

# Religious Liberty

By Benjamin Phillips

## Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

### Assignment One

Read the comments related to Daniel 3:28–30 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: After the three Hebrews walked out of the furnace, what did the king say (v. 28), decree (v. 29) and cause (v. 30)? Did the king respect the people's same freedom to respond to God that he and the three Hebrews had demonstrated? Given how God had protected the three Hebrews, do you think He needed the king to punish people who disrespected Him?

### Assignment Two

Read Acts 5:17–32; then read the comments related to Acts 5:28 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: Why did the Sanhedrin feel threatened by what the apostles were doing and saying? Is religious liberty threatened where leaders like what is being said and done or where they don't? What does your culture or government dislike about what the Bible teaches?

### Assignment Three

Read the comments related to 1 Timothy 2:1–6 in the section **It's in the Book**. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: Are Christians the enemies of those in power? From 1 Timothy 2:1–6, what arguments would you use to prove that Christians want the best for those in power and for all men? (Hint: see especially vv. 1 and 4.)

### Scripture to Memorize

... *"Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."* Matthew 22:21

### Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will place allegiance to God above allegiance to government and insist on that freedom for everyone, not just Christians.

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## It's in the Book

30 minutes

### Real-Life Scenario

A local Islamic group has applied for a zoning permit to build a mosque. Their request has been denied because a majority of the community doesn't want a mosque in the neighborhood. Is the decision of the zoning commission wrong? Would your answer be different if the request were for a church? Can religious liberty exist for Christians and not for others?

Read Daniel 3:1–18 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 5. fall down and worship the golden image.** Ancient cultures believed the stability of their city or nation depended on keeping their patron gods happy. As a result, religion was considered a national security issue. People were not free to worship according to their own conviction. Capital punishment was an extreme, but not unheard-of, consequence of “endangering” the state in this way.

**Verse 16. we have no need to answer you.** Though the king gave the three Hebrews a second chance to worship the image, they respectfully declined that chance. They would not change their response to the call to worship the king's idol.

**Verse 17. our God whom we serve is able to deliver us.** The three Hebrews expressed a firm conviction that God was capable of delivering them. This statement expressed the *content* of their belief.

**Verse 18. But if not.** The obedience of the three was not conditioned upon God's guaranteeing immediate deliverance from the king's punishment. This statement identified their belief as a *conviction*; they wouldn't change their minds on this matter. **we will not serve your gods.** This final statement insisted that their *conduct* would be driven by their allegiance to God rather than the demands of the king.

Read Daniel 3:26–30 out loud.

### Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share answers to the following questions: After the three Hebrews walked out of the furnace, what did the king say (v. 28), decree (v. 29), and cause (v. 30)? Did the king respect the people's same freedom to respond to God that he and the three Hebrews had demonstrated? Given how God had protected the three Hebrews, do you think He needed the king to punish people who disrespected Him?

### Discussion Question

Do you think the king's decree transformed everyone in the Babylonian Empire into believers in God? Why or why not? Which makes you more likely to accept a view: being shown that it is true or being told you cannot express a contrary opinion?

### On Your Own

How much are you willing to risk in order to obey God? Write your thoughts in the space below.

Read Acts 5:27–32 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 28. We strictly charged you.** At the time of Acts, Judea was governed by the Sanhedrin (including religious leaders), under the supervision of the Roman governor. **intend to bring this man's blood upon us.** These leaders were offended and threatened by the apostles' preaching, which pointed out that Jesus had been crucified by the Romans at the demand of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin objected to both the *content* of the apostles' message and their *conduct*, teaching in the name of Jesus.

**Verse 29. We must obey God rather than men.** The apostles demonstrated that they were acting under *conviction* when they refused to elevate the will of the Sanhedrin over the will of God.

**Verse 30. The God of our fathers raised Jesus.** The apostles based their conviction on what God had clearly done and said.

**Verse 32. we are witnesses of these things.** The claim went beyond being eyewitnesses of the events, though they certainly were eyewitnesses. The apostles' point was that their mission was to bear witness, to testify to what God had done and said. **so is the Holy Spirit.** Their reliance was on the Holy Spirit, whose mission is to point people to Christ and who is at work in those who are obedient to God.

### Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share answers to the following questions: Why did the Sanhedrin feel threatened by what the apostles were doing and saying? Is religious liberty threatened where leaders like what is being said and done or where they don't? What does your culture or government dislike about what the Bible teaches?

### Discussion Question

How are leaders in government and culture threatened by Christians' refusal to obey men instead of God? How do they try to get Christians (and others) to be silent and/or act differently at those points? What resources do Christians have to withstand that pressure?

Read 1 Timothy 2:1–6 out loud.

### Studying the Passage

**Verse 1. Supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings.** Paul called on believers to go to God in prayer, seeking God's blessing on all men and thanking Him for the good He does through them.

**Verse 2. for kings and all who are in high positions.** Though Paul urged prayers for all men, he particularly insisted on prayer for rulers and those in authority under them. This was particularly important because at the time Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, he was in prison awaiting trial before Caesar Nero. **that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life.** One reason Paul gave for praying for leaders was so that they would allow disciples to live out their allegiance to Christ in peace.

**Verses 3–4. This is good . . . God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved.** Paul's second reason for praying for rulers and officials was that they would both hear and see the gospel at work and themselves be saved.

**Verses 5–6. one mediator . . . who gave Himself as a ransom for all.** The ultimate basis for praying for hostile government officials was that in fulfilling the plan of God, Jesus gave Himself as a ransom for everyone. This is true even for those who are hostile to Christianity at the moment.

### **Assignment Three Feedback**

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share answers to the following questions: Are Christians the enemies of those in power? From 1 Timothy 2:1–6, what arguments would you give that true disciples want the best for those in power and for all men?

### **Discussion Question**

If you had to give evidence that people in your church are using their religious liberty to bless officials who are hostile to Christianity, what could you say? How might the answer to that question make government more or less likely to respect the religious liberty of Christians?

### **On Your Own**

In the space below, make a list of elected officials and other government leaders you think are hostile to believers and the things the Bible teaches. Commit yourself to pray that God would bless them, guide them in their official roles, and especially bring them to faith in Christ.

## **Heart and Hands**

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

## **Since Last Week**

5 minutes

## **Grace-Filled Accountability**

5 minutes

## **Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service**

5 minutes

## **Prayer**

7 minutes

## **At Home: Nail It Down**

Religious liberty is the idea that “government is not competent to judge (condemn) sincere religious conviction and cannot coerce religious observance” (Ben Phillips, *Idiot's Guide: The Bible*, 2014, 185). This means that while government must not suppress Christianity, neither should it suppress other religions such as Judaism, Buddhism or Islam.

This may be threatening to some religions that want the government to force others to accept their faith. This also may threaten secularists who want to silence religious people who rebuke wrong attitudes and behaviors in the culture. As Christians, we do not need to fear because we know God has and will show Himself strong, validating the gospel in the face of all kinds of human resistance or persecution.

Religious liberty covers more than mere belief. Such liberty also extends to obedience to God's commands. The Babylonians (Daniel 3) and the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:27–32) were more concerned with what the three Hebrews and the disciples were doing than with their private beliefs. Freedom for a disciple to believe the Bible is meaningless without freedom for that disciple to obey the Bible.

Religious liberty must not become a shield or cover for hatred and enmity toward even the most oppressive government. Instead, disciples should demonstrate that in their freedom to obey God's Word, they become the greatest blessing to government officials (see 1 Timothy 2:1–6).

### **Follow up Question**

*What essential beliefs and practices of your faith in Christ would you refuse to surrender, no matter what the cost—even being executed or being publicly shamed?*

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.