

Church of God, The Eternal

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Dear Brethren,

Greetings from Mindanao, Philippines.

I am very happy to have this privilege of reaching you through this letter. I pray that you are all spiritually and physically well. For us here, though, there are some isolated encounters in some parts of Mindanao between the government and Muslim separatists, we are all physically safe, but fighting for our spiritual lives.

The problem of our government, with our very few Muslim countrymen, has existed for more than a century. Since 1851 when the Spaniards invaded, and occupied our country, Muslims that were here in Mindanao never succumbed to or bowed down to any Christian government. They want independence and are still fighting to have an independent Muslim community and self-rule. They do not like the thought of the possibility that their beliefs will be adulterated with any Christian teachings. Their *conviction* to their belief is beyond reproach. They are willing to lay down their lives for it.

What about our religious beliefs? Are they convictions or simply preferences? In the past many of us were shocked as we saw cherished beliefs watered down and finally flushed away. Many brethren have been taken in by wrong teachings and have totally cast aside what they once believed, and when changes in doctrines came out that suited them better (such as no longer needing to tithe or observe the Sabbath), then they preferred to accept the new ways.

A belief is merely a person's preference when certain circumstances will motivate him to change it, it does not matter how strongly or intensely a belief is held if there is no real conviction behind it—it remains a preference. The distinguishing mark of preference is that it can be changed.

There are so many factors that can cause a person to change his preferences. There is peer pressure, family member influence, self-interest, the threat of litigation, or imprisonment, or even the thought of death. If any of these can stop a person from

totally obeying God, then he does not have a conviction. What he initially believed was what he preferred, but when circumstances changed and he was threatened in any way, he was willing to change, too.

Let us examine the Parable of the Sower and the Seed in Matthew, chapter thirteen. He who received the seeds in the stony places, "the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it" (v. 20). The truth is exciting at first to this kind of person, and he may even embrace it enthusiastically and perhaps begin to walk in the new path he has discovered. But it becomes clear that it is just a preference—not a conviction—when future circumstances interfere with the new found belief. "Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended. He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful" (vv. 21–22). Such individuals have not been convicted—they have merely exchanged their "beliefs" for a whole new set of preferences. And if life were to become too difficult to continue on the new path, it would be changed again—anything to avoid difficulties. Real conviction—belief that persists regardless of circumstances—is sadly lacking.

A good Biblical example of conviction is found in Daniel, chapter three, where we read the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. King Nebuchadnezzar had built a great image and commanded everyone in Babylon to bow down to it. When the Chaldeans, who hated the Jews, discovered that the three friends refused to obey the king, they were quick to respond. "There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (v.12). The king commanded the three men to be brought before him and laid it on the line. If you don't worship the image, gentlemen, then you will suffer a fiery death! What was their answer? "Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (vv.16–18).

All three men were looking death squarely in the face. If their devotion to the true God had merely been a preference, they probably would have recanted and reasoned their way out of the situation. Their decision wasn't an on-the-spot reaction. They had the courage of their own convictions. They were not about to defile

themselves. Remember, there were thousands of other Jews in Babylon at this time. But the three men didn't care what others did or what others thought. They were willing to take a stand by themselves.

Another point to consider: They were given a second chance to save their lives if they would change their minds and bow down to the image. But they didn't take it. Their beliefs were non-negotiable. If they were willing even to discuss the possibility of compromising their beliefs, their worship would have been preference only and not conviction.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were confident of God's deliverance, but they said they wouldn't change their minds even if He chose not to deliver them.

Over the centuries, God's people have faced trials, tests, persecutions and heresy. Regrettably, many of them compromised their beliefs. They gave up for a variety of reasons what they once proved to be true. Some couldn't handle the ostracism they faced. Others gave in to pressure from family or friends and embraced false teachings to "keep the peace." Still others were persuaded that false teachings were true, being convinced by clever arguments or false intellectual reasoning.

All had one thing in common. They proved that their previous beliefs were merely preferences—not convictions. Otherwise they would have persevered in them. But those who are convicted of the truth do not compromise their beliefs for any reason. They proved—and then they lived—the truth! No amount of pressure from any source will convince them to believe "another concept of gospel."

When trials come, whether from religious heresy or from vain secular philosophy, convicted Christians stand firm in their beliefs. Their foundations are not moved or shattered because such believers build on the solid truths of God's Word. They will not compromise God's law.

We all need to examine ourselves in the light of what has happened to the Church of God in recent years. We all need to make sure we are convicted Christians and have not simply preferred this church over another. The Church of God will continue to face persecution and opposition from teachings not only outside the body, but even among the membership, and worst of all, even within the ministry—all intended to wear down our faith, and undermine the Truth. As individuals, this will test our conviction. Our reactions will determine whether our beliefs are just preferences or whether we truly are convicted Christians.

If only we could have conviction like that of the Muslims here in Mindanao—regarding religious belief. And like that of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. With regards to our belief to the living God and His Truth, with such conviction, brethren, no amount of trials or persecutions can or will separate us from the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mario Y. Roque', written in a cursive style.

Mario Y. Roque