

• *Daniel and his friends denounced as enemies of the state for not conforming to the state-religion*

Christian state-religion

• *Is almost as bad as pagan state-religion*

• *The sixteenth-century reformers were Christianized persecutors in their views about church-and-state*

• *When you have state-religion, you have persecution, even if the 'state-religion' claims to be Christian*

The King's response

• *Anger, interrogation and threats*

• *The king's entire religion and-state mentality is part of his spiritual blindness*

• *Commands a public execution by burning*

There was no 'separation of church and state' in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon, and if you have a country in which there is a non-tolerating, state-upheld ideology you will inevitably persecute the dissenter. In Daniel 3 certain court astrologers see that Daniel and his friends are not conforming to the state-religion. So they denounce them as enemies of the state^{□1}. 'They pay no heed to you, O king. They do not serve your gods...' ^{□2}. It does not occur to them that it might be possible to be loyal to Nebuchadnezzar without serving his god. 'One nation, one religion' is their slogan. You can't be a good staff-member of the Babylonian court if you don't have the same religion as the king. So they think.

One has to say that **Christian** state-religion is almost as bad as pagan state-religion, and will also be a persecuting power. The Latin phrase used in the sixteenth century *cuius regio, cuius religio* ('Whose is the country – his is the religion') was a slogan of Bible-believing reformers at that time. But it is not much different from the ideas of Daniel's enemies! So it comes as no surprise to find that 'state-church' Christians persecute other people, even if they are Christian brothers and sisters! The sixteenth-century reformers were Christianized persecutors in their views about church-and-state. It comes as no surprise to find that they were obliged to be persecutors. The state 'bears not the sword in vain' and is an agent of God's wrath^{□1}. If the church becomes a state-department the 'state-church' will 'not bear the sword in vain' – and will persecute. Of 'all peoples over whom our rule extends ..., we give orders that all these are to adopt the name "Catholic Christians"' – said the Roman emperor Theodosius. He was being a Christianized Nebuchadnezzar! He went on, 'They must first come under the wrath of God and then also under ours', and he proceeded to persecute Christians who were not 'Catholics'. Of course! It is all perfectly logical. When you have state-religion, you have persecution, even if the 'state-religion' claims to be Christian. Centuries ago, in the state churches of Europe, non-conforming Christians were persecuted for not being in the state-church. 'Christian' armies were sent to subdue them!

Nebuchadnezzar was angry^{□1}! He thinks his entire rule is threatened if there are any religious dissenters in the land. He says to himself, 'How can you be loyal to the king if you are not loyal to the king's religion?' The men are interrogated^{□2} and threatened with the death penalty if they will not conform^{□3}. The three Hebrews are respectful but firmly insist on worshipping only the God of Israel ^{□4}. They are not demanding that Nebuchadnezzar worship God; they simply want freedom to do so themselves. The king's entire religion and-state mentality is part of his spiritual blindness. There is no point in even discussing the matter. They do not know what God will do, but they know what they must do^{□5}.

Nebuchadnezzar was even more furious^{□1}! The expression on his face reveals his fury^{□2}. He savagely commands a furnace to be made as fiery as possible ('seven times' is not scientifically literal) ^{□3}.

□1 3:8-12
□2 3:12

□1 Romans 13:4

□1 3:13

□2 3:14

□3 3:15

□4 3:16-18

□5 3:18

□1 3:19

□2 3:19a

□3 3:19b

As soon as possible the three men are to be ruthlessly executed. They must be bound^{¶4}, left clothed^{¶5} and executed as publicly and as speedily as can be done. Nebuchadnezzar is determined to discourage any dissenters in his state. A difference of religious conviction is treason of the worst kind – thinks Nebuchadnezzar. The flames leap through the top of the furnace and some of his soldiers are killed^{¶6}, and the three Hebrews fall into the flaming fire^{¶7}.

¶4 3:20

¶5 3:21

¶6 3:22

¶7 3:23

• *God's Protection comes to faithful people*

• *Not always*

• *But at times dramatically*

• *Supernatural protection for Daniel and his friends*

• *Nebuchadnezzar's religious and political opinions have been forcibly changed in a few seconds!*

• *Four significant results follow their willingness to endure persecution and to die for their faith*

• *We render to God the things that are God's – come what may!*

God's protection comes to faithful people. It does not always happen this way. Oftentimes Christians have died for their faith. Sometimes they have died at the hands of other Christians (one remembers how the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli drowned Christians who believed in believers' baptism) – all because of state religion. But God can protect in a dramatic way at times. Nebuchadnezzar is watching the execution. He leaps to his feet in amazement^{¶1}. The prisoners have been unbound! They are walking around unharmed in the midst of the fire. There is a fourth person with them – someone like a son of the gods – a supernatural person^{¶2}, an angel^{¶3} representing God.

¶1 3:24

¶2 3:25

¶3 3:28

Nebuchadnezzar's religious and political opinions have been forcibly changed in a few seconds! He calls for the Hebrews to come from the fire^{¶1}. All his state officials are witnesses to this defiance of state-religion, and they are eyewitnesses of an amazing miracle^{¶2}.

¶1 3:26

¶2 3:27

The incident leads to four results.

(i) Nebuchadnezzar is once again compelled to acknowledge the reality of the God of Israel^{¶1}.

¶1 3:28

(ii) Nebuchadnezzar is compelled to acknowledge that the great loyalty of the three Hebrews to the God of Israel has been rewarded.

(iii) By state-decree the worship of the God of Israel becomes one of the accepted religions in Babylon. Willingness to endure persecution and to die for one's faith, if need be, is the way to win freedom to worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a step towards tolerance, a step towards the separation of church and state. Although few dissenters are tolerated in Babylon, at least one is added to the tolerated list – the faith of Israel.

¶2 3:30

(iv) The three Hebrews who were willing to lose their lives get promotion in the service of the Babylonian empire^{¶2}!

This is Daniel's theme. How do we survive in a pagan world? We render to God the things that are God's – come what may!

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Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His expository commentaries are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.

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