

Religious Freedom

Small Group Studies in Three Modules



Module 3: 'Beyond An Eye For An Eye' (Matt 5:38-42)

Key Question: How do we, as local baptist christians meeting in community, live out our principles in relation to religious freedom in our local community?

This module seeks to apply what has been considered in Modules 1 & 2 and explore constructive ways forward in our engagement with society.

Setting a Context (20 mins) All together, briefly recall your group discussions in relation to the material in the previous two modules on the matter of religious freedom.

For Conversation (10 minutes):

- Q. What are we feeling?
- Q. What is our experience?
- Q. What is our heritage?

Introduction To Theological Reflection (5 minutes - still all together)

What do we mean by freedom?

- In the secular world many will understand it as a freedom from constraint, or control.
- For Israel, their identity was in their liberation by Yahweh from slavery in Egypt.
- For Christians, we often think of it as freedom from condemnation, and from the power of sin and death. How frequently do we think of our freedom as a freedom for..., a freedom for others, and for service? (Gal 5:13)

Jesus is supremely the free person, even as he stands before Pilate arrested and condemned. (John 18:36)

Paul and Silas experience freedom even as they are imprisoned in Philippi. (Acts 16:25)

In Matt 5:38-42 Jesus makes it clear that the original intent of "an eye for an eye" was not to encourage revenge but to prevent revenge from escalating into increasing circles of violent retaliation.

But Jesus goes much further in demonstrating three non-violent means of resisting an oppressor, whilst maintaining the human dignity of both parties.

Theological Reflection (30 minutes - all together to begin with, then in groups of 3-4)

Sermon on the Mount; 'Love for enemies' Matt 5:44 "I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."

One member of the group should read aloud the following story:

Dirk Willems is one of the most celebrated Anabaptist martyrs. He was born in Asperen, Gelderland, Netherlands, and was baptised as a young man, thus rejecting the infant baptism practiced at that time by both Catholics and established Protestants in the Netherlands.

This action, plus his continued devotion to his new faith and the baptism of several other people in his home, led to his condemnation by the Roman Catholic Church in the Netherlands and subsequent arrest.

Willems was held in a residential palace turned into a prison, from which he escaped using a rope made out of knotted rags. Using this, he was able to climb out of the prison onto the frozen moat. Willems crossed the ice, at which point a guard noticed his escape and gave chase, but during his pursuit the guard fell through the ice. Willems turned back to save the life of his pursuer, thus being recaptured and held until he was burned at the stake near his hometown on 16 May 1569.

Break into groups of 3-4

Together, discuss your reaction to this story. The following questions may be helpful:

- Q How do you think you might have responded in Dirk's situation?
- Q. Mission: Would you be willing to sacrifice your life in order that others might come to faith, as many missionaries have done?
- Q. Would you be willing to make the same sacrifice to defend someone's freedom to not have faith, or to practice a different faith?

Karen O'Dell Bullock, Chair of the BWA Religious Liberty Commission says: "While millions of individuals across the globe suffer daily repression and persecution due to sanctions against religious liberty, some Baptists seem to be content to abandon the role of advocating for religious liberty. How Baptists and Baptist-like traditions choose to voice responses to church-state issues in the future may have grave consequences for their witness in society. This championing of Religious Freedom has been one of the enduring historic and characteristic beacons of Baptist life." (p8) www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org/Haw-Bullock.pdf

Drawing Things Together (30 minutes - all together again)

In the light of these three modules you might want to reconsider the following cases as a way to see what impact the course has had, if any, on your outlook.

"Caroline Petrie, a committed Christian, has been accused by her employers of failing to demonstrate a "personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity". She faces disciplinary action and could lose her job over the incident.

Mrs Petrie, a married mother of two, says she has been left shocked and upset by the action taken against her. She insists she has never forced her own religious beliefs on anyone but politely inquired if the elderly patient wanted her to pray for her – either in the woman's presence or after the nurse had left the patient's home." www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/4409168/Nurse-suspended-for-offering-to-pray-for-patients-recovery.html

"A Christian doctor who was fired by a hospital after quoting from the Bible and emailing a prayer to colleagues has lost his unfair dismissal claim.

David Drew, 64, told an employment tribunal that Walsall Manor Hospital made him feel like a 'religious maniac' for sending the message. The father-of-four insisted he emailed the prayer, by 16th century Jesuit founder St Ignatius Loyola, to motivate his department. He prefaced it by saying: 'I find this a personal inspiration in my frail imperfect efforts to serve my patients, their families and our department.'" www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2138716/Doctor-fired-quoting-bible-emailing-prayer-colleagues-loses-job-battle.html#ixzz2GLSMbaCZ

And in relation to your own local context:

- Q. How does this all work out in practice for me?
- Q. How does this all work out in practice for our congregation?
- Q. How does this all work out in practice for our relationship to our local community?

