

On the Conscience

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Presented at the Dakota-Montana District Eastern Conference Winkel, January 25-26, 2021.

✠ In the name of Jesus. ✠

We know that our brain works. Thinking about things takes effort. We also know that the behavior of our conscience takes a toll on us. Neuroscientist and philosopher Patricia Churchland quantifies it. Neuroscience tells us that while the brain takes up 2% of our body mass, it uses 25% of our calories (Churchland, 33-34). Thinking, feeling, agonizing, working up the gumption to do or decide, takes a lot of energy. The conscience takes up a lot of energy.

Television and movies provide us with plenty of examples. We saw it as kids, when we heard Jiminy Cricket sing for us, "Let your conscience be your guide." Then we watched Pinocchio try to use it. Naughty boys turning into jackasses and huge whales swallowing the beloved wooden boy terrified us (and them). That whole film showed us what a bad guide Pinocchio's conscience and the ideas of his "friends" were. And how hard it is to separate the good from the bad.

We see Indiana Jones on his *Last Crusade* press a man back into the oncoming propellers of a ship, threatening his life if he will not reveal the location of his father and why this man seems to be attacking him. And the man, facing death, calmly says, "My soul is prepared. How is yours?"

We see Samuel L. Jackson in *A Time to Kill* hide in a closet to ambush the human scum who raped and nearly killed his little girl. After killing them, while on trial, he cries out, "Of course they deserve to die! And I hope they burn in hell!"

We could turn to older films as well. In *Casablanca*, Humphrey Bogart plays an expatriate American who owns a café in the

eponymous northwest African refugee city. His mantra is, "I stick my neck out for no one." He stands by as a friend gets arrested, and eventually murdered by Reich authorities. He appears to do nothing to help his former love interest and her husband flee the Nazis. Yet the corrupt police captain points out how in the past Rick has always taken the side of the little guy, the "right" side. And here too, eventually, though he still loves the girl, he sides against the Nazis and rejoins the effort. He sticks his neck out.

And, finally, we see Luther in the 2003 Luther movie punching, flailing, swearing, and screaming at the devil in that upper room while waiting to go back before the Emperor at Worms to take his stand.

These stand before us as examples of the battle the conscience wages in our hearts, minds, and lives. The conscience is alive and well. It fights. We see the effort, stress, and strain that the conscience puts on a person. We see how much energy the conscience takes up.

But what is it?

The Conscience and Its Job

Almost no one debates that the conscience exists. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights says, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience" (Article 1). The world sees it because the world, to a man, lives with it.

Scripture settles the matter in Romans 2, "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, 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” (vv14-15). The conscience exists. People have it, regardless of their religious orientation or belief system. Yet it still remains somewhat unsettled in many minds, perhaps even our own, just what this conscience is.

Theologians and philosophers and linguists are all over the map on the conscience. What is it? How to define it? Are there actually some people (psychopaths) that lack one? Is it part of the intellect or the will? Is it the voice of God or the voice of man? The word itself has been used variously over time. It has simply meant consciousness and awareness, that is, knowledge. But the way we use the word now is clearly more than just knowing something. So, perhaps “self-awareness.” I know that I know.

But, again, we would not say that that is enough. In cartoons, the conscience is sometimes depicted for us as an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. That is, we think of it as a voice that says things to us. Paul in Romans 2 says that it accuses or defends us. Psalm 6 captures this spirit, “O LORD, heal me, for my bones are in agony. My soul is in anguish” (vv2-3). Or Psalm 38, “My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear” (v4). We could use other words to describe this work. It evaluates. It pressures. It obligates. It demands punishment. Take, for example, Psalm 130, “If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand” (v3)? In 2 Corinthians 1:12, Paul simply says that it “testifies.” It bears witness.

Because we like analogies, people try to come up with images to describe the conscience. We could think of it as an umpire calling balls and strikes. Or we might view it as a window through which I view the world. If this “window” is dirty or clean becomes an issue. It determines how I see the

world. We can see it as a courtroom. There sits a judge declaring the rightness/wrongness of a behavior.

Another way to look at the conscience is to think through the process of how it works. Where does the conscience sit in the decision-making chain of events? Knowledge comes first. Something appears in my intellect. I read something, hear something, see something. I know it. Then comes a feeling about what I know. I feel good or bad about it. I decide that it is right or wrong. More than that, I know that it is good or bad, right or wrong. The conscience waves “hello.” Now the will comes into play. I do or do not based on the action of the conscience.

Of course, the conscience is not irresistible. I can act against it. Which usually results in feelings of guilt, and perhaps not just feelings, but actual guilt incurred. I have done something objectively wrong, which makes me liable to receive punishment.

This brings us to a key point about the conscience. It is not just a feeling. It is not your subjective desire to do thus and so. No matter how much we want it to be that way. Conscience is a gift from God. Humans come with one built in. It is part of us. It receives information. When it passes a judgment on information, it becomes that beacon of the divine. Or at least it should be. The conscience should simply reflect or be coterminous with the law written in our heart. “Although they know God’s righteous decree” (Romans 1:32). The Gentile (unbeliever) knows. Even if he does not know that he knows. Which means that the conscience serves a religious function, even in the most atheistic person. It demonstrates our relation to God. Whether we like it or not, know it or not, want it or not. The conscience puts us in our place relative to God.

What forms the Conscience?

Again, we have to push back against what we want, think, or feel here. We commonly think that

the conscience is totally individual. The conscience is you and you are your conscience. What you think or feel makes up your conscience. It is your innate humanness. It is what you think is right or wrong, good or noble.

In this way we view the freedom of conscience. It frees me to do what I want. The western world credits Luther with this for what he did at Worms. He stuck it to the man. He said, "I'm free to think what I want." This personal and private space of my conscience cannot be invaded by anyone at any time for any reason. If I think it is right, it is right.

Not so fast. Luther did not do that. Eric Metaxas summarizes it well in his recent Luther biography, "Many historians have put Luther forward as the first to put 'individual conscience' before the authority of the church and empire. But ironically, he was not at all asserting the freedom of the individual to do as he pleased. He was asserting the freedom of the individual to do as God pleased – if and when the church or the state attempted to abrogate that freedom" (Metaxas, 229).

The conscience is not some free-wheeling player floating around in my head. It is not some intuitive device that just knows what to do. If it were, we would have to take notice how conveniently it always agrees with what we want.

No, something else shapes, forms, molds, instructs, and teaches the conscience. And it functions based on how it has been shaped, formed, molded, instructed, and taught. It is, in this way, like a computer, "Garbage in, garbage out" (at least, computers before the advent of our all-knowing AI algorithms).

Go back to Romans 2. Notice why it is that the Gentiles do the same things that Jews did. "Since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts." That knowledge allows their conscience to bear witness, to accuse or defend them. Their conscience did not come up

with these Sinaitic sounding laws. The law of God in their hearts did, that remnant of a good and perfect creation. That knowledge worked on their consciences to say, "Outlawing murder is a good thing."

So, that itty-bitty little bit of the Word of God that clings to humanity's heart shows us how the conscience works. It acts on information. We do not have to take an incredible leap in logic to say then, that as Christians, who do not just have some remnants in our heart of God's law, but the complete revelation of God's will in his Word, that that Word forms, shapes, molds, instructs, and teaches our consciences.

In fact, we take no leap of logic at all. Scripture says it. In 2 Corinthians 10:5, Paul says, "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

The Word of God forms our conscience. Nothing else can form it well. The mind alone, the conscience, without the Word, and without faith in that Word, is not enough. Consider 1 Corinthians 2:9-10. Paul quotes Isaiah and says, "'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.' But God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." Or, to Titus, Paul says, "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure" (1:15). We will say more about Titus later, but just note, that only when we have the Spirit, faith, when we have been made pure, can we hope to have a good, properly working conscience.

And only when we have Scripture will we have something reliable to form our conscience. Consider Philippians 4:8-9. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable— if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it

into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." Or passages where God tells us to obey our parents, pastors, or governing authorities. Consider also a negative example. Paul in Romans 7 says that he would not have known what coveting was, and that it was sinful, except that God said so. He revealed it in Exodus 20. And then Deuteronomy 5 for good measure. And then told us the story of Ahab and Naboth and David and Bathsheba. Just in case we needed some real-life illustrations.

"But Worms!" the world cries out. Did not Luther free us from the shackles of outside authorities, even the Bible? That may be what the world has done. The only authority is me and the voice inside my head. I may call it the voice of God, but it sounds suspiciously like me. But this is not what Luther did.

Yes, as Gordon Rupp writes, "Luther's fight was within his conscience" (Rupp, 47). And yes, it was a long, dark night of the soul. We know Luther's *Anfechtung*. In the monastery, he whipped his body bloody. In later years, he whipped himself mentally. He heard the charges and accusations of his opponents before and after his stand at Worms. "Are you the only one? Are you willing to tear the church apart? Put aside your conscience! Put aside your feelings!" But he was not fighting to free the mind from all authorities. He was not just searching his feelings like some medieval Jedi master. He was fighting two competing authorities.

On the one hand, the pope and his decrees had wormed their way into Luther's brain and bound his conscience. Spend your life receiving the Sacrament in one kind, fasting from meat on Fridays, living under obligatory celibacy, and doing any number of other canonically commanded things. These things the pope taught him from his youth. Under penalty of purgatory and hell.

On the other hand, Scripture. Already in 1518, when he stood before Cardinal Cajetan Luther

begged: "For this reason, most reverend father in Christ, since you are blessed by divine favor with unusual gifts, especially with keen judgment, I humbly beg your most reverend highness to deal leniently with me, to have compassion with my conscience, to show me how I may understand this doctrine differently, and not to compel me to revoke those things which I must believe according to the testimony of my conscience. As long as these Scripture passages stand, I cannot do otherwise, for I know that one must obey God rather than men" (LW 31:274).

"As long as these Scripture passages stand." Luther does not appeal to feelings. He appeals to the Word of God. That holds him captive.

To his prince, Frederick, he wrote in January 1521: "I repeat: I am humbly willing to do or to omit doing all that I can before God and with Christian dignity, or to do or to omit doing all that I am told, on an honorable, Christian, and satisfactory basis of holy divine Scripture" (LW 48:195).

He will do anything on the "satisfactory basis of holy divine Scripture."

And, of course, at the justly famous Diet of Worms, he said, "Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience" (LW 32:112).

"I am bound by the Scriptures." "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." The Word of God shaped, formed, fashioned, taught, and instructed Luther and his conscience. It testifies. It accuses. It defends. It obligates him to say and do the things he says and does. Not some feeling

or emotion. Feelings and emotions are not the authority. His conscience is not the authority. Something rules them: the Word of God. And once this information is in, it's not safe or right to go against it.

In the follow up conversations, responding to questions put to him, Luther goes on to say that he desires "the clear arguments of those who spoke against him" (*LW 32:113*). He met with princes and bishops in the days after his testimony before the emperor and said that he "knew also that private opinions should give way." He begged only to "not be forced to deny the Word of God" (*LW 32:118*). In one last appeal he "besought them all the more not to violate his conscience, bound as it was by the chains of Scripture and the holy Word, by forcing him to deny that clear Word of God" (*LW 32:119*). For matters we will discuss later, his conclusion is also pertinent, "He said that in other respects he would do everything most obediently" (*LW 32:119*). Where the Word had not shaped, formed, taught, instructed, chained, or captured his conscience, he would do almost anything they asked. So long as it was not sinful.

The next generation of Lutherans agreed with Luther. In the Preface to the Book of Concord, they wrote, "This is the case: being instructed from the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, we are sure about our doctrine and Confession. By the grace of the Holy Spirit, our minds and consciences have been confirmed to a greater degree" (Preface 22).

It sounds so easy. Read the Word. It shapes and forms and molds your conscience. You feel good. You do good. Here you stand.

Of course, it ends up being anything but easy. Near the end of his life, Luther looks back upon his struggle and says: "Here, in my case, you may also see how hard it is to struggle out of and emerge from errors which have been confirmed by the example of the whole world and have by long habit become a part of nature, as it were.

How true is the proverb, 'It is hard to give up the accustomed,' and, 'Custom is second nature.' How truly Augustine says, 'If one does not resist custom, it becomes a necessity.' I had then already read and taught the sacred Scriptures most diligently privately and publicly for seven years, so that I knew them nearly all by memory. I had also acquired the beginning of the knowledge of Christ and faith in him, i.e., not by works but by faith in Christ are we made righteous and saved. Finally, regarding that of which I speak, I had already defended the proposition publicly that the pope is not the head of the church by divine right. Nevertheless, I did not draw the conclusion, namely, that the pope must be of the devil. For what is not of God must of necessity be of the devil" (*LW 34:333*).

He talks about years of study which imprinted the Scripture upon his memory. He knew justification by faith alone through grace alone in Christ alone. He had publicly defended these propositions. And yet he had not drawn (or could not?) all the conclusions. He still agonized over those things he had learned from the pope. Because they so shaped and formed his conscience.

Or better would be to say that they misshaped the conscience. Some would have the conscience be the final, perfect arbiter of all morality. What it says is absolutely right without fail. It is infallible and makes no mistakes. It is the true voice of God (if you are the religious type) or the pure voice of humanity that we follow without question (if you are less religiously minded).

Sadly, it is not. The conscience is a part of our broken humanity. Our sinful condition affects our conscience just as much as it affects the rest of our body and all creation. "We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly" (Romans 8:22-23). If the creation groans, how can we exempt the conscience? Even though the believer can say, "In

my inner being I delight in God's law" (Romans 7:22), still, "I see another law at work in the members of my body" (v23). And that body is pushed and driven by the conscience, which is an imperfect machine now. It can be "seared as with a hot iron" as Paul says in 1 Timothy 4:2. The conscience can be burned, cut off from functioning, locked into a particular position. We can end up "darkened in our understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts" (Ephesians 4:18). Paul goes on to say that such people have "lost all sensitivity" (4:19). Or, going back to Titus 1, "to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted." Notice how Paul bifurcates the mind and the conscience. Sin does not only mess with our knowledge and intellect. We no longer have fully functioning brains like Adam. We can barely name the animals let alone take care of them, or ourselves. We know nothing. But not only that, the conscience, the thing that shouts out "Right!" or "Wrong!" gets all wonky. Because sin defiles and pollutes the conscience too. The umpire needs glasses. Dirt smears the window so that we cannot see. The judge is on the take.¹

This means that the conscience does not just spur us on to do good. The conscience helps us to do evil. It does a quite convincing job because it speaks with authority. As some have noted, we are most confident in doing evil when we are convinced that it is right. When our conscience pipes up, we listen.

While the Word of God properly forms consciences, the Word of God alone does not form consciences. The culture surrounding us forms our conscience. Films, literature, music, the prevailing world view all end up in our heads. We start to parrot not just the language, but the actual views that they promote. Is our thirst for

vengeance driven by how many films or characters we observe who get theirs? And we cheer them on. I think we were all on Samuel Jackson's side in *A Time to Kill*. It does not bother us all that much when Batman takes the law into his own hands, especially since he swears not to kill. But even the Punisher, who acts as judge, jury, and executioner does not give us much pause. Someone has to take care of things. The bar gets lowered.

Man's laws also form, shape, and instruct our conscience. If something is legal, then, well, it is legal. If the law allows it, even if only technically, then our conscience does not cry out and accuse us nearly so loudly.

Peers also impact our conscience. Bryan Wolfmuller calls our peers the "most profound influence" upon our conscience (see works cited). We spend so much time with them at school, at work, in the military. We absorb the way they talk, the way they think, the things they like. And we follow along in many cases. Monkey see, monkey do. It is not always sinful, but we do take to heart Paul's warning in 1 Corinthians 15:33: "Bad company corrupts good character."

These things, and others we can probably list, feed our consciences all kinds of information. Some of it is good. Some of it is bad. But it all goes in and shapes, forms, and instructs the conscience. And the conscience can only feed you what it has, "Garbage in, garbage out."

This creates the interesting pickle that you end up damned if you do and damned if you don't when it comes to following your conscience. If you follow it, you sin. If you do not follow it, you sin. One example that Lutheran theologians give is the fasting Roman Catholic. If he does not eat meat on Fridays, he follows his conscience, but disobeys God because he follows this manmade

¹ Here, if we had time, we could talk about the psychopathic brain and the question of whether such people have broken consciences or no conscience at

all. Has a mental disorder impaired the conscience, or was it left out at birth? Reading Hare, Kiehl, and Churchland can scratch this itch for you if you desire.

(and idolatrous) law as if it might justify him. However, if he eats meat on Friday because his Lutheran friend says, "Hey, it's okay," then he obeys God, but violates his conscience because he goes against what it tells him is right. Or, at the very least, he is not quite sure. So now he does God's thing, but goes against his conscience, for St. Paul says, "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" (Romans 14:23). Yikes!

On top of that, you cannot even use a misshaped conscience as a defense. In an introduction to the writings of Thomas Aquinas on the conscience, one scholar writes, "Thomas's most haunting teaching on the matter of conscience is that, while a conscience always binds, it does not always excuse. So much for the exculpating trump of the appeal to conscience. After all, one's conscience may be badly formed and one may be culpable for that" (Aquinas, 217).

Another area we should consider is the "weak conscience." Paul deals with this especially in 1 Corinthians 8. He uses the phrase a number of times as he discusses the question of eating food sacrificed to idols. He says what Christians know: "We know that an idol is nothing" (v4). But then he says, "But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled" (v7).

Paul concludes, "But food does not bring us near to God" (v8) and at the same time, "Be careful, however, that your exercise of freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak" (v9). We have to reckon with consciences that are all over the map. Some know stuff and some do not. Some are convinced. Some are not. We also need to beware of how knowledge can puff up, as Paul says. Only love builds up. We love the people with the weak conscience. We love them like crazy. We are willing to change our behavior for them. We also work to shape, form, mold, and teach those

weak consciences with the Word of God. We incorporate them fully into the church at all times, as Romans 14 makes clear.

One other aspect should be mentioned: fear. In Galatians 2, Paul says fear caused Peter to do something that might have appeared to be an act of conscience: withdraw from eating with Gentiles when the Jews from Jerusalem showed up. In Galatians 6, Paul says that "those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ" (v12). Fear drives our behaviors, even our consciences. Fear shapes, forms, and molds our consciences. We must consider that as we make decisions. This is especially helpful in these fraught political times as it seems more and more people demand that we take a stand for or against a candidate or a party or a platform. We can consider the impact of fear and weak consciences also on our coronavirus conversations.

All of this shows you that while the conscience is a judge and an umpire, it is a judge and an umpire afflicted and affected by sin. That means we cannot simply say, "Let your conscience be your guide." The conscience is like a lower court. It makes rulings. But there actually is a higher authority. We tend to think of the conscience as that higher authority. No. God's Word is the Supreme Court of our conscience. The pope claims unappealable authority. The Word of God has it.

The Walls that Protect the Conscience

If the conscience suffers from the sinful condition, then we have to be nervous, worried, and anxious. How can I trust that voice? How can I trust my inclinations about right and wrong? How can I trust the verdicts – the accusations or defenses – of this corrupted conscience?

For this reason, our Lord has provided walls to protect the conscience. They are not for us to

hide behind. Rather, they are places, refuges, fortresses, as the psalms describe. The Lord provides these walls as part of his First Article and Fourth Petition care for us.

Earlier we gave some examples from the Word of God regarding things he has spoken that shape, teach, form, and mold our conscience. One set of those examples are these walls around our conscience: the family, the Church, and the state. In each instance, we have a clear word from God instituting these walls and our service to them.

We have the family given to us Genesis 1 and 2, then in the fourth commandment, and affirmed in Colossians 3:20, "Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord." Enhance that wall with Ephesians 6:4, "Fathers, raise up your children in the training and instruction of the Lord." The Lord builds this wall around us in order to train us in his Word and protect us from the Devil and his allies. Our parents form our conscience as they teach us God's Word, but also teach us how to be citizens of the world. They shield us, also, Lord willing, from the worst deprivations of the world.

Jesus gave us the Church in John 21 (among other places) when he told Peter, "Take care of my sheep" (v16). Further, he tells us in Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." In case you missed it, the Spirit repeats himself in verse 17. "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." Here we have the Lord not just establishing the holy ministry, but establishing it as a wall that surrounds us, the place, as Luther says in the Catechism, where there is always the forgiveness of sins. It is also the place where we sit and learn "everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19). In other words, these walls surround us and form our theological conscience. In the Church we get to hear straight from the Lord's mouthpieces the Lord's words. The Church prepares our conscience, shapes,

forms, and molds our consciences for our struggles in a world broken by sin and ruled by the Devil.

Our God also gave us governing authorities. And he attaches the word conscience to them. "Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience" (Romans 13:5). God establishes the government. He says that it is his thing, his gift. On top of that, in so many words, he also teaches your conscience that they are to be obeyed. Not simply from fear, but because the intent of these authorities is to provide peace, security, and some measure of freedom. They exist to protect you from anarchy and from the wickedness that we find in so many corners of the world.

God gives this information to our consciences. These words shape our consciences. And offer comfort. Our Savior intends family, Church, and state to be Fourth Petition blessings. They are daily bread. Certainly, sin mucks this up and now there are terrible families, churches, and states, racked and wrecked by sin. That does not change the information the Spirit directs to our conscience. If we see them wrecked by sin, our conscience is bound to fix them and make them the walls they are meant to be.

The Devil, of course, makes this a Sisyphean task. He prowls around, like a roaring lion, lying and murdering. He works to remove these walls from us, that is, to bring in the just mentioned sin to tear down these walls. He works to remove you from behind these walls. When we are protected by the Word of God and by God's institutions, it is a bit harder for him to get at us. But when the walls come tumbling down, or when we voluntarily leave these walls, or when we determine that these walls serve no valuable purpose for us, then the Devil can do his work.

And he is an expert. Heiko Oberman, in his biography of Luther, talked frequently of how the Devil has managed to make his way into our

conscience. He makes our conscience the supreme authority because the Devil is the "master of subjectivity" and an "expert on the single soul" (Oberman 227, 243). He wriggles into our minds, into our culture, into our society so that we see no authority greater than our own minds, our own conscience shaped and formed by our own inner voice and no other. He pits our conscience against God and his Word. Cracks form within the walls. We are masters of the universe and do not need family, Church, or state. We build our own walls.

Unfortunately, great builders we are not. Going back to Paul, "Bad company corrupts good character." We throw off family, Church, or state and replace it with...what?

It is when we leave home that we enter one of our most perilous fights. As mentioned above, Wolfmueller sees peers as the "most profound influence." So we leave our greatest influencers – Mom and Dad – and replace them with college roommates, boot camp buddies, work pals. Not all of whom, for sure, are wicked, evil folks. But they bring new ideas to the table. "Let's get drunk after a hard day!" "Let's score with those chicks!" We talked differently around our friends than our parents. Our vocabulary became coarser, jokes dirtier. How many of us have crazy college stories involving driving when we should not have, close calls with police or authorities, or taking it just a bit too far with that special someone? And we tell the stories with half a smile.

In an essay called "Teaching the Conscience to the Youth," Wolfmueller spends some significant time on discussing the Devil's use of alcohol, how he encourages drunkenness. This is one of the pervasive sins of the high school and college years, the first years of leaving home. The Devil uses this to lower our inhibitions, to make us think and act otherwise than we would, to make us comfortable with behaviors we know to be wrong. Either we collapse with the guilt of violating our conscience – and God's Word – or we change our conscience. We break it.

It is the same when we leave the walls of the Church or the state behind. We replace the Church and her theology with whatever theological or spiritual or philosophical ideas make us happy or support our current lifestyle. The Devil lies to us and says we will be happier. But this bad theology that our itching ears want to hear will kill us. We will no longer be Jesus' disciples because we stop holding on to the truth.

Likewise, when we determine that the state has no more authority, that we will act as we see fit, we will harden and sear our conscience to any and every lawless behavior. And bring the power of the sword down upon us as well. "Bad company corrupts good character." Even if the only bad company in the room is the Devil and what he has made of me. Or better would be to say what I have made of myself at his urging.

Christ fixes the Conscience

Finally, I sit among the pieces of my broken conscience and my broken life. I live in despair, hopeless, ready to hang myself with Judas for all the evil that I have done, the good I have left undone. I live crushed by the weight of all the good I am trying to do to make things right. I follow, obey, or invent any number of commands, rules, laws, ceremonies, or traditions, trying to please God, but not knowing if they do. I cannot say the perfect Lord's Prayer. I cannot make my way without distraction through any liturgy. I cannot confess every sin to my priest or live in perfect celibacy.

"Christ Jesus came into the world, to save sinners, of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who believe on him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16). St. Paul said this as he pondered his past blasphemies and persecutions. They weighed upon his conscience. A lot of things shaped his conscience to say to him: "Damned for all time."

The only solution he could point to was Christ. Christ is the only thing that fixes our conscience. It starts at the font. "This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 3:21).

The good news of the gospel gives me new information. All the things that I thought would get me into a right relation with God only make things worse. They weigh me down. But Christ comes and cleanses the conscience.

Think of the Old Testament priests, offering sacrifice after sacrifice for themselves and the people. They kept sacrificing because they kept sinning. No number of bulls, goats, lambs, doves, or blood would wash their conscience clean, would take away their sins. But then Christ! "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14)!

Christ came and heard his Father's words. Christ had a perfectly formed, shaped, and instructed conscience. And he listened to it. For us. The Spirit comes and proclaims that Christ to us. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). My conscience can say something new to me, "Peace!" Not because I did thus-and-so, but because Christ did thus-and-so.

"Therefore it is for freedom that Christ has set you free," (Galatians 5:1), Paul writes. I am free. For the Bible tells me so. Because it tells me that Jesus freed me from the demands of the law, from the curse of the law, from the lordship of the Devil and death by his perfect life and death.

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ" (Romans 8:1). Though the Devil whispers and shouts in my ears all my damnable sins and tries to misshape my

conscience or sear it into ever more wicked sin, the Spirit points me to Christ, who took on human flesh, who became sin for me, who died so that I live, no longer for myself (or the Devil) but for him who loved me and gave himself for me.

Here, in these words, our God tells the law to stay in its lane, the Devil to stay in his lane, and Death to stay in its lane. More, he says to the Christian in Romans 6: "When you're alive in Christ, they're dead to you."

For this reason, our Lord Jesus sent Dr. Luther and those like him, to free our consciences, to lift the heavy burden of sin from us, to show us the right use of the law. By showing us Christ. Melancthon writes: "Until now consciences were plagued with the doctrine of works. They did not hear consolation from the gospel. Some people were driven by conscience into the desert and into monasteries, hoping to merit grace by a monastic life. Some people came up with other works to merit grace and make satisfaction for sins. That is why the need was so great for teaching and renewing the doctrine of faith in Christ, so that anxious consciences would not be without consolation but would know that grace, forgiveness of sins, and justification are received by faith in Christ" (AC XX 22).

God got to work on our consciences by renewing the preaching of Christ. And because he knows how weak we are, he gives us the signs and seals of Christ in the sacraments. "The people are also advised about the dignity and use of the Sacrament, about how it brings great consolation to anxious consciences, so that they too may learn to believe God and to expect and ask from Him all that is good" (AC XXIV 7). The Sacrament is no mere ceremony, no law we carry out. God reaches down into our world and gives our consciences new information: "The body of Christ for you." Which is to say, "I – your God – love you!"

We need to hear this. We preach the law to ourselves by nature. So does the Devil as he

accuses you. He hurls every possible sin he can at you. He only defends you when he has made you twist or dismiss God's Word. But he is best at getting you to sin and then pointing the finger at you. So the Devil uses God's law upon our conscience and "The Law works wrath and only accuses. The Law terrifies consciences, because consciences are never at rest unless they hear God's voice clearly promising the forgiveness of sins. So the Gospel must be added, that for Christ's sake sins are forgiven and that we obtain the forgiveness of sins by faith in Christ" (Ap IV/V 136/257).

This is the Church's work. This is the pastor's work. This is the Christian's work. "All sane people regard it as the highest and most important matter if you heal doubting consciences" (Ap XIIb 176). This emphasis on preaching the gospel does not discount the preaching of the law. We preach the law. We condemn sinners. But we do it so that we can speak the absolution, the voice of God from heaven, the great "I love you" of Christ. When we do one and leave the other undone, that destroys consciences. We either burden them with the law or allow them to stop thinking about and worrying about sin.

Our Lutheran assumption is the guilty conscience, the despairing conscience, because we see how little preaching of Christ happens. So we preach Christ crucified, as Paul says. We try to know nothing except Christ crucified.

This does not just apply to preaching and administering the Sacrament. It flows into our private conversations, whether as pastors or Christians. The Smalcald Articles calls this the "mutual conversation and consolation of brethren" (SA III IV). In order to fix consciences we must talk about Jesus with people. This encourages us to make use of private confession and absolution. In his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, Luther said about private confession, "I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences. For when we have laid bare our

conscience to our brother and privately made known to him the evil that lurked within, we receive from our brother's lips the word of comfort spoken by God himself. And, if we accept this in faith, we find peace in the mercy of God speaking to us through our brother" (LW 36:86).

In this mutual conversation, we speak both law and gospel. The law exposes what really are sins. It shapes, forms, and instructs consciences. So does the gospel. As Luther says here, and as we say in the catechism, and as Christ said in Luke 10:16, it is the voice of God from heaven. The Lord treats with us personally through the lips of our confessor when there is absolution. And that is why our Confessions urge us to keep confession: for the sake of the absolution.

A wonderful example of this mutual conversation came to my attention through the daily lectionary recently. In Acts 11:1-18, some Jews criticize Peter for preaching the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius. More, for baptizing him and fellowshiping with him even though he and his friends and family remain uncircumcised and unkosher.

Peter does not thunder back with an appeal to the freedom of his conscience as we might. "It felt good and right to me, so I did it!" He tells the story of the Lord sending him the blanket of clean and unclean animals that he should kill and eat. He tells of how he argued with God that he did not eat unclean food and how God told him, "There is no more unclean food." He tells them how he went to Cornelius and preached Christ and how the Holy Spirit came upon them and he baptized them. He concludes, "If God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God" (Acts 11:17). The result? "When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life'" (Acts 11:18). There were no appeals to thoughts and feelings. Peter gave the Word God gave him to these people and God reshaped their consciences. All God's people said, "*Ego te absolvo!*"

Conversations with the Conscience

This account from Acts 11 brings us to an area of conscience that we have talked to death over the years: Christian freedom and adiaphora. But it is a part of this conversation about conscience.

What these men brought to Peter became the first great controversy in the early Church: what to do with Jewish rules and laws about circumcision, diet, the Sabbath, etc. The Church solved it in Acts 15 by saying that out of love Gentiles should do some Jewish things, and Paul talked in Romans and Galatians and Colossians about how Jews and Gentiles cannot and should not judge each other over things that are no longer commanded or forbidden.

Romans 14 is one of the great chapters on this. Paul talks about how to handle “disputable” matters (v1). That tells us that there are things we can talk about, that we can discuss. Certain matters in our Christian lives are discussable. In Romans he uses the examples of foods to eat and holy days.

Our Confessions dedicate a lot of time to how we handle discussable things. For example, Melancthon writes about the number of the sacraments and makes it clear that he has no wish to hyperventilate over how people number them because there are different ways to look at it and much depends on the definition.

In Article XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession, he also says that “it is lawful for bishops, or pastors, to make ordinances so that things will be done orderly in the Church, but not to teach that we merit grace or make satisfaction for sins. Consciences are not bound to regard them as necessary services and to think that it is a sin to break them without offense to others” (53).

Paul, in fact, seems to kick the door wide open on discussability when he says, “Everything is permissible for me” (1 Corinthians 6:12) and again in 10:23, “Everything is permissible.” Of

course, we also know well Paul expanded on that statement. “Not everything is beneficial.” Luther had an interesting word here: *frommet*. “It’s not all pious or devout.”

As mentioned above, we have kicked, ridden, stomped, whipped, and flogged the adiaphora horse to death, so it will not take up (hopefully) too much of our time here. But we do have to address it in connection with conscience.

People like to appeal to their conscience in this area, and much like with the word adiaphora, the word conscience intends to shut down the conversation. “My conscience cannot tolerate contemporary worship!” “My conscience cannot tolerate every Sunday communion!” “My conscience cannot tolerate this, that, or the other!”

Well, first of all, we have to determine if the things binding our conscience are discussable or not. If they are, then it becomes sort of hard for them to bind your conscience, because only what God’s Word says binds our conscience. You must have a Word from God. In the third of his *Invocavit* Sermons of 1522, Luther said, “You must rest upon a strong and clear text of Scripture if you would stand the test. If you cannot do that, you will never withstand – the devil will pluck you like a parched leaf” (LW 51:80). A little later, “They wished to make a ‘must’ out of that which is free. This God cannot tolerate. Do you presume to do things differently from the way the supreme Majesty has decreed” (LW 51:82)?

Luther then opened his fourth sermon by saying, “In all these matters love is the captain” (LW 51:84). This fits well with Paul in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8. He directs us to love our brother, whether he is the strong or weak one. In the words of Prof. Tiefel, “Sure, you can do it, but why would you?”

Helpful in this is something I stumbled upon in an essay by John Vieths. He wrote on Romans 14 and uncovered a quote in a commentary by F.W.

Wenzel: "Adiaphora exists only in theory" (Vieths, 1). This is not to deny the existence of adiaphora. Foods and holy days and vestments and celibacy and any number of things are middlethings.² If you dance and play cards and drink beer and I do not, that is permitted.

No, what Wenzel seems to be getting after is that when we get to a real-world case and situation, we will discover quite quickly that while a thing is, in the abstract, adiaphora, almost always we will have to decide about doing it or not doing it, and our behavior will determine if it remains adiaphora or not. Do we obsessively dance, drink, and smoke? Can we not live without them? Then they are no longer adiaphora. Are we carrying our love for the liturgy to an extreme in which we declare that it came from heaven, that it is not adaptable or discussable and those who use contemporary forms may just be heretics? Then they are no longer adiaphora. When love is not the captain, then things must be resisted.

But when love is the captain, we can keep discussable things discussable, even when we make a decision. We will decide how often to offer communion, what form of worship we will use, whether we will allow beer to be consumed on church property, whether to serve pork, and any number of other things. Christians in your parish will decide whether to attend dances, smoke cigars, go to the casino, or attend a Hindu wedding ceremony. Let love be the captain. Let discussable things stay discussable.

We tend to make decrees on these items. We want to drag middlethings in a direction that soothes and salves our conscience. We tend to make our use of middlethings the thing that gets us by in the day. "Ah, my church does the right things in worship. I can be at peace." I am not arguing for or against any worship forms. I have feelings on this matter. But I will note that Francis

Pieper said something interesting that I think we only accept in the abstract: "The Lutheran synods of this country recently prepared and adopted a beautiful form of divine liturgy. But this of itself does not bring us one step closer to Christian unity as defined in God's Word, for the unity of the Church consists in the unity and purity of its doctrine. This unity and purity, however, is missing from the other church communities. In contrast, if each of our 2000 congregations were to observe different customs, we would still have the proper Christian unity because, by God's grace, pure doctrine resounds from our pulpits and errorists are disciplined" (Pieper, *The Church and Her Treasure*, 214).

I say we only accept that in the abstract because of the conversations about middlethings that I have seen and been a part of in which it became pretty clear that one side was absolutely right, the other side was absolutely wrong, and the true unity of the Church was at stake.

Again, this is not to shut down any discussion. Luther's *Invocavit* sermons breath a spirit of discussion: "Let's talk about how we deal with images." Our Confessions advocate that the Lutheran Church is all about being careful with not only the gospel, but all the ceremonies that surround it. We do nothing foolishly or in a way that will cause offense. Luther's amazingly gentle touch in his worth-reading booklet, *Receiving Both Kinds* (LW 36:231-268) would be a healthy case study for us as he handles this situation that is not a middlethings situation: whether to receive the Sacrament in both kinds. When he says that you should receive it in one kind at a parish that does it that way even though you receive it in both kinds at home, and do it without raising a stink, we pause. When he says give your opinion about how to receive the Sacrament only when asked, we think back to how often we give our opinion asked or not. When he suggests that

² To avoid using the word adiaphora over and over, I have also chosen to use middlethings, a literal translation of the German word *mitteldinge*.

perhaps a one-year moratorium on the Sacrament might chill people out a bit, we blanch and wonder if he had too much of Katy's beer that day. But in all of this, it shows us how love is the captain.

Above all, the way Holy Scripture deals with this in Acts 10-15, Galatians, Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 6-14, Colossians 2, and any number of other places helps us discover what are matters of conscience and what may not be. It reminds us to keep our consciences to ourselves sometimes, especially in the discussable things. It is not always necessary that everybody knows your opinion on everything, in real life, or social media. "So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves" (Romans 14:22).

I think here especially about the last year and the coming year. We want to sound off and blast off on politicians, on political views, on matters of interest, on masks, on mandates, on lockdowns, etc. etc. etc. It might feel good. But perhaps it will move love off the captain's chair. Especially since we know, first of all, that we do not have all the information yet. Secondly, we may not be sure that this really binds our conscience. And, finally, in our congregation we have the variety of opinion. Even Michael Jordan understood that both Republicans and Democrats buy shoes.

We may think how we settle matters – and the necessity to settle matters – on middlethings will salve our conscience. We often say as much. "If only I had liturgical worship," or "weekly communion" or "a praise band" or "a consensus model" or "no voters assembly" or "no more confirmation" or whatever. But the truth is that they will not. You will move on to the next thing because your conscience will not be salved. Only Christ salves the conscience. "If a touch of Christ healed, how much more will this most tender spiritual touch, this absorbing of the Word, communicate to the soul all things that belong to the Word" (LW 31:349).

We let the Word then dominate our conscience. We notice, for example, the kinds of things the Spirit actually does tell us to do and to not do, for example in Ephesians 4-6, where he mentions all sorts of moral issues for the purpose of shaping and informing our conscience, but spends precious little ink discussing worship matters.

We try to avoid this condemnation Melancthon leveled against his Roman opponents: "We see that the academics and theologians gather the traditions and seek ways to relieve and ease consciences. They do not free consciences enough, but sometimes entangle them even more! The schools and sermons have been so occupied with gathering these 'traditions' that they do not even have enough leisure time to touch on Scripture. They do not pursue the far more useful doctrine of faith, the cross, hope, the dignity of secular affairs, and consolation for severely tested consciences" (AC XXVI 14-15).

We must learn to distinguish between what is necessary (Baptism, the Supper, good fruits, confession and absolution, God's commands, vocation) and what is not (listing all sins to the priest, ceremonies, observing them all perfectly, earning righteousness, going into the desert and monasteries, celibacy, traditions, papal [or synodical] decrees).

We must also realize, with joy, that all the things that misshape our conscience can be unlearned (cf. AC XX 4). And those things by which God shapes our conscience are necessary to be learned. It puts me in mind of people who struggle with the requirement of the Athanasian Creed to believe all this about the Trinity or face damnation. "How are we supposed to know all that stuff about the Trinity?" I like to say: "Did you read it? Now you're briefed. It's necessary."

The Conclusion (finally!)

"Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me." Whether Luther actually said those words at Worms or not, they live in our memories. We try

to live by them. We do it as we stand upon the Word of God.

When we do that, that allows us to talk in a proper way about the conscience. If we learn nothing else from this, we can learn to talk more about the conscience. If we do, in a proper way, in love, then perhaps we can exorcise some of those faulty and subjective ideas about the conscience.

One way that Bryan Wolfmüller suggests we do this is, instead of asking people, "How are you doing?" say, "How's your conscience?" It will be off-putting, for sure, but allows us to direct the conversation to what does and does not help the conscience: the Word of God. Because no matter how they answer the question, you can go to the Word. If they say, "Not good," you can ask why. If they say, "Fine," you can ask why.

We discover along the way – or are reminded – that we try to avoid the Word with all our heart rather than stand upon it. Because we do not want to feel bad. This is one of the Devil's tricks which we have absorbed into our lives.

But we are dealing with broken consciences every day. Our own to start with. Whenever we have come to terms with sin, we have to say to ourselves or others, "Well, now, you've broken

your conscience. It doesn't work right anymore. We have to fix it. And since it's broke, you can't trust it. So, you'll have to trust God. You shall not commit adultery." Or, "You shall not steal." Or, "You should fear and love God that you do not despise preaching and his Word." Or...whatever.³

When we do this, well, then there we stand. We can do no other. God help us. We stand upon the Word of God going after people's consciences. God entrusted this job to his Church and her preachers. "Should a guilty conscience seize me since my baptism did release me in a dear forgiving flood, sprinkling me with Jesus' blood" (CWS 737:2)? We go after their consciences to plague them by preaching the law, and then to release those plagued consciences with the flood of Jesus' blood.

Standing upon this Word, assaulting the conscience with God's law and gospel we send people home with their conscience clean, and ours, so that we can sing, "Teach me to live that I may dread the grave as little as my bed. Teach me to die so that I may rise glorious at the awful day" (CW 592:2). Why? Because we have applied Christ to the conscience. "Forgive me, Lord, for thy dear Son, the ill that I this day have done, that with the world, myself, and thee, I, ere I sleep, at peace may be" (CW 592:1). That Word, that Christ, prepares our souls. Nothing else will.

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³ I am indebted to Bryan Wolfmüller for the idea to ask, "How's your conscience?" and this image of the broken conscience.

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