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What is Conscience?

A. W. Meyer

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

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What Is Conscience?*

We shall offer several definitions. Dr. Pieper, in his *Christl. Dogmatik*, says it is "der Gerichtshof Gottes im Menschen." Some call it the voice of God in man. Prof. G. Herzer says: "Conscience is an innate aptitude in every human soul." (*Theol. Monthly* VII, No. 2.) Esser, in his *Psychologie*: Das Gewissen ist "die durch die praktische Vernunft geleitete Urteilkraft ueber die moralische Guete oder Schlechtigkeit der einzelnen Handlungen." We add: Und es stellt Belohnung oder Strafe in Aussicht. Stoeckhardt, *Roemerbrief*, p. 90: "Das Gewissen ist, wie Cremer richtig definiert, 'das als Zeuge auftretende eigene Bewusstsein.' Und zwar bezeugt dasselbe die sittliche Qualitaet der menschlichen Handlungen." Some call conscience "eine von Gott dem Menschen eingepflanzte Anlage." Hoenecke, in his *Dogmatik* (Vol II, p. 363), thus defines conscience: "Das Gewissen ist Bewusstsein von Gott als dem im Sittengesetz als heilig sich offenbarenden und Heiligkeit fordernden Gott." Luther does not offer a clear-cut theoretical definition of conscience, but he speaks very perspicuously on the *functions* of conscience, and we shall take occasion to quote him repeatedly. Hauff, in his *Real-konkordanz*, calls conscience "das deutliche Bewusstsein von der sittlichen Guete unserer Gesinnungen und Handlungen, den inneren Richter, den jeder im Busen traegt." *Standard Dictionary*: "Conscience is the activity or faculty by which distinctions are made between the right and wrong in conduct and character." The *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia* defines conscience as "the moral sense of the individual applied to his own conduct."

Take your choice among these definitions, or perhaps you have a better one of your own. To render a definition of a mental faculty which cannot be challenged is difficult, and it is of greater practical value to understand the functions of this important agency or power.

The term *conscience* is not found in the Old Testament original, but is supplied by the word *heart*. David's heart smote him, 1 Sam. 24, 5; 2 Sam. 24, 10. Luther: "Sein Herz schlug ihm." However, in his translation Luther also uses the term *Gewissen*. Job 27, 6 ("My heart shall not reproach me") is thus rendered by Luther: "Mein Gewissen beisst mich nicht."

Our Lord did not use the term *conscience*; St. Paul introduced it into the early Christian vocabulary, using it mainly in his epistles, also in Acts. Col. 2, 16 he refers to conscience in the words, "Let no man therefore *judge* you in meat," etc. Luther aptly renders this: "So lasset nun niemand euch Gewissen machen ueber Speise," etc.

*This paper, in a condensed form, was read in the April, 1934, sessions of the New York and New Jersey Pastoral Conference.

The word for *conscience* in the New Testament is *συνείδησις*, the Latin *conscientia*, signifying a joint knowledge, ein Mitwissen. We find it mentioned in connection with man and his actions over thirty times in the New Testament. It is spoken of repeatedly as a good conscience, also, called a pure, wounded, weak, defiled, evil, seared conscience, one void of offense, etc. As we proceed, we shall of necessity analyze conscience and its functions.

Conscience is a censor, a judge of man's moral actions, commending or condemning them; hence it has been called the voice of God in man, for it speaks with authority.

The schoolmen engaged in hair-splitting casuistry on conscience. The Jesuits practically ruled it out; they regard *conscientia* as a prejudice to be removed by probabilism." (*Schaff-Herzog*.) The Standard Dictionary defines probabilism as follows: "2. Roman Catholic Theology. The doctrine that, as long as the existence, interpretation, or application of a law remains truly doubtful, one may follow his own inclination on the ground that a doubtful law cannot impose a certain obligation. In its extreme form this doctrine admits the moral legality of any ethical judgment made by a layman *when supported as possible by one recognized moral theologian*." (Italics ours.) This last stipulation is of first importance for our treatise. It places the conscience of the layman in the keeping of "one recognized moral theologian," evidently the priest to whom confession is made.

Luther again recognized the functions of conscience, following the New Testament directions.

Rom. 2, 14, 15 is an outstanding passage. Let us take that, broadly speaking, as the basis for our study: "The Gentiles . . . show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another." We have here three parts, to wit: Law, conscience, thoughts, or the *functioning* of conscience.

We must note that conscience is *not a source of knowledge of the Moral Law*. The apostle clearly distinguishes between the work of the Law written in the hearts, and conscience bearing witness to this, *συμμετρυνούσης*. Your intellect, your conception of what is right and wrong, governs the action or judgment of conscience. See the importance of instilling in the heart of the child the correct conception of right and wrong as coming from the highest authority. For if the intellect does not give the right directions or the correct information, the conscience will be warped in its judgment of the act. The judge has not the right law-book, and hence his findings are not correct.

Dr. Stoeckhardt comments on Rom. 2, 15: "Dieses [Gewissen] erscheint, da von einem *συμμετρυνεῖν* die Rede ist, als etwas, was zu

der Aussage des inneren Gesetzes hinzukommt, dieselbe begleitet. Doch ist dies doppelte Zeugnis verschiedener Art. Das Gewissen ist eben nicht identisch mit dem Naturgesetz. Das Naturgesetz ist Norm, Forderung, Forderung Gottes, bezeugt dem Menschen *in genere*, was gut und boese ist, schreibt ihm vor, was er tun und lassen soll. Das Gewissen hingegen fordert nicht, sondern beurteilt die konkreten einzelnen Handlungen des Menschen, sagt dem Menschen, ob das, was er jetzt tun will oder tut oder getan hat, recht oder unrecht ist oder war. Und da urteilt es eben nach jener dem Menscheninnern eingepraegten Norm; es ist nicht an sich Quelle der Erkenntnis des Boesen und Guten, sondern schoepft sein Urteil aus der natuerlichen Gesetzeserkenntnis."

A conscience rendering the wrong verdict has been called a *conscientia erronea*, an erring conscience, *ein irrendes Gewissen*. It tells the person that the wrong thing is right and should be performed or that the right thing is wrong and should not be performed. Strictly speaking, conscience in its functions does not err; hence the "erring conscience" is a misnomer; it is not *conscience* which errs, but the *directions given it* are at fault, and that always has disastrous moral results. The heathen is told and instructed to pray to the idol; his conscience seconds these instructions. If he *heeds* conscience, he sins against the First Commandment; if he *violates* his conscience, he has what we term an evil conscience, breaks down his character, and is unhappy.

Luther at Worms: "Es ist weder sicher noch geraten, etwas wider das Gewissen zu tun." And when speaking to the Christian, Luther warns: "Wider das Gewissen tun ist ebensoviele als wider den Glauben tun und schwer suendigen." (St. L., XII, 21.)

We again see the supreme importance of having the right doctrine, of having the intellect instructed correctly. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, in the first place and above all, for *doctrine*.

But even the conscience of a well-indoctrinated Lutheran is not beyond the possibility of erring. He should daily look into the divine Law for guidance and on special occasions make special inquiry. We regulate our watch by some reliable timepiece. We Lutherans inform or instruct our intellect, by which in turn our conscience is guided, by means of the *Bible*, which, we insist, is the infallible truth, the supreme standard. The Romanists turn for standardizing their conscience to the Pope, alias the Church, as being superior to the Bible. Modernists and all rationalists appeal to *reason* as the supreme court and the guide for their conscience. Many make popular opinion their guide as to what is right or wrong. We agree with what Luther said: "Unser Gewissen kann nur dann getrost und sicher sein, wenn es sich auf Gottes Wort gruendet." (St. L., III, 1470.)

We should cultivate a *sensitive* conscience. Dogmaticians speak of a *conscientia probabilis*. Hollaz: "*Contra conscientiam probabilem peccat, qui viam tutiorem negligit.*" Dr. Pieper, in his *Christl. Dogmatik*, extends this to things material, management of congregational affairs, etc. To be careless as to what is right and wrong is to sin in that respect.

When it is *doubtful* to us whether a thing is right or wrong (*conscientia dubia*), we should be "fully persuaded in our own mind," Rom. 14, 5. "He that doubteth is dammed if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin," v. 23. *Fides, quae creditur*, must be the guide for our own conscience.

Conscience is not "the voice of God in man" in the sense of always approving what is right and disapproving what is wrong. St. Paul declares he had, also before his conversion, served God "with pure conscience," *ἐν καθαρῇ συνειδήσει*, 2 Tim. 1, 3. See also Acts 22, 3, 4. Christ predicted to His disciples: "The time cometh that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service," John 16, 2. It is related of Huss that, when he was being martyred on the pyre, he said to the peasant who added his fagot, "*O sancta simplicitas!*" In such cases the erring (perverted) conscience, as in the case of many fanatics to-day, functions according to some false norm, — erroneous doctrines or principles, traditions, man-made laws, wrong environments, — such false norm arrogating to itself the authority belonging alone to God and His Word. The only way to rectify a mistaken conscience is not ridicule or the advice to disregard it, but proper tutoring, based on Holy Writ.

The Bible also speaks of a *weak* conscience in reference to adiaphora. 1 Cor. 8, 7: "There is not in every man that knowledge; for some with conscience of the idol unto this hour eat it as a thing offered unto an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled." We who have the better knowledge should not be inconsiderate, in word or walk, of those weak in conscience; for St. Paul says in the same chapter, v. 12: "When ye sin so against the brethren and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ."

Often it is our Christian duty to conform our walk and actions to the brother's weak conscience. Says the same apostle, Rom. 14, 19: "Let us therefore follow after the things that make for peace and things wherewith one may edify another. For meat destroy not the work of God." V. 21: "For it is good neither to eat nor to drink wine nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth or is offended or is made weak."

Should our conscience be governed by another man's conscience? No, only by God's Word. St. Paul asks: "Why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience?" 1 Cor. 10, 29. Offense may be *taken*, not *given*; and at times it may be our duty to show that our conscience

is bound only by Scripture and not by the eccentricities of others. On the other hand, for a person to ignore the earnest warnings of his pastor or those of experienced church leaders with the flippant remark that he will not have his liberty judged by another man's conscience usually means that he does not want God's Word to interfere with his liberty either.

It is not to be overlooked that conscience *assumes authority*, "the thoughts . . . accusing or else excusing one another." When accusing and not commending, this may become intolerable. We are reminded of the Conscience Fund in Washington. The Law of God, natural and revealed, demands punishment, and conscience drives this home, reiterates it. And an evil conscience makes cowards. "The wicked flee when no man pursueth," Prov. 28. Luther: "Wenn unser Gewissen schuldig und erschrocken ist, fuerchten wir uns auch vor einer Bratwurst und vor denen, die unsere Freunde sind und uns alles Gute goennen." (St. L., II, 1598.)

Moses describes the troubled conscience very vividly: "Thy life shall hang in doubt before thee, and thou shalt fear day and night and shalt have none assurance of thy life. In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! . . . And at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning! for the fear of thine heart wherewith thou shalt fear and for the sight of thine eyes which thou shalt see," Deut. 28, 66. 67. Luther comments on this passage: "Ich habe noch keine Stelle gesehen, welche den Jammer eines boesen Gewissens klarer ausspraeche mit so passenden und geeigneten Worten und Ausspruechen. Denn so steht das Herz, welches Gott beleidigt, das heisst, welches gequaelt wird durch das Bewusstsein der Suende." (St. L., III, 1604.)

In view of the dire results of evil actions, conscience is valuable as a *danger signal*. Beware! Beware when an evil action is contemplated! So Joseph: "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" When the warning is heeded and the temptation vanquished, how comforting the reaction! Conscience then commends.—God has promised grace and blessing to all that keep His commandments. And to this conscience also bears witness. It will assure us that "godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come," 1 Tim. 4, 8. There is a sense of divine favor and of the presence of the Holy Spirit coming over us when we have abode by the Law of God in the face of temptation. "Virtue is its own reward," men say. However, never forget that, since conscience may give the wrong verdict, its plaudits may tend to establish a man all the more in his evil ways.

Conscience may become *dormant*. Its voice of protest against particular sins persisted in gradually dies down. Constant intercourse with the profane may even lead to profanity, without conscience' voice at last being heard. The moral sense is blunted—*abgestumpft*.

This holds not only with individuals, but also with us as a nation. Divorces procured on all kinds of pretenses hardly excite comment. We are told of having as a nation the worst record for murders, for gangster, burglar, and racketeer activities, etc.; but the most we do is editorially to "view with alarm" and let it go at that. Even members of the churches become indifferent because the public conscience has ceased to react against these violations of the Moral Law; sermons against these and kindred evils they come to regard merely as gestures of propriety. St. Paul says of the Gentiles of his day, Eph. 4, 18, 19: "Having their understanding darkened . . . because of the blindness of their heart, . . . *being past feeling*" (*ἀπηλλογιστές*), having lost — morally — the sense of pain. The persistent violating of their conscience by sinning has made it callous, insensible to moral pain. If you peruse the whole passage carefully, the conviction will gather strength that in cases such as described a conscience rendered imperious to any and all appeals of the Gospel may be indicative of the sin against the Holy Ghost — a most terrible judgment of God. *Do not trifle with the voice of your conscience!*

Low morals nationally, as time goes on, may no longer be "viewed with alarm" or "deplored," but considered conventional and modern, while such pastors and papers as uphold the Bible views are decried as outmoded. History tells us that some heathen nations reached such a low moral stage that even the most repulsive lewdness was practised not only in secret, but in their sanctuaries. In consequence of human depravity conscience may even be made to sanction and commend this.

Often the sinner who has lulled his conscience to sleep with great trouble does not want it roused, and many an excuse for not coming to hear the searching Word of God may be found to center in this fact. At times it takes the form of wanting to postpone action. When Paul "reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and Judgment to come," Felix trembled (conscience was awakened) and answered: "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee," Acts 24, 24 f.

The voice of conscience can be *drowned out*, *uebertönt* (as our conversation is by noisy subway trains or street traffic) by the din and turmoil of dissipation, the mad clamor of passion, the loud clatter of ambitious pursuits, or by the cares of the world, the love of money, etc. But even the conscience of a whole nation may again be roused, as by the prophets of old. (Vide Jonah in Nineveh.) And the *individual's* dormant conscience may perhaps suddenly be shaken out of its sleep. Joseph's brothers had in the course of many years nearly forgotten what their conscience told them about their dastardly deed at the time; but when in Egypt their conscience was shaken out of its lethargy "and they said one to another, We are verily guilty concerning our brother in that we saw the anguish of his soul when

he besought us and we would not hear; therefore is this distress come upon us," Gen. 42, 21. Alas, if this awakening comes too late, or if, when awaking, man permits the stern voice of conscience to drive him to despair through the wiles of the devil! A deterrent example is that of Judas. The Law should be preached in its searching severity in order that the conscience of the sinner may be fully aroused and that he may then *seek healing peace in the Gospel*, which gives that peace with the holy God which the world can neither give nor take away. Hoenecke: "Durch den Glauben allein wird das boese Gewissen ein gutes." (*Dogmatik*, II, 363.)

Trying to obtain this peace with God for the conscience by the works of the Law is futile. Luther: "Darum ist ein jeglich Gesetz dem Gewissen unmoeglich zu tragen. Das Gewissen, das darunter liegt, ist so muede und elend, will immer an den Werken hangen, kann keine Ruhe haben; je mehr es tut, je mueder es wird. Ja, es drueckt es wohl ein einzig Werk, dass ihm die Welt zu enge wird, treibt immer und sagt: 'Tu, tu, tu!' hoert nicht auf zu treiben, bis dass wir sehen durch Gottes Gnade, dass es dieses nicht tut, es muss die Gnade tun, sonst ist es nimmer getan. So wird das Herz zufrieden, keck und kuehn auf Gott, und fallen die Werke ab, machen nicht mehr Unruhe," (St. L., VIII, 1007.)

A government should secure to each citizen the right to worship and live according to the dictates of his conscience. We call this religious liberty. The decree of Darius prohibiting Daniel from praying to his God was tyrannical. Naturally the *exercise* of this freedom of conscience has its restrictions, or limitations, in a commonwealth. Our practise of religious liberty should not trespass or infringe on the rights of others (Sunday laws).

There is such a thing as a *supersensitive* conscience as to adaphora, often guided by self-conceived standards of morals. This should be corrected by way of applying the norm of God's Word. *Our conscience never can be supersensitive or too particular in heeding the instructions of Holy Writ.* In fact, in that regard we should cultivate a conscience which reacts most readily to the sermons heard or the Scriptures read.

The pastor meets with perverted consciences on every side because of irreligious environments in which children are reared and the misleading private and public examples of men or women. Hence, when urging people to attend services, we should appeal to their conscience and duty when dealing with those confirmed in our Church; but "rank outsiders" seldom have compunctions of conscience on that score, and we should be thankful if we are able to bring them into contact with the Gospel by some ulterior reason; for sometimes, as Goldsmith says in his *Deserted Village*, "fools who came to scoff remained to pray."

To make the statement, *There is really such a thing as conscience*, seems ridiculously superfluous. But in some modern books on psychology and mental science as well as by many present-day teachers of these subjects it is seriously contended that conscience, if at all recognizable, has been evolved, as an emotion, by the superstitious religious training brought to bear on the human mind through the ages. The danger to immature minds in reading such literature or imbibing such views in the classroom is apparent; for the advice to disregard the voice of conscience suits natural tendencies, as it gives free rein to loose morals of every description.

Parents, teachers, pastors, editors, have the weighty responsibility—among others—of molding the conscience of those coming under their influence, of making them happy for time and eternity. The Word of God must be the only guide, or one will create a warped conscience; one may fall into the serious error of pronouncing things sinful which are not, thus burdening the conscience, or of not designating things sinful which the Bible condemns, which causes people to live in sins against God without being reproved by their conscience.

If you control a man's conscience, you dominate him absolutely and completely. This sovereignty should be accorded only to God's Word. But we see at a glance the secret of the Catholic priest's power over his parishioners in auricular confession, where he lords it over the consciences.

Unburdening the conscience, as is done in private confession to the pastor, is a great relief. It is assumed by some that David's conscience was dormant after he had sinned against Bethsheba and Uriah, until Nathan spoke to him. It seems more probable that the man whose conscience (heart) smote him "because he had cut off Saul's skirt" and "after he had numbered the people" would have felt much uneasiness upon having fallen into such gross sins. Because of court flattery and the devil's wiles he was kept from relieving his pent-up emotions; but when Nathan confronted him, his prompt confession: "I have sinned against the Lord," sounds like a sigh of relief.

Yonkers, N. Y.

A. W. MEYER.

Die kirchlichen Vorgänge in Deutschland, lutherisch gesehen.

Mit Recht mißt man den Vorgängen, die das Reich Gottes unmittelbar berühren, eine noch größere Bedeutung zu als den Vorgängen der Weltgeschichte. Darum werden alle treuen Lutheraner des Auslands vor allem fragen: Wie steht es mit der kirchlichen Entwicklung im neuen deutschen Staate? Im vergangenen Sommer und Herbst und auch noch im Winter (1933—34) wußten die Deutschland feind-