

LESSON 19

Defending Religious Freedom

Introduction

Religious freedom is the sacred privilege to believe and act as we choose—to define ourselves and then live in the way our consciences dictate—while at the same time respecting others’ rights (see D&C 134:4). In this lesson, students will examine Book of Mormon accounts in which individuals and

groups sought to overthrow the Church of God and to undermine religious rights and freedoms. Students will be reminded that religious freedom needs to be protected and preserved today.

Background Reading

- Robert D. Hales, “Preserving Agency, Protecting Religious Freedom,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2015, 111–13.
- Dallin H. Oaks, “Balancing Truth and Tolerance,” *Ensign*, Feb. 2013, 24–31.
- “Why We Need Religious Freedom,” mormonnewsroom.org/article/why-religious-freedom.
- “An Introduction to Religious Freedom,” mormonnewsroom.org/article/introduction-religious-freedom.

Suggestions for Teaching

Mosiah 29:10–11, 16–18, 25–26, 32; Alma 30:7–9

The importance of agency and religious freedom

Remind students that before we came to earth, we participated in the Council in Heaven. Ask students to share some of the major purposes and outcomes of this council. Then display and read aloud the following statements by President Ezra Taft Benson (1899–1994):



“The central issue in that premortal council was: Shall the children of God have untrammelled agency to choose the course they should follow, whether good or evil, or shall they be coerced and forced to be obedient? Christ and all who followed Him stood for the former proposition—freedom of choice; Satan stood for the latter—coercion and force” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Ezra Taft Benson* [2014], 60–61).

“The scriptures make clear that there was a great war in heaven, a struggle over the principle of freedom, the right of choice” (*Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 61).

“The war that began in heaven over this issue is not yet over. The conflict continues on the battlefield of mortality” (*Teachings: Ezra Taft Benson*, 61).

- What evidence have you seen that the premortal conflict over freedom and choice continues in mortality?
- Why do you think Satan seeks to destroy freedom?

As students respond, consider sharing the following statement by President David O. McKay (1873–1970):



“Next to the bestowal of life itself, the right to direct that life is God’s greatest gift to man” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: David O. McKay* [2003], 208).

Remind students that for centuries after Lehi arrived in the promised land, the Nephites were ruled by kings. King Mosiah, however, proposed that a new form of government be instituted. Ask students to study Mosiah 29:10–11, 16–18, 25–26 and look for why Mosiah proposed a new form of government.

- What reasons did King Mosiah give for desiring to implement a new form of government?

Explain to students that the system of judges was appropriate and necessary to preserve freedom in Nephite society. Other societies have similarly sought to establish and preserve freedom, although their systems of government may have been organized differently. Ask a student to read Mosiah 29:32 aloud while the class looks for why Mosiah wanted to preserve his people’s liberty.

- Why was it necessary to preserve the Nephites’ liberty?
- Whose responsibility is it to help preserve our rights and privileges? How can this preservation be accomplished?

Explain that exercising individual freedoms should not supersede the principle of obeying laws of the land.

Invite students to search Alma 30:7–9 and identify one of the rights guaranteed by the new Nephite government.

You might explain that this passage shows that the Lord forbids discriminating against others based on their belief or nonbelief in God (see also D&C 134:4).

- How does protecting religious freedom benefit society?

To help students answer this question, invite a student to read the following:

“Religious freedom, or freedom of conscience, is critical to the health of a diverse society. It allows different faiths and beliefs to flourish. Religious freedom protects the rights of all groups and individuals, including the most vulnerable, whether religious or not” (“Religious Freedom,” mormonnewsroom.org/official-statement/religious-freedom).

To help students understand the basic elements of religious freedom, display the following statement by Elder Robert D. Hales of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, and ask a student to read it:



“There are four cornerstones of religious freedom that we as Latter-day Saints must rely upon and protect.

“The first is freedom to believe. ...

“The second cornerstone of religious liberty is the freedom to share our faith and our beliefs with others. ...

“The third cornerstone of religious liberty is the freedom to form a religious organization, a church, to worship peacefully with others. ...

“The fourth cornerstone of religious liberty is the freedom to live our faith—free exercise of faith not just in the home and chapel but also in public places” (“Preserving Agency, Protecting Religious Freedom,” *Ensign or Liahona*, May 2015, 112).

Summarize these four cornerstones by writing the following on the board:

Freedom to believe, share, organize, and live.

- How would the restriction of any of these four cornerstones inhibit opportunities for spiritual growth?
- How has your life been affected by these elements of religious freedom?

Alma 2:1–10, 12, 27–28; 44:1–5; 46:4–5, 10–16, 19–22

Preserving religious freedom

Write the following references on the board, and explain that these passages contain examples of threats to religious freedom:

Alma 2:1–4

Alma 46:4–5, 10

Assign half of the class to study the first passage and the other half to study the second. Ask students to look for the objective of those who threatened religious freedom.

- According to these passages, what were the objectives of Amlici and Amalickiah?
- How would the loss of religious freedom have affected the societies in these accounts?

Add the following bold text to the references on the board:

Alma 2:1–4, 5–10, 12, 27–28

Alma 46:4–5, 10, 11–16, 19–22

Invite students to read the verses that were added to the passage they read, and ask them to look for what righteous people did to protect their religious freedom.

- What truths can we learn from these passages about the importance of preserving religious freedom? (Students should identify the following truths: **It is our duty to defend our families, our religion, and our freedom. When we call upon God and covenant to keep His commandments, He will strengthen us in defending our rights and religion.**)

Time permitting, you might also read Alma 44:1–5 with the class and discuss how the Nephites' faith strengthened them against Zerahemnah and the Lamanites.

- In the Book of Mormon, religious freedom was often threatened through persecution and war. How do individuals and groups threaten religious freedom today?

As needed to help answer this question, read the following statement about growing threats to religious liberty in the United States. Point out that while this statement deals with issues within the United States specifically, many other countries are facing similar challenges to religious liberty. (*Note: Use this statement only to give examples of how some religious freedoms are being challenged. Do not let this become a discussion of gay rights or other political issues.*)

"Challenges to religious freedom are emerging from many sources. Emerging advocacy for gay rights threatens to abridge religious freedom in a number of ways. Changes in health care threaten the rights of those who hold certain moral convictions about human life. These and other developments are producing conflict and beginning to impose on religious organizations and people of conscience. They are threatening ... to restrict how religious organizations can manage their employment and their property. They are bringing about the coercion of religiously-affiliated universities, schools and social-service entities. ... In these and in many other circumstances, we see how religious freedom and freedom of conscience are being subtly but steadily eroded" ("An Introduction to Religious Freedom," mormonnewsroom.org/article/introduction-religious-freedom).

Point out that the Church has advocated for fairness for all. Consistent with Articles of Faith 1:11, we must claim our right of religious freedom in a fair and balanced way that also respects the rights and interests of others (see "Mormon Leaders Call

for Laws That Protect Religious Freedom,” mormonnewsroom.org/article/church-news-conference-on-religious-freedom-and-nondiscrimination).

Invite a student to read aloud the following statement by the Prophet Joseph Smith (1805–44):



“If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a ‘Mormon,’ I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any other denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves.

“It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul—civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race” (*Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* [2007], 345).

- Why is it important to safeguard religious freedom for all people and not just for Latter-day Saints? (Such safeguards enable others to use their agency according to God’s plan and promote a peaceful and just society. If we want our religious beliefs protected and respected, then we must protect and respect the beliefs of others.)
- What are some appropriate actions we might take to preserve and strengthen religious freedom?

To help answer this question, invite a student to read the following statement by Elder Robert D. Hales aloud:



“Brothers and sisters, we are responsible to safeguard these sacred freedoms and rights for ourselves and our posterity. What can you and I do?

“First, we can become informed. Be aware of issues in your community that could have an impact on religious liberty.

“Second, in your individual capacity, join with others who share our commitment to religious freedom. Work side by side to protect religious freedom.

“Third, live your life to be a good example of what you believe—in word and deed. How we live our religion is far more important than what we may say about our religion” (“Preserving Agency,” 112).

- How can you become aware of issues that affect religious liberty in your community?
- What other groups in your area share your commitment to religious freedom?
- What have you done or seen others do to promote religious freedom?

Inform students of the religious freedom resources available on mormonnewsroom.org. Encourage students to consider what they might do to promote and defend religious freedom, and share your testimony that Heavenly Father will guide them in their efforts.

Student Readings

- Mosiah 29:10–11, 16–18, 25–26, 32; Alma 2:1–10, 12, 27–28; 30:7–9; 44:1–5; 46:4–5, 10–16, 20–22.
- Robert D. Hales, “Preserving Agency, Protecting Religious Freedom,” *Ensign* or *Liahona*, May 2015, 111–13.