



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
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June 2015

Should People Serve God out of Fear or Love?

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Over the past few decades there has been a pronounced effort to remove fear as a motive for serving God. It has gained momentum with the increased acceptance of the “accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative” philosophy. “Hell fire and brimstone” preaching has all but been relegated to the image of a wild-eyed, arm-waving, half-lunatic character in movies and television programs. Many words have been spoken and volumes written telling us why people need to serve and obey God from love rather than fear.

This is a false dichotomy. The Bible says a lot about serving God out of love, but it also says a lot about serving Him out of fear. We did a search of the King James Version and were surprised to find the phrases “fear God” and “fear the LORD” is found a combined total of 42 times; while the combined total for “love God” and “love the Lord” was 21 – only one half the number of the “love” passages. Does this mean that we should urge people to serve God out of fear twice as much as out of love? Of course not. But it does tell us that fear plays a big part in serving God and should not be disparaged as it is often done today.

It just seems that it is hard for some people to strike a balance. As the song goes, they don’t want to “... mess with Mister In Between.” It is often presented as though you must choose either love or fear rather than a mixture of both. The result has been that people are rarely taught to fear God any more. Many of this generation perceive themselves to be better educated, more enlightened and more spiritual than past generations who acted from fear. Their mission is to free their brethren from all fear-service and replace it altogether with the

sweeter motive of love.

A few passages should be sufficient to show that God intends that man fear him as well as love him:

*The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.* (Proverbs 1:7)

*The **fear** of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.* (Proverbs 9:10)

*And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather **fear** him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.* (Matthew 10:28)

*There is no **fear** of God before their eyes.* (Romans 3:18)

*Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the **fear** of God.* (2 Corinthians 7:1)

*Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and **godly fear**:* (Hebrews 12:28)

*Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. **Fear God**. Honour the king.* (1 Peter 2:17)

*But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and **fear**:* (1 Peter 3:15)

We should not allow these passages to cause one to serve God out of any less love. One cannot serve God acceptably without loving him with all his heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37), nor can he serve Him acceptably without godly fear.

(Hebrews 12:28). God is both good and severe (Romans 11:22). It is sometimes suggested that the more we mature as Christians the more we will love Him and the less we will fear Him. Again, why is it either/or? When one grows in the knowledge of the Lord the more he learns of reasons to love him, but also he learns more reasons to fear him. He learns more of God's grace and mercy prompting him to love his more, but he also learns more of "the terror of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:11) prompting him to fear him more. As one grows in his knowledge of heaven, the more he loves the Lord for providing it for him and then as he grows in the knowledge of hell, the more he fears displeasing God and going there. God, who knows what is in man, is better qualified to tell what motivations are needed to serve him acceptably – a healthy balance of both love and fear. ■

Jesus and Pilate's Wife

Fanning Yater Tant

Pilate was in a dilemma. An innocent man stood before him for judgment; Pilate knew that for envy he had been delivered up, and there was no evidence of wrong doing which would justify a sentence against him. Yet the mob was howling for blood. It was a ticklish situation, a nasty mess. Pilate must have wished with all his heart that he could be relieved of the necessity of handling this case. Either way he went, he was certain to have regrets. His sense of Roman justice was outraged at the thought of condemning an innocent man; yet his political sagacity told him that he dare not antagonize the mob.

At this crucial juncture his wife sent an urgent message: "Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." How pleasant that would be! What a relief just to wash his hands of the whole affair, bow gracefully out of the picture, and refuse to render a verdict. In a sense that was what Pilate tried to do. He even called for water and symbolically "washed his hands" of the matter,

avowing his innocence. Yet Pilate found that it was impossible to side-step his moral responsibility. The verdict of history, repeated endlessly in that earliest of all creedal statements, is that Christ was "crucified under Pontius Pilate."

As it was with Pilate, so is it with everyone who has knowledge of Jesus. Neutrality is an impossibility. The advice of Pilate's wife is incredible. Pilate's very failure to declare himself was a declaration. Had he been familiar with the teachings of the prisoner he would have recalled his words, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad." (Matt. 12:30) The long story of the years has demonstrated the inexorable truth which Jesus put into words, "I came not to send peace, but a sword." His advent into the world has brought to mankind the necessity of making a choice regarding him. In theory they may postpone the choice, or try to evade it or avoid it; in practice the choice is made every day, and in every act or word or thought. Pilate's theory was that he could avert the choice; his practice was that he delivered Christ to be crucified.

A hundred years ago the Church of Christ stood at the crossroads. For multiplied thousands of Christians an inescapable choice loomed up. They did not ask for this problem; they did not want it; they did not like it. But it was there. In theory multitudes of them tried to shut their eyes to the problem, and ignore it; in practice every last one of them made a choice. Apparently in any such circumstances there are three choices possible: a positive choice for, a positive choice against, and a neutral choice. But as the years unfold, it has been demonstrated over and over again that the "neutral" choice disappears in the cold, hard logic of practice. Men can be neutral in theory only; in practice they are compelled to declare themselves.

In national affairs, when a nation is engaged in a struggle to the death for her very existence, neutrality is regarded as treason. In spiritual affairs, it is true that the Lord's church is perpetually engaged in a warfare that knows no respite. When a matter of truth or error is up for decision, any attempt at "neutrality" is treason to the truth!

“Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man,” said Pilate’s wife. Attempting to follow that advice, Pilate turned Christ over to his tormenters. “Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man,” is the unexpressed, but none-the-less real, determination of thousands upon thousands of our contemporaries and acquaintances. Yet every such effort at “neutrality” is disastrous to the one attempting it. For Christ cannot be ignored. He makes positive claims and demands on the life of every individual. A failure to acknowledge those claims, a refusal to yield to those demands places one squarely in opposition and rebellion against God.

In theory a man can decide to be “neutral” on the subject of baptism; he is neither “for” it, nor “against” it. But in practice he either will be baptized, or he will not be. There is no neutrality in practice. In theory a man may be “neutral” on the subject of instrumental music in the worship; he is neither “for” it, nor is he “against” it. But in practice he cannot be neutral. He will either worship with it; or refuse to worship with it. The choice may not be forced upon him all at once; but sooner or later it will come. Perhaps he thinks himself against instrumental music; but he never speaks against it; never points out to any man the error of it; refuses to discuss it either publicly or privately. He is neutral in theory only; he is not neutral in practice. His influence is on the side of those who advocate the organ.

In theory, a man can decide to be “neutral” as to the regularity of observance of the Lord’s Supper; in practice he cannot be neutral. A failure to be for a weekly observance of it inevitably puts him in the class of those who are NOT for a weekly observance of it.

“Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man.” Yes, that is what Pilate devoutly wished could be so. But it was impossible for him. And it is impossible for anybody. It is impossible for YOU! When right and wrong are involved, when truth and error are in combat, neutrality is not only treason, it is impossible. Even an attempt at neutrality marks one as disloyal to Christ. There is no middle ground between Christ and Satan.

“It is God’s Will”

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

This is a good sentiment, but it is sometimes tossed about with reckless abandon. Virtually everything that happens to one, good or bad, draws this comment for well-meaning people. A young man is driving down a highway, a drunk crosses the median, hits the young man’s car head-on and kills him. Or, a young person is a customer at a convenience store, a thug comes in to rob the store and opens fire on the clerk and the young bystander, killing them both. At the funerals of these victims, good folks will put their arms around the victims’ family and say, “Just remember, this is all God’s will.” But, is it? How do they know?

When spoken at such a time as described, it is implied that the events described and the resulting deaths of these young people were just what God wanted. He wanted these to die the way they did. He wanted the drunk driver to be drunk and hit the other car. He wanted the thug to riddle those two people in the store with bullets. Is that really how God operates?

There are two prevalent extreme views of God’s dealing with events of His creation. One is *Deism*. It is the “belief in a God who created the world but has since remained indifferent to it.” (Dictionary.com). It views God as having created the world like a string powered toy top and jerking the string to start it to spinning and has left it alone to just spin itself out – without any further interference from Him.

Calvinism teaches the opposite extreme from deism. Rather than the stringed top concept of God, where God leaves things alone to naturally play out, Calvinism is another stringed concept. The strings of this concept is that of puppet strings being pulled in the background by the puppeteer (God); pulling a string for every minute move of the puppet on the stage. It makes every move of mankind to be a result of a direct pull of God on the string. The idea that God so micro-manages the events of this world that nothing is left to chance or

freewill. It is this concept that pronounces every tragedy to be “God’s will.”

The Bible teaches neither of these extremes. God made the world and put man in it with the ability to choose either to do His will or not to do it. He made the world where things can sometimes go wrong, a world perfect for the purpose of maintaining mankind with freewill. The only sense that *everything* might be said to be His will would be that He created a world where such things are possible. It was not God’s will that Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and die, but that they refrain from it and live. It was Satan’s will that they eat it. They did his will and received the consequences of their actions. It is God’s will that every person be saved (1 Tim. 2:4) and that no one perish (2 Pet. 3:9). But, in spite of this, not everyone will be saved, but many will perish.

That God providentially works behind the scenes for our good is clearly taught in the Scriptures. If that was not the case, then we would have little need to petition God for things. But, the key is “behind the scenes” – it cannot be known without clear objective evidence from God. We pray to God and trust Him to work it out in His way. But, to assume that *everything* that happens is God’s will or to assume that “*everything* has a purpose” is presumption on our part. We may see certain things work out for our good and have a high suspicion that it was a direct result of God’s providence – even expressing our suspicion – but without revelation we cannot be certain.

Let’s face it, the Bible says that some things happen by chance or accident (1 Sam. 6:9; 2 Sam. 1:6; Ecc. 9:11; Luke 10:31). Without revelation we may not always know the difference of this and providence.

The only things that we can know for certain to be God’s will are those things revealed. The only revelation that we receive today is God’s written word. We need to be careful that we don’t mistake our will for God’s will. The story is told of a preacher getting an offer from another congregation to work with it at twice the financial support he was receiving. He told those making the offer that he needed to pray about it to see what

God’s will would be for him. He then hung up the phone and yelled to his wife “Honey, start packing, I have some serious praying to do.” No doubt he found that it was “God’s will” that he make the move. It is alright, even good, to pray about a decision that we need to make, but be sure that we do not impose our will disguised as God’s will, rather than praying about it and leaving it to God to work it out behind the scenes. As Mordicai said to Esther, “*who knoweth* whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esth. 4:14). We know now, because we have the revelation that it was by God’s providence, but Mordicai was not privy to what we now know.

In our efforts to magnify God and his awesome goodness and power, we need to be careful not to leave the impression with folks that *every* thing that happens to them is “God’s will.” That may well turn them against God by thinking their tragic loss was caused by God.

It is better to express what we know to be God’s will from a reading of His word, than to express what may or may not be his will working behind the scenes in his control of the world. Moses wrote a long time ago, “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.” (Deut. 29:29). God has chosen to reveal to us the fact of his providential working in the affairs of men in this world, but has not revealed all the many details of his workings. Let’s be content to express only those things revealed – leaving the secret workings with God. Most of us have a good curiosity to look into things we do not know. That is not bad. It moves us to continually search the Scriptures seeking out all things that God has revealed. However, there is a problem when that curiosity causes us try to delve deeply into what is revealed in an effort to find out things no one else has found – not found because they have not been revealed. If we were to find them they would no doubt be marvelous and awesome, but God, in his wisdom, has chosen to keep them to himself. We need to leave them there and concentrate on “those things which are revealed.” ■