



## Forced Religion: It Never Works

*Then Nebuchadnezzar spake, and said, Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who hath sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king's word, and yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, That every people, nation, and language, which speak any thing amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill: because there is no other God that can deliver after this sort. Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, in the province of Babylon. (Daniel 3:28-30)*

Despite his keen awareness of God's power, the king still doesn't really understand the character of God. If we read the first half of this passage, we think the king really understands and desires to honor God. Then we read the second half of the passage, and run face to face with reality. Forced religion with the death penalty on any nonconformists, along with their families, is not the Biblical attitude toward worshipping God. Sadly, even our Christian history displays far too many examples of attempts to force people into a certain mold under threat of death or damage, should they refuse. Neither the head of civil government nor the head of a given church or denomination have Biblical authority to force people against their will into their preconceived mold of the faith. In European Christian history the Inquisition is a glaring example of this devastating attitude. However, our own country's early history also contains multiple examples of attempts within each colony/state to name a "state church" and to force all citizens to support that church, both in mandated taxes to fund the state church and in overt persecution against those who refused to join the state church or believe according to its teachings. The cliché is often used with reference to political situations, but it applies in religion as well, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

Nebuchadnezzar's harsh decree serves as a perfect "attention-getter" for us to see the error of forced religion, even forced worship of God. What attitude should characterize those who choose the Bible and its teachings, both toward God and toward our fellow-believers?

What do we learn from Scripture regarding our worshipping attitude toward God?

*Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)*

A literal rendition of this verse indicates the centrality of a willing mind in every act of our discipleship. "If any man is willing to come after me..." would be a valid interpretation of the verse. Jesus makes this willing mind the first and thus foundational premise of true and acceptable discipleship.

*Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. (Philemon 13-14)*

In these verses Paul is reasoning with Philemon regarding Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, who, after abandoning his master, encountered Paul and embraced the good news of the gospel. Paul encourages Philemon to willingly forgive Onesimus because of his new-found faith. However, he emphasizes that Philemon's choice should be willingly made, not done out of some kind of "necessity." Neither Paul nor God were forcing Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother in Christ and not as a renegade slave.

*For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. (1 Corinthians 9:17)*

Here Paul is discussing the "necessity" of his calling to preach the gospel. Despite the "necessity" that was laid on Paul in his calling, his exercise of that calling, of that necessity, must be altogether willingly performed. God does not force a man to preach against his will, though He indeed does exercise strong convictions. Preaching the gospel is not a matter of the

individual's choice or ambition. It is a gift bestowed by God, not the result of a man who seeks to influence others by his power of persuasion and leadership.

*Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind.... (1 Peter 5:2)*

Here Peter reinforces Paul's point that our work as ministers must be approached with a willing mind and heart. No man who approaches ministry with an attitude that he was coerced into it will be effective or beneficial to others. Further Peter eliminates money as a motivating, or even as a contributory incentive to preaching. No preacher operating with respect to his calling will respond to an invitation to go somewhere and preach with, "I'll consider it, but first I need to know how much you plan to pay me." Abominable!

Next let's examine the proper Biblical attitude we should maintain toward other believers.

*And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. (1 Corinthians 12:28)*

Every gift that honors God and ministers to His people, every "spiritual gift," according to Paul, is "set...in the church." No man every attained effective ministry or honored God by trying to function in ministry apart from a local church. Many decades ago a man rather arrogantly told me that, despite his significant age, though he had never been ordained, he believed that God had called him to preach. In an obviously defiant attitude he noted that no church had called for his ordination, but "God...ordained me to preach." Eventually this man found a church that ordained him, but that independent spirit, and likely the absence of a call from God, prevented this man from ever being beneficial to any church.

*Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. (Ephesians 5:21)*

The submission of which Paul here writes is not coerced or forced, but willing. Rather than defining the New Testament church as a place where every person "does his own thing," Paul defined it as a place where each member submits to other members. This submission must be willing.

*And this they did, not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God. (2 Corinthians 8:5)*

Here Paul commends the churches in Macedonia, Greece, for their willing outreach and service to other churches in other regions of the Roman Empire. Rather than these Christians grudgingly doing as little as they thought they could do, Paul praises them for doing far more than even he expected of them. They "...gave their own selves..." first to God and then to Paul and those who ministered with him. Ah, how often we fail to rise above our own selfish selves because we have never truly given ourselves to God. Only as we give ourselves willingly and joyfully to God can we give ourselves willingly and joyfully to each other.

Anytime a preacher mentions money and giving however Biblical his approach to the topic people, become defensive. Notice the following passage that deals with this subject of Biblical giving.

*But this I say, He which soweth sparingly shall reap also sparingly; and he which soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully. Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:6-7)*

The Greek word translated "cheerful" in this passage is translated from the Greek root of our English word "hilarious." Willing, joyful, this word describes about any attitude other than grudging or resentful. What an example of our theme!

I am amazed at the contrast between Nebuchadnezzar's attitude of "Do or die" toward his subjects and the consistent New Testament attitude of personal willingness in every acceptable and God-honoring act of faith and obedience.

Does this mean that every Christian has a "right" to believe anything he/she wishes and to live in any way that he/she wishes? Of course not. Throughout the New Testament we find one example after another that affirms the obvious. God dictates His truth and His acceptable form of obedience. We are not free to choose any idea or relativistic set of values and beliefs we wish as our "personal Christian faith." Notice the clear form of the faith that appears in these verses.

*But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. (Romans 6:17)*

“...that form of doctrine...” Here “form” has the meaning of a fixed mold, similar to a form we build into which we pour cement. Biblical doctrine is “molded” by God, not by our personal ideas.

*But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. (Galatians 1:8)*

Clearly Paul rejected the notion that the Galatians were free to worship God in any way they wished.

*Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints. (Jude 3)*

Jude exhorts us to earnestly contend for “the faith,” a fixed and stated body of clear and revealed Biblical truth, not merely choose our own ideas and ways. In Titus 1:7 Paul requires that a minister of the gospel not be self-willed. In 2 Peter 2:10 Peter identifies “self-willed” as a primary identifying characteristic of false teachers, the theme of this whole chapter.

It is an incredible and joyful scene to observe a body of believers who gather regularly to sing, pray, preach or hear preaching, and to spend joyful time talking with each other about the beautiful truths of the gospel that they willing, and joyfully share in common. This, my friends, is God’s depiction of a New Testament church at its best.

Little Zion Primitive Baptist Church  
16434 Woodruff  
Bellflower, California

Worship service each Sunday                      10:30 A. M.  
Joseph R. Holder    Pastor