
A Candle in the Wind

Conscience in natural man

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Matthew Henry speaks of conscience somewhere as, “the candle of the Lord which was not quite put out”. Though it is not God’s voice as such, the conscience, including the moral record in the heart and a man’s mind or opinion, is a good gift from God. However, like every other good gift from God, the conscience has been affected by the Fall of man. George Washington spoke of the conscience as “that little spark of celestial fire” and the Puritan George Swinnock called it a “deputy deity in the little world man”. Such expressions are acceptable as long as we remember that conscience is only a spark and the deputy is a fallible deputy at best.

Fallen

It has been denied by some but it is a fact that man had a conscience, that is a moral faculty, even before the Fall. The way Eve responded to the serpent by stating God’s command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil shows this. When Adam and Eve fell man fell. When man fell his conscience fell too.

The Dutch theologian GC Berkouwer, in his work on the doctrine of man, rightly insists that any inclination to good characteristic of the conscience is:

dispelled by the reality of man’s inclination to evil... We can never look to conscience as something which enables man to retain a relative goodness in a special organ standing outside the effects of corruption.¹

Similarly the great Jonathan Edwards though he spoke of the natural conscience as being “as it were, in God’s stead, as an internal Judge” yet he also argues very strongly in many places for the Biblical doctrines of original sin and total depravity. In a sermon on Hosea 5:15 he says,

Natural conscience remains, but sin, in a great degree, stupefies it, and hinders it in its work.²

This is one reason why in the 19th century Scots holiness teacher Oswald Chambers, German Lutheran Franz Delitzsch, English doctor Alfred Schofield and others who wrote on the conscience all insisted that it is wrong to speak of conscience as the voice of God. Similarly, AH Strong, in his *Systematic Theology*, quotes DW Faunce approvingly,

Conscience is not God – it is only part of one’s self. To build up a religion about one’s conscience as if it were God is only a refined selfishness.³

Chambers says “If conscience were the ‘voice of God’ it would be the most contradictory voice ever heard.” To demonstrate this he instances the conscience of a Hindu mother and that of a Christian mother.⁴ Schofield asserts that conscience is no

more God's voice than the piano is Paderewski's voice. It will respond to a little girl's touch as much as to the master's.⁵

Conscience is not the single virtue untainted by the Fall. Every faculty in every man is affected by the sin of our father Adam. We are separated from God. His image in man has been defaced, shattered. Just like all God's other gifts conscience is misused, abused and defective. This is true also of the record of God's requirements in our hearts (the moral record) and our capacity to think correctly (the mind).

The moral record

The mediaeval Roman Catholic scholar Aquinas spoke not of the moral record but of *sunteresis* or *synderesis*. The word was apparently first used by the Greek church father Origen to denote man's nature or the remnant of the image of God after the Fall. Aquinas held that this faculty, which supplied moral principles, was itself infallible. Later this idea was upheld by certain mystics but denied by the Jesuits who were happy to supply its place with their own rules. Although the term *synderesis* was used by the Puritans there was no suggestion that it was anything less than fallible.

When Paul says in Romans 2:15 that the Gentiles have the requirements of God's Law written on their hearts he cannot be suggesting that each individual is born with an innate and thorough knowledge of God's Law. If that were so why would there have been any need for the revelation at Sinai? Paul is not holding up the very limited conformity of the Gentiles as a moral example. The point he is driving at, in fact, is that "there is none righteous, no not one" (Romans 3:10). As Professor John Murray points out in his commentary on Romans, Paul specifically states that it is the requirements of the Law that are written in men's hearts.⁶ In other words, everyone has some idea of right and wrong, but not a clear idea of God's holy law.

Even if fallen man's conscience functioned perfectly it would not be bearing witness to a full and accurate record of God's commands. Thus in John Bunyan's classic, but lesser known allegory, *The Holy War*, we read that Mr Mind had only, "some old and rent and torn parchments of the law of good Shaddai in his house".⁷ We should not be surprised, therefore, to find men not only excusing and defending themselves for things such as murder, idolatry and immorality contrary to God's Law; but also condemning themselves for eating meat or travelling in a car or missing mass, things not forbidden in the Law.

Conscience itself is a witness not a lawmaker. It can only act on the evidence available and the known law. It is like a skylight not a light bulb, a *means* of knowledge not a *source*. It refers us back to our own moral standard and urges us, with varying strength, to comply. If our moral record is faulty, proper obedience to God will be impossible.

There are a number of contenders for the role of chief informant to the moral record. Tradition and trends vie with the truth. This is the reason sometimes for inward confusion and conflict. In his Bishop Sanderson Lectures, Christopher Wordsworth warns against following the example of men however learned or pious they may be. We must teach our consciences not to consider highest the opinions of others or even our own opinions as such but the Word of God.

Conscience proper

The conscience itself is also imperfect, of course. It is not useless, but it is unreliable. It can be variable, deceived, corrupted, intermittent or simply unable to cope with complex issues. Bunyan has Mr Conscience as the town recorder. After the fall of the town of Mansoul he would have terrible fits at times when he would “make the whole town of Mansoul shake with his voice” and yet at other times he would say nothing at all.⁸ We can all identify with that state of affairs.

Speaking of this element in conscience Oswald Chambers uses the illustration of what Ruskin called “innocence of sight”. Artists are usually trained to paint what they see, not what they believe is there. The fallen conscience is like an untrained artist, it makes the mistake of not recording exactly what it sees. There is always a distortion.

The mind

Further, when conscience’s faulty message is assessed in a man’s thoughts he often suppresses it or finds other ways of ignoring it. In *Holy War* terms Mansoul becomes convinced that Mr Conscience is mad and not worth listening to. We see “the whole town in a rage and fury against the old gentleman”. “Yea” says Bunyan “the rascal crew at some times would be for destroying him”.⁹ John 3:19-21 reminds us of the usual reaction of the fallen conscience.

God’s spy

Everyone has a moral awareness. Anthropologists have failed to discover a totally amoral society. All realise there is right and there is wrong.

The beginning of Paul’s argument in his letter to the Romans makes clear that even unbelievers know there is a God, a God who will judge them concerning right and wrong. Therefore, even though the information available to the conscience is incomplete “the echo of the voice of God” does reach them. Jacques Ellul notes that, “The protests that indignity and injustice evoke from unbelievers as well as Christians indicate that the voice of conscience has not been utterly silenced and obliterated.”¹⁰

It is important for believers to remember this. God has a “spy” in the hearts of unbelievers, what Thomas Brooks called “a preacher in the bosom”. The conscience, however imperfectly, gives a man at least some idea of what God thinks of him and of his actions. Of course, the better informed a man’s conscience the better the preaching; the more effective the espionage. This is why the unbeliever so often studiously avoids going to church or reading the Bible or having contact with Christians. He wants to “turn down the volume” or “do a deal” with his conscience. He will do almost anything to pacify it.

We can almost always reckon on a man having a conscience that is active in some area. It is important for Christians to bear this in mind when witnessing to unbelievers. Where a man’s conscience is relatively healthy we have an ally on the inside. As we bear witness to the truth from without, so does conscience within. Like Paul, we should aim to set forth the truth plainly, commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God (see 2 Corinthians 4:2). We seek to enlighten the conscience of the unbeliever with the lamp of God’s Word.

Keep listening

Although the conscience of the unbeliever is imperfect and fallible he ought to be encouraged to listen to it. Like a Supreme Court judgement or one from the House of Lords (or should we say Strasbourg?) the conscience speaks categorically and absolutely. There is no room for further appeal.¹¹ In each case conscience must be followed.

At one point in his *Christian Directory* Richard Baxter opposes this view.¹² He calls it a dangerous error to think that the conscience must always be followed. What about when the conscience is misinformed? One recognises his point but once you begin to ignore or disobey your conscience, confusion and trouble are bound to follow. Surely Luther's famous dictum is correct, "To act against conscience is neither right nor safe". Matthew Henry agrees, "We must never be over-awed either by majesty or multitude to do a sinful thing and go against our consciences." It is surely never right for a man to do what he believes to be wrong.

"Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" (Romans 14:22).

There is a dilemma here of course. RC Sproul has dubbed it the "double jeopardy dilemma".¹³ If we follow conscience into sin we are guilty. Yet to act against conscience is also a sin. This is not to support the Roman Catholic idea of what is called *invincible ignorance*, rather it is to stress that it is imperative that all men seek to conform their moral record to the revealed will of God.

When we mention Luther's dictum quoted above we must remember that he began by saying "My conscience is captive to the Word of God". It is not enough to set your watch by the kitchen clock, you must also be sure that the clock is conforming to the astronomical standards of time.

Bishop Charles Gore, the first Bishop of Birmingham, got it right when he said "Man's first duty is to enlighten his conscience not to follow it". Do not waste time and cause damage by endeavouring to get anyone to act against their conscience. Instead concentrate on encouraging them to keep their moral record informed by the Word of God. Listening to your conscience is not a problem. It is a good thing. It is in the inadequacies of the moral record that the problem lies.

The content

We can understand, then, why John Knox could say to Mary, Queen of Scots, that her conscience was useless – because it was not properly informed! What matters so much is the content of the moral standard to which conscience bears witness. Jiminy Cricket's advice in song "always follow your conscience" is fine as far as it goes, but what good is it if my moral record is ill-informed?

Oswald Chambers points out in his book on Biblical psychology that to speak of educating the conscience is half truth, half error. As AH Strong puts it, conscience itself can only be educated "in the sense of acquiring greater facility and quickness in making decisions".¹⁴

Chambers uses the illustration of the effects of coloured light. We need the pure white light of Jesus Christ shining in our hearts if we are ever to see things as they really are. The education we need is for God's requirements to be laid on our hearts.

Similarly in his book on *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who

died at the hands of the Gestapo, speaks of people in his day who said, “Adolf Hitler is my conscience”. By that they meant that the Führer was their moral standard. The ramifications of such a hopeless statement are now obvious to all. Rather, as Bonhoeffer rightly says, people should say, “Jesus Christ is my conscience”.

The high court of conscience is not the highest court, it can only look to a higher one, the law of God itself. Paul makes this clear in 1 Cor. 4:4,

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

(The apostle is a notorious example, before his conversion, of an excusing conscience where his actions were anything but pleasing to God. Cf. Acts 23:1, 26:9; Philippians 3:4-6; 2 Timothy 1:3; John 16:2). As Herman Ridderbos and many of the older Reformed commentators point out, the reference here is not so much to the inadequacy of conscience but to the importance of the coming judgment.¹⁵ What matters is not what our peers think or what other men think. Not even what we think ourselves. What matters is God’s verdict. However, the verse also implies the imperfect nature of the conscience and this ought to be remembered. The judgment of conscience does not mean the end of all dispute – something to which those who break the law in just causes ought to give careful thought.

The healthy conscience is often consistent, although never infallible. A healthy conscience is not easily fooled. It is stubborn. It is not swayed by popular opinion or fear of danger. Obstinate, persistent and inflexible your conscience is a good friend to have when it is right, but it is a real handicap otherwise. A misinformed conscience can lead you into big trouble and also cause harm to others.

It is something like a magnetic compass. While the needle points to magnetic north all is well. But if at some stage you enter a strong magnetic field which is not that of the earth itself disaster may well follow if you continue to rely on that compass. Or to put it another way, following your nose is a good way to get to a place, but first you have to point your nose in the right direction!

Resistible

Another problem with the conscience, even the well informed conscience, is that although it is usually persistent it can be resisted. The conscience can pursue a man for crimes committed decades ago. Even the memory of a relatively minor misdemeanour can haunt a person for years. “The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul” wrote Calvin. “I would bear any affliction rather than be burdened with a guilty conscience” said Spurgeon. Thunderbolts, tornadoes, a dungeon full of snakes, being burnt at the stake – all were preferable to him.¹⁶ Some people have even taken their own lives rather than live with their accusing conscience.

The conscience truly is, at times, “an awesome force with which to reckon”.¹⁷ Nevertheless it can be resisted. If it cannot be ignored it can still be defied. An active conscience will guarantee nothing. If desensitised enough it can even be hardened to the point where it virtually ceases to function.

Inadequate yet an ally

We need a balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of conscience. On the one hand, the conscience is inadequate to save a man.

“Did any man’s conscience, unenlightened by the Spirit, ever tell him that his sins deserved damnation?” asks Spurgeon. “Did it ever lead any man to feel an abhorrence of sin as sin? Did conscience ever bring a man to such self-renunciation that he totally abhorred himself and all his works and came to Christ?”

Such questions have to be answered in the negative. The conscience is not the same as God’s own Word.

On the other hand, the conscience is still a God-given gift witnessing to the state of our relationship with our Maker. It is an eternal voice speaking into this temporal life, “a certain mean between man and God”, “a line connecting man to his Creator”.¹⁸ Every man has a conscience, even total pagans. In each case the conscience is a potential ally, a fifth columnist, in the war to recapture the souls of lost men and women. Thanks be to God for the conscience!

References

- ¹ G C Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 170
- ² See Jonathan Edwards in *Nature of True Virtue* and *On Original Sin* and sermon (p. 61) in *Select Works*, Vol. II (Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), quoted and summarised in REO White, *The Changing Continuity of Christian Ethics* 2 volumes (Paternoster Press, 1981), 2:259,260.
- ³ AH Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Pickering & Inglis, 1962, reprint of 1907 edition), p. 501.
- ⁴ Oswald Chambers, *Biblical Psychology* (London, 1912), p. 217
- ⁵ AT Schofield, *The Springs of Character* (London), p. 198
- ⁶ See John Murray, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 1955-65)
- ⁷ John Bunyan, *The Holy War* in *Works*, 3 volumes (Baker Book House, 1977 reprint of 1875 edition, first published 1682), 3:263
- ⁸ Bunyan, 3:261
- ⁹ Bunyan, 3:262
- ¹⁰ Ellul, quoted by PE Hughes, *Christian Ethics in Secular Society* (Baker Book House, 1983), p. 33
- ¹¹ Kant spoke of conscience as the “Categorical imperative”. A Professor Shairp in the 19th century spoke of it as “The absolute in the soul”. In his “Sermon on Human Nature” Butler says that “without being consulted” the conscience magisterially asserts itself in approving or condemning.
- ¹² Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* (Soli Deo Gloria Reprint), Grand Direction X: “... There is a dangerous error...that a man is bound to do everything which his conscience telleth him is the will of God and that every man must obey his conscience as if it were the lawgiver of the world, whereas indeed it is not ourselves but God who is our lawgiver. Conscience is not authorised to make us any duty which God hath not made us, only to discern the law of God and call upon us to observe it: an erring conscience is not to be obeyed, but to be better informed.”
- ¹³ RC Sproul, *Right and Wrong: Ethics and the Christian Today* (Scripture Union, 1986), p. 93
- ¹⁴ Chambers p. 219, Strong p. 500
- ¹⁵ Ridderbos, *Pauline Theology*, p. 292ff.
- ¹⁶ CH Spurgeon, see the entry under “Conscience” in Tom Carter, *Spurgeon at his Best* (Baker Book House, 1988)
- ¹⁷ Rudnick, p. 127
- ¹⁸ The phrases are those of Calvin and PE Hughes respectively.

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