are innocent before the law, and punishing those who are guilty of breaking the law of the Republic of Belarus during and after the election campaign (Amos 5:15). There should be a special investigation which determines how such a systematic disrespect for the law and for human beings was possible in modern Belarus.

Legal punishment should be established and carried out for all of those who were part of creating a system of disregard for the law. Evil must be called evil, and lawlessness, violence, and falsehood recognized for what they are. Only then can we return people's trust in justice and restore their faith in the government and its leadership.

Punishing the guilty must be done not out of a feeling of hatred or desire for revenge, but in order to restore respect for the law, which God established, and which is the basis for the normal development of society. Society must be compassionate, but all people must be equal before the law and be clearly aware that punishment for breaking the law is inescapable (Ecclesiastes 8:11).

Only on matters of legality, justice, and equality of people before the law can we build a society where people with different points of view and convictions can peacefully coexist, develop, and work together, a society in which the rights and freedoms of citizens will be protected.

We also want to address ordinary Belarusians with a call to speak up for their civil position, live out their constitutional rights within the bounds of the law, especially emphasizing peaceful and non-violent protests, with respect to other members of society who hold other views, and also seeking, by their actions and words, to bring about reconciliation in society, rather than increased enmity.



# Electronic Resources:

1. Institute for Religious Freedom. URL: <https://www.irs.in.ua/ru>
2. Slavic Center for Law and Justice. Online edition "Religion and the Law."  
URL: <http://www.sclj.ru>
3. Stefanus Alliance International. URL: <https://www.stefanus.no/english/>
4. Christian Solidarity Worldwide. URL: <https://www.csw.org.uk/home.htm>
5. Forum18. URL: <http://www.forum18.org>
6. Open Doors. URL: <https://www.opendoorsusa.org>
7. Religious Liberty Partnership. URL: <https://rlpartnership.org>
8. The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. URL: <https://erlc.com>
9. WEA Religious Liberty Commission. URL: <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/rlc/>
10. Books and other resources on the site of Voice of the Martyrs.  
URL: [https://vom-ru.org/?page\\_id=132](https://vom-ru.org/?page_id=132)
11. Books and other resources on the site of the Barnabas Fund.  
URL: <http://barnabasfund.ru/ru/category/publikatsii/book/>
12. Educational Resources on Freedom of Religion and Conscience.  
URL: <https://www.forb-learning.org/index.html>
13. World Watch Monitor. URL: <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org>