
Alan Sears: Acceptance Speech at RFI's 2022 Defender of Religious Freedom Award Ceremony

Religious Freedom Institute

Alan Sears, Founder and former President of Alliance Defending Freedom, delivered the following remarks on November 3, 2022 at a ceremony in Washington, D.C. in acceptance of RFI's 2022 Defender of Religious Freedom Award.

Thank you, John. Thank you, members of the Institute – and my dear brothers and sisters of good will and common purpose in faith. Thank you, Paula Sears, for enabling all.

Thomas Farr, I am so thankful for the Religious Freedom Institute – for your unwavering commitment for all these years, of “*Working to Secure Religious Freedom for Everyone, Everywhere.*” You’ve saved lives, you’ve protected souls, you’ve preserved human dignity on so many fronts. Thank you for doing what you do. And I commend the RFI basis of liberty curriculum to all.

We live in days of profound political upheaval and surging social turbulence ... of churning emotion and growing violence ... of steadily deepening anger and contempt for God and the rule of law. But, looking around this room tonight, we are reminded that many refuse to bow to that intimidation, or remain silent in the face of that abuse. We hold to the faith of our fathers. We stand on the deepest convictions of our souls.

I am reminded of something John Stonestreet shared at an ADF event some years ago.

He made the observation that, at night, when we’re safe and secure in our well-lit homes, and we suddenly remember something we left out in the car, and open the door to step outside, we find an interesting phenomenon. Darkness doesn’t flood through the open door to plunge our home into shadows. Instead, the *light from inside pierces the darkness*, casting its illumination onto the shadowy things outside.

It’s that way, John explained, with the light of God that shines within us. When we confront the darkness, we are not overpowered. Instead, God’s light flows from us to pierce the darkness and evil around us.

It’s a dark world out there – growing darker by the hour. But we don’t huddle in here, crouched and trembling around our small candles. We draw courage from our faith ... and *lift our light* to shine truth and love and hope into that darkness. And we lift up and support each other.

Each of us comes to this room tonight from our own cherished faith traditions. You must know that I am a Christian – a follower of Jesus Christ. I find my purpose and freedom in Him.

But that faith doesn't just inform my own religious views and sensibilities. It also informs my passion for others to find their own hope and freedom and purpose in life. I cannot but speak from my own beliefs, and from my Christian perspective.

But we don't have to share each other's faith to share a commitment to secure for people of all faiths the *freedom to worship* in the way they choose.

That is why I am so thankful that you have invited me here tonight.

What a humbling, overwhelming honor to be invited to stand at the same dais where three more distinguished persons have stood in recent years, to receive this same award. I can't say enough words to convey the respect and appreciation I hold for these extraordinary leaders.

It wasn't so long ago that his Excellency, the Archbishop Charles Chaput, stood with my wife, Paula, and me at the Shrine of Saint Peregrine, to pray that I would be healed of Stage 4 cancer. I am indebted to him for his kind intercessions – and those of many others of you in this room tonight.

Thanks to your prayers, and God's grace, I have been granted more days to serve Him and His kingdom.

As many of you know, the Archbishop is the author of *Render Unto Caesar* – a volume we designated as required reading for a generation of lawyers at Alliance Defending Freedom. About that rare volume, RFI's President Tom Farr has said:

“At the core of the Archbishop's teaching on religious freedom is the belief that if we are not able to live our lives according to our religious convictions – publicly as well as privately, alone and in community with others – none of us can be said to be living a fully human life.”

Russell Moore served as President of the *Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Commission* during the years I was honored to lead ADF. I had the great privilege of working with Russell on many religious freedom issues.

Carl Anderson understands the meaning of, “*for God and country.*” He served as a member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and for 20 years, he served as Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, the world's largest Catholic fraternal organization.

I'm not sure how I came to stand in such remarkable company, but I humbly accept this award in the name – and on behalf of – the ADF team and all of those who have stood, these recent years, for the defense of religious freedom for everyone, everywhere.

We bring many points of view and perspectives to these tables tonight. We could fill this room, undoubtedly, with lively debate on many issues.

But in the end, I don't think we would find much disagreement on *what* needs to be done, in these difficult days, by people of character ... by those who are called to live by faith.

But I would respectfully suggest that, now and in the crowded days ahead, knowing what we need to do – and even doing what we need to do – will not be enough.

For the *way*, the “*how*” of what we do is as important to God as the “*what*” we do.

I would like to share with you a photograph.

This is a picture of President Ronald Reagan with Romek and Wanda Spasowski. Romek was a leading Polish diplomat and Ambassador to the United States.[1] In December 1981– as the Polish resistance to Communist tyranny grew – which was encouraged by the earlier election as John Paul II as Pope and his courageous preaching – Romek, became the highest-ranking Communist official ever to defect to the West. It was a courageous but a very dangerous decision. His Polish citizenship was revoked, and he was condemned to death.

When President Reagan met with the Spasowskis at the White House, hours after their defection, he sensed their nervousness, their worries about what would come next. As he walked them out to the car that was waiting to take them to their new home, he personally held an umbrella over them, and put a supportive arm of comfort around Wanda.

This is *how, the way* President Reagan opened his arms to persons who days before were opponents, those who had represented a hostile regime, that in league with the Soviet Union was terribly oppressing the Polish people.

What this photo depicts is called *grace*. These are not the actions of a politician, or even of a world leader. These are the actions of a kind man ... a friend.

I can't help thinking that – for all the assurances of protection this couple had received – this was the moment they knew they really were safe. This gentle gesture was the moment they knew they'd made the right decision.

When I was first asked to launch, to be the founding president of Alliance Defending Freedom – which was then a mere dream, a concept to develop – I understood my mission.

It was to “*create the capacity to respond to opportunity.*” To lay an enduring groundwork for the long-term struggle for religious liberty ... a foundation for victory, and for us, as Christians, to “keep the legal door open” to live out the Gospel, the good news.

It was not something we could achieve alone. We would need to build a strong alliance.

People are willing to share the effort when they know you are willing to share the credit – if there is any. In those cynical days we had to convince those we recruited that this was not going to be “*all about*” ADF – our name in all the headlines, our faces on all the networks, our egos being fed. The objective, instead, was to “make stars of others” – to “hold the umbrella” – to embrace those in need of assurance that things are going to be all right.

From the beginning of ADF in 1993, we made a deliberate effort to do that ... and it worked. The

alliance grew. People of common cause and faith came together. We increasingly began to see victories ... and by God's grace, we see them still.

Fourteen wins at the Supreme Court over the last 11 years, and significant roles with allies in more than 60 others. [2] On the world stage, 14 wins at the International Court of Human Rights ... including, just six months ago, a blowout victory at the high court of Finland.[3] A ministry that opened its doors with \$4,700 in start-up cash now with a budget in the tens of millions of dollars.[4] And we've seen our "pride and joy," the Blackstone Legal Fellowship grow to now more than 2,400 Fellows in 30 nations.

But friends, what makes these things sweet is the *spirit in which* and *how* this work was accomplished by God's grace.

For ADF, that "how" the "way", came down to a handful of principles that had been instilled in me by others, and that I tried, in turn, to pass along... and that we pray, will always remain a vital part of the DNA of ADF.

The first principle, I've already mentioned: "Making stars of others." Simply put, that means finding ways to make sure *those around us are recognized and look good*. Recognizing what they do best and encouraging them in that. Observing the things, they do less well, and graciously helping them to do better. It means finding as much joy, in their success as we do in our own.

And another part of that principle when we say "*it's not about us*" and to "*make stars of others*," is to have an open hand. To always look for ways to have "*an open hand*" to tangibly lift up others.

To do this at ADF we created a grant program that has provided over 2,000 grants, totaling over \$15,000,000, to help fund allies and others the world would call our competitors. We created the Litigation Academy to train and equip allied lawyers, and launched the Summit to build relationships, develop strategy, to enhance the capabilities of the greater movement because it is about "winning" and the alliance.

When one has an open hand – to share your blessings with your allies – God can constantly replenish one's own resources (*and a closed hand is hard for God to refill*), and it also helps keep you from falling for delusions about your own self-importance, helping you realize how much we need one another.

And again, thank you Tom Farr, and RFI, for the freedom training you are generously doing for others – online and for students and leaders – worldwide.

Which brings me, actually, to the next "no charge" principle: we don't have "enemies." We have "opponents."

Our enemy is not an individual. It's an evil greater than any one person or group. As the Apostle Paul[5]noted, "*our struggle is not with flesh and blood.*"

No matter the intensity, the acrimony, or even the cruelty of that opposition, we make a deliberate

choice to not demonize or despise individuals. We don't attack their reputation or besmirch their character. Instead, *we offer grace* so they would know the love God has for them – grace like we saw Ronald Reagan extend.

Years ago, long-time ADF attorney Jordan Lorence, found himself arguing a key case in the California Supreme Court. The opposing attorney was deep in her presentation when she began coughing. Jordan, sitting across from her, stood up, poured a glass of water, and stepped across the aisle to give it to her. She took a long sip, and was able to proceed with her argument.

Except, she couldn't remember where she was in her presentation. She stood there, fumbling, sorting through her papers, trying to find her place. Jordan intervened again. He leaned over and quietly whispered what she'd been saying at the moment her coughing began. She quickly recovered and returned to her arguments.

It was a small act of kindness, but she didn't forget what Jordan had done for her – and wrote of it to me years later.

That's the way it's supposed to work. We want even those trying to destroy us to be able to depend on our word, trust in our character, and know that – however sharp our differences – we will look on them with kindness and compassion.

As Winston Churchill famously said: “In War, Resolution; In Defeat, Defiance; In Victory, Magnanimity; and in Peace, Good Will.”

Someday, the dust will settle. The battle will be over. We want to be able to look back at what we said, what we did, without regret ... at peace that we have “*fought the good fight.*”

That doesn't mean we don't fight with all of our strength. We fight, as Paul says, “*not as one who beats the air.*”[6]

Another very important thing to me, when I was asked to launch ADF, was our motive for wading into the fray. “*Are we doing this to say that ‘we tried,’*” I asked, or, “*are we in it to win?*”

Winning, I was told, was the objective. That perspective gave us great clarity that we wanted to accomplish things in ways that would last – and for 29 years, the ADF team has brought everything it has onto the field.

Supreme Court Justice Joseph McKenna, writing a 1935 decision,[7] described the role of a prosecutor:

“*He may prosecute with earnestness and vigor,*” McKenna said, “*indeed, he should do so. But, while he may strike hard blows, he is not at liberty to strike foul ones. It is as much his duty to refrain from improper methods calculated to produce a wrongful conviction as it is to use every legitimate means to bring about a just one.*”

In defending religious liberty, serving our Lord, we have an even higher duty in the way we do what we do than that which the justice so eloquently described.

Isn't it interesting that the greatest and most decisive battles recorded in Hebrew Scripture – Joshua at Jericho, Gideon against the Midianites, Elijah at Mount Carmel – are remembered as much for how the battle was fought, as for the victory itself?

That's not a coincidence. It brings me to another principle that has been especially vital to any ADF success. A principle found in our ministry's theme verse, John 15:5, where Jesus says:

"I am the vine; you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

As Christians, our ADF Team knows we are totally dependent on Christ our Lord, for strength, for financial sufficiency, for wisdom and discernment ... for favor in the courts. Recognizing that dependence, means understanding that we cannot accomplish God's purposes in ungodly ways. What's done for His purpose, but not in His way, can only fail. While what's done in His way must, in time, accomplish His purpose.

Some may feel I'm using a great deal of "battle" language this evening. I can't really help that. We're in a global battle for religious freedom, and the fighting is ramping up everywhere.

In the words of C.S. Lewis: *"Every inch of ground in the universe is under assault all the time. There is no 'neutral ground' in the universe."* [8]

We are fighting a spiritual war for a better, saner, safer culture. We are fighting for *"a new birth of freedom."* For the souls of our children, and our grandchildren, and countless strangers all around us.

Cultures that preserve the religious freedom of their citizens thrive. Those that don't, die. It's the root from which all other freedoms grow.

Saint John Paul II spoke often of freedom:

"The Church addresses people," he said, *"with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom, but rather promotes it. The Church proposes – she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience."* [9]

Sad to say, that is not a view shared by all too many of our opponents.

By way of contrast, I commend to you again the Reagan example. He used every resource of his office to end Soviet domination and brutality throughout the world, and in Berlin in 1987, cried out, [10] *"Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"*

Through an extraordinary combination of Defense buildups – he called the missiles placed in Germany pointing at Moscow the *"Peacekeepers"* – *"Big Stick"* diplomacy, [11] and the careful cultivation of personal relationships with other world leaders, he along with John Paul II managed what seemed even far more impossible than as the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* did until just a few months ago.

They brought an end to the Soviet Union and the Cold War. And yet, Reagan said,[12] “*Mr. Gorbachev deserves most of the credit.*”

Ronald Reagan, truly, “made stars of others” – sometimes even his opponents. “In victory, magnanimity.”

As our ultimate objective is full religious liberty for everyone, everywhere – we must heed John Paul II’s [13]reminder, that: “*Freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.*”

That’s why *how, the way* we do what we do is as important as what we do.

And why: “*Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; [love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*”[14]

On behalf of all of those in this room, those across our land, and all around the world tonight who are bearing and believing, hoping and enduring... making, in ways great and small, their faithful, day-by-day, eternal difference... and to the Religious Freedom Institute, thank you for this award. For the blessing of your friendship and the inspiration of your example.

In closing, we ask the Lord that He will show us the *how, the way*, to gain religious freedom for everyone, everywhere – and that He will let His light flow from us into the darkness.

As we make that prayer, let us recall the words of light Abraham Lincoln[15] spoke against the national darkness of 1861:

“The struggle of today is not altogether for today; it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us.”

Dear friends, let us proceed to the great task before us. And as we engage in that great task to which we are called, let us always do it in love, recalling the words of Aquinas that “*to love, is to will the good of the other.*”

Thank you for your kind attention, and may God bless you.

[1] See: *Romek & Wanda: The Greatest Political, Faith & Love Story of the Twentieth Century*– December 21 2021 by Romuald Spasowski (Author), William M Watson S.J./Sacred Story (Preface), George Weigel (Foreword)

[2] – including crucial victories, the recent term for religious schools, for the end of an old legal test that was a “lemon” in name and effect. And – in cooperation with so many, many others – the long-awaited rejection of *Roe v. Wade*. *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971) The three components of the Lemon Test are:

1. The statute has a secular legislative purpose.
2. The statute neither advances nor inhibits religion.
3. The statute doesn't create entanglement of government and religion.

Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, No. 19-1392, 597 U.S. ____ (2022), also reversed *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992); *Roe v. Wade*, 410 U.S. 113 (1973)

[3] FINLAND: for a member of Parliament and her bishop husband, clearing them of charges that they spoke hate when sharing the clear teachings on human sexuality contained in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

[4] As of FY ending June 30, 2022 ADF crossed a combined revenue total of \$100 million[.

5] Ephesians 6:12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this world's darkness, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

[6] 1 Corinthians 9:26

[7] *BERGER v. UNITED STATES*, 295 U.S. 78 (1935)

[8] C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*

[9] "Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing. She respects individuals and cultures, and she honors the sanctuary of conscience. To those for who various reasons oppose missionary activity, the Church repeats: Open the doors to Christ!" (Redemptoris Missio 1990 "On the permanent validity of the Church's missionary mandate" Section 39).

[10] Remarks on East-West Relations at the Brandenburg Gate in West Berlin June 12, 1987
<https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/128814/brandenburg.pdf>

[11] To President Ronald Reagan, détente – the State Department bureaucratic approach– was “*a one-way street that the Soviet Union has used to achieve its own aims.*”

[12] As noted by *The Wall Street Journal* in its coverage of Mikhail Gorbachev's death earlier this year

[13] "Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought." Section 7 of HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II Oriole Park at Camden Yards, Baltimore Sunday, 8 October 1995
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19951008_baltimore.html

[14] 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

[15] <https://genius.com/Abraham-lincoln-state-of-the-union-1861-annotated>



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The Religious Freedom Institute (RFI) is committed to achieving broad acceptance of religious liberty as a fundamental human right, a source of individual and social flourishing, the cornerstone of a successful society, and a driver of national and international security

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