

Dealing Pastorally With The Conscience

[Professor Gurgel, Middler Dogmatics, May 12, 2000]

By Jason Schmidt

Conscience plays a role every day in the life of every person. Some consciences have been dulled or ignored. Some have been abused and twisted. The further sinful people delve into the understanding of the conscience, the further they stray from Scriptural truths connected with the conscience. Therefore it is practical and beneficial to study the conscience from a Biblical perspective. In particular this study focuses on the definition of the conscience, the function of the conscience, troubled and doubting consciences, and human attempts to calm the troubling conscience.

The study of the conscience necessitates a working definition of “conscience.” The conscience is a person’s consciousness of his relationship with God. God has revealed the basis for this consciousness in man’s heart in connection with man’s natural knowledge of God as Meyer states: “Men’s knowledge of what is morally good or bad he (Paul) traces to a law ‘written on their hearts.’ This testimony concerning God as the author of the inscribed law is corroborated by the testimony of conscience.”¹ Natural man has a basic sense of right and wrong implanted in his mind. The Apostle Paul also speaks this way in Romans 2:14-15

¹⁴ (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, ¹⁵ since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) 2

However, the conscience serves as more than a simple guide to making morally correct choices based on emotional responses. Rather “it . . . keeps him (man) posted on the will of God. Conscience is a special function of the soul reacting continuously to the inward law and as such is a sense –organ for the precepts of this law.”³ At the very heart of the conscience lies the standards set by God. The conscience responds on the basis of the natural law of God inside of each individual.

Based on the standards set by God, the conscience serves two main purposes. It “a) reveals and demands (Rom. 2:15a) . . . and b) it judges and condemns (Rom. 2:15b).”⁴ In natural man the conscience makes sure that the people whom it serves know that someone has set a standard for them.

When natural man fails to live up to the demands of his conscience, the conscience in turn judges him and condemns him. Take the example of a child who steals candy from a convenience store. No one must tell the child that his actions were wrong. The conscience functions by a) revealing and demanding “that wasn’t right to take that—you shouldn’t do that”, and b) it judges and condemns “your action was wrong—you are guilty of stealing.” The conscience produces the opposite reaction when a person acts in accordance with preset standards. If this same child decides to put the candy back before he leaves the store, his

¹ Meyer, *The Revelation of God*. OGH vol. I. pp. 469-470.

² *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984. All Scripture is quoted from the NIV.

³ Peters, *The Natural Knowledge of God in the Light of Law and the Gospel*, OGH vol. II. Pp. 232-233.

⁴ Pieper, *The Doctrine of Man*, Christian Dogmatics vol. I. pp. 531-532.

conscience will speak positively a) “that was right of you to put the candy back—you should do what you did”, and b) “your action was right—you are not guilty.”

In addition, the conscience also serves believers and unbelievers differently. “In the unbelievers the conscience can only feel relatively good in proportion to his keeping of the law. The believer’s conscience, however, can be confident of its righteousness and thus its relationship to God through the gospel.”⁵ In the case between believers and unbelievers, the main difference lies in the promises and the comforts of the gospel.

The unbeliever strives only to maintain a clear conscience to avoid the feeling of a guilty conscience. As long as his conscience judges him “not guilty” he is content. If his conscience judges him “guilty,” he must perform additional righteous acts to appease his conscience. On the other hand believers cling to the promise of the gospel message. When the believer’s conscience judges him “not guilty” he rejoices that the Holy Spirit has enabled him to live a life for his Savior. When the believer’s conscience judges him “guilty” he runs to his Savior’s cross as Pieper writes: “Consciences stricken by the Law of God can find grace only when they take their stand on the unshakable foundation on which the whole Christian Church is built, on the Word of the Apostles and Prophets (Eph. 2:20), on Christ’s own Word (John 8:31).”⁶ For the believer, then, the conscience serves a three-fold purpose:

1) to bring us to the knowledge of our sins . . . 2) the most important function is to assure us on the basis of the gospel that Jesus Christ has cleansed us from all unrighteousness . . . and 3) to further our Christian life, so that we may live as Christians out of love to him who first loved us.⁷

The gospel is the main focal point in dealing with troubled or weak consciences. As is the case above, the gospel offers no comfort to the unbeliever who doesn’t cling to its promises. The believer however will find great comfort in the gospel when he has a troubled or doubting conscience.

Most if not all people have experienced a troubled conscience. King David recorded his thoughts and feelings while he was dealing with a troubled conscience after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. He writes in Ps. 51:3: “For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.” In Ps. 32: 3-4, David also describes the pains of a troubled conscience: “³ When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. ⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” Luther described the torment of a troubled conscience in this manner: “But a guilty conscience lights the flames of hell and stirs up feelings of horrible anguish in the heart.”⁸

A pastor may counsel a troubled conscience in different ways. A beginning to the end of a troubled conscience is confession of sin. David describes this release of guilt in Ps 32:5: “Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD’—and you forgave the guilt of my sin.” Luther also supported the remedy of confession: “Great is the benefit derived from the use of the keys and private absolution. By it the conscience can be quieted.”⁹ Encouraging a person with a troubled

⁵ Mueller, *The Bible and Bioethics*, OGH vol. II. pp. 99-100.

⁶ Pieper, *Nature and Character of Theology*, Christian Dogmatics vol. I. p. 73.

⁷ Raabe, *The Conscience*, OGH vol. II. p. 259.

⁸ Qtd in Plass, *What Luther Says*. P. 626.

⁹ Ibid, p. 9.

conscience to confess his sin either privately to the pastor or in a worship service is the pastor's first step in counseling a troubled conscience.

Although confession of sins is a first step in comforting a troubling conscience, it is of no value unless the pastor adds the gospel message of forgiveness through Jesus' blood. John assures us of the forgiveness we find in Christ: "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (I John 1:7). Because only Jesus' blood removes sin, it is the only effective means of removing the terror from a troubled conscience. Therefore the gospel will dominate a counseling session with a troubled conscience. The pastor will lead a person with a troubled conscience to realize that his sin has been taken off his shoulders and placed on his Savior. Only then will the burden of guilt be removed and the comfort of forgiveness will take its place.

A doubting conscience requires a definition before an approach to correcting it can be offered. A doubting conscience, in certain cases, isn't sure what to do based on what God has spoken in his Word. Such doubt "comes from not being sure that we know or understand all that God has spoken on the issue or being uncertain that we are properly applying what has been said."¹⁰ The preceding quote was made with respect to ethical questions not directly addressed in Scripture. These cases present a very tender conscience in need of pastoral care and guidance.

The Apostle Paul addresses the matter of dealing with weak consciences in his letters to the Corinthians and to the Romans. In I Corinthians Paul addresses the subject of eating food sacrificed to idols. In this case both those who chose to eat the meat and those who chose not to eat the meat were correct. Doubting consciences arose when some felt that it was going against their consciences to eat such meat. They weren't properly trained to understand that it was permissible to eat of the meat.

As he deals with this situation Paul models sound counseling advice for pastors to follow. Paul demonstrates the need to avoid causing one who has a weak or doubting conscience to sin by eating against a conscience:

"Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." (I Cor. 8:9-12).

Had the weak brother eaten, he would be sinning against his conscience. In this case we see Paul masterfully addressing the issue while not forcing the one with a doubting conscience to eat.

Paul tells us in Romans when addressing a similar situation dealing with eating what some considered to be unclean: "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin" (14:23). This establishes a principle for all pastors who are counseling a doubting conscience. A counseling pastor will never tell a person with a doubting conscience to disregard his conscience. God has established through Paul that a person sins when he goes against his conscience. Always being careful not to offend the doubting conscience, a pastor must educate such a person so that he might make a right decision based on what Scripture says on the matter. The pastor will wait until the education process is completed before encouraging the doubting conscience to make a decision.

¹⁰ Mueller, *The Bible and Bioethics*, OGH vol. II. p. 101.

The solutions for both cases, dealing with either a troubled or a weak conscience, are found in Scripture--and in particular in the gospel. However, there are other pastoral counseling approaches that suggest different sources of counseling insight. In his book, *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling—Resources For the Ministry of Healing and Growth*, Howard Clinebell suggests:

As representative Christian persons we (counseling pastors) can draw on and share the resources of a rich spiritual tradition—wisdom about life and death—time-tested by many centuries of human struggle . . . God often can use us with all our limitations to carry the spiritual bread of our heritage to feed the deep spiritual hungers of human hearts . . . It's important in our counseling to pray silently for openness to the presence of the Holy Spirit, the 'Great Counselor,' working in and through our relationships. The Spirit brings healing *through* our efforts, sometimes more in spite of than because of what we do. The work of an effective pastoral counselor 'springs from, and is sustained by, a deep and continuous interior transaction with God'."¹¹

Clinebell advocates direct channeling of assistance and insight from the Holy Spirit. He doesn't mention going back to Scripture as a source of absolute authority and comfort. Instead this type of approach emphasizes human wisdom assisted by the Holy Spirit. By doing so, he places spirituality and humanistic abilities to understand people over the core truths of Scripture.

This gospel-lacking approach manifests itself in the manner in which Clinebell suggests helping those with confused consciences. He attributes the development of many of these confused consciences to the changing value systems of our day. However he fails to draw on the changeless truths of Scripture as a source and remedy. He writes:

The frantic (and futile) efforts of authoritarian religious groups to recover the old ethical certainties can be understood as a defensive reaction formation in response to the anxieties and uncertainties of our period of mind-boggling ethical transitions . . . Value clarification and revision have an important part in the church's educational and growth ministry as well as in individual and family counseling.¹²

Following his approach our pastors would not only twist the truths of Scripture, but they would also deny the truths of Scripture. Reaching out to individuals in this manner not only robs them of the comfort of the gospel, but it also leads to still more uncertainty in spiritual matters.

The self-help movement is quickly rising as another approach to addressing the problem of the troubled conscience. Lacking any Scriptural insights by design, this approach bases its foundation on the slogan, "No one is to blame." L.S. Barksdale, Founder of the Barksdale Foundation (for the furtherance of human understanding), entitled his essay of the month "No One is To Blame." He addresses the issue of the troubled conscience by removing every form of responsibility and accountability. His essay includes the following points:

1. My Awareness is the degree of clarity with which I perceive, analyze, evaluate and understand, both consciously and non-consciously, everything that affects my life.
3. My inborn need is to "feel good" mentally, physically and emotionally. Thus, in order to "feel good" I inevitably do what I most want to do--that is, what I would rather do than not do.
4. It is my prevailing Awareness--that is, how clearly I perceive, analyze, evaluate and understand my total life experience and intuitional (quoted as written)

¹¹ Clinebell, *Pastoral Care and Counseling*. P. 133.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 150.

insights--that informs me what I would rather do than not do. 5. Thus, it is my Awareness that determines my every decision and action. Consequently, any fault in my behavior or endeavors lies not in me, but in my prevailing Awareness.¹³

Although Barksdale's approach may sound absurd in a theologian's ear, his approach to a clean conscience appeals to many people. An awareness of this and other self-help approaches prepares a pastor to deal with potential problems should a member become involved with self-help therapy. Education and sound teaching on the pastor's part will prepare those with troubled or doubting consciences for situations in which they face self-help solutions to their problems.

In response to the self-help approach and in conclusion, it has been shown that only the gospel message of Jesus Christ can cure a troubled or doubting conscience. As Pieper states: "only faith in the Vicarious Satisfaction can man's consciousness of guilt be removed."¹⁴ And he also writes: "Since all our daily sins automatically register in our conscience as guilt, our spiritual life is preserved only in this way that the handwriting of our guilt is daily and continuously blotted out by faith in the reconciliation which Christ has accomplished." May the counseling pastor never forget this truth as he leads his troubled and doubting sheep to the cross for true counseling.

Bibliography

Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics, vol. I&II. Concordia Publishing House. Saint Louis: 1951.

Lange, Lyle. ed. Our Great Heritage, vol. I&II. Northwestern Publishing House. Milwaukee: 1991.

Plass, Ewald. What Luther Says. Concordia Publishing House. Saint Louis:1959.

Barksdale, L.S. *No One Is To Blame*. www.barksdale.org/Essays

Clinebell, Howard. Pastoral Care and Counseling. Abingdon Press. Nashville: 1984.

¹³ Barksdale. Web site location: <http://www.barksdale.org/Essays>

¹⁴ Pieper, *The Doctrine of Christ*. Christian Dogmatics vol. II. p. 369.