Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 13 Article 29

5-1-1942

Conscience

E. W. Koehler
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

the theologians and the clamor of the schools died away and were forgotten in the rapture of a more perfect knowledge. Said Becon, one of the youngest, as in after years he looked back: 'So oft as I was in the company of these brethren, methought I was quietly placed in the new glorious Jerusalem.' "

Mullinger calls this "the theological school of the university"; we like to think of it as the first English Lutheran Theological Seminary.

Cardinal Wolsey's "contempt of the clergy was looked on as that which gave encouragement to the heretics. When reports were brought to court of a company that were at Cambridge, Bilney, Latimer, and others that read and propagated Luther's books and opinions, some bishops moved in the year 1523 "that there might be a visitation appointed to go to Cambridge for trying who were the fautors of heresy there. But he, as legate, did inhibit it." He forbade Fisher of Rochester and West of Ely, two bitter enemies of the Lutherans, but he sent Dr. Robert Shorton of Pembroke Hall, a well-known favorer of Lutheranism.

This was made the 43rd charge against the cardinal, not punishing "the Lutheran sect. He had hindered the true and direct correction of heresies."

And his acts as to the abbeys "may be weighed to the worst act or article of Martyn Luthers."

Oak Park, Ill. *(To be continued)* WM. DALLMANN

Conscience

Lectures Delivered at the River Forest Summer School, 1941

I

Etymology. — The English word *conscience* is derived from the Latin *conscientia*, which, in turn, is a literal translation of the Greek συνείδησις, *syneidesis*, and which in German is rendered with *Gewissen*. The component parts of these words have the same meaning: *eidesis, scientia, science, wissen* mean *knowing, knowledge*, and the prefixes *syn, con, ge* mean *together with, in conjunction with*. The difficulty in determining the etymological concept of the term lies in fixing the relation of the prefix. With what does the prefix *syn*, or *con*, connect the noun *eidesis*, or *scientia*?

The Modern Eclectic Dictionary, defines *conscience* thus: "As the etymology indicates, it signifies *knowledge along with* — but whether with a thing or a person or being, it is difficult to determine." Young's Analytical Concordance defines *syneidesis* as *a knowing with one's self*. Vincent, in *Word Studies in the New*

Testament, says: "It is compounded of *syn*, together with, and *eidenai*, to know; and its fundamental idea is knowing together with one's self." This construction is supported by the use Paul makes of the verb *syneidenai* in 1 Cor. 4:4: "οὐδὲν γὰρ ἐμαυτῷ σύνοιδα," *ouden gar emauto synoida*. Very definitely he connects the idea of knowing, expressed in *oida*, through the prefix *syn* with himself, *emauto*. Hence we are justified in translating the noun *syneidesis* with "a knowledge one has together with himself." The same holds good for the other terms *conscientia*, *conscience*, *Gewissen*.

But what may it mean that I have knowledge together with myself? Let us illustrate. If I know a secret together with my neighbor, then this means not only that we both know the secret, but also that each knows that the other knows it. If, then, I say that I know something together with myself, this means not only that I know something, but that I am cognizant of the fact that I know it. The idea expressed in *syneidesis*, therefore, is not a knowledge of things I have acquired by study and observation, but rather a knowledge I have of this knowledge, I know that I know. It is the mind's cognizance of itself, of its thoughts, ideas, and mental operations. Having acquired a bit of knowledge, I am inwardly aware and conscious of what I know. As distinguished from intellectual knowledge, *syneidesis* denotes the awareness one has of this knowledge. Webster defines consciousness as "knowledge of sensations and mental operations, or of what passes in one's mind." This will help us to understand the etymological concept of *syneidesis* as knowledge along with one's self; it is essentially consciousness, an awareness we have of the intellectual knowledge that is in our mind.

In the classical writers *syneidesis* denotes simply *consciousness* without any ethical bearing. The moral implication, which we have in the word *conscience*, as distinguished from *consciousness*, was added later. From a practical viewpoint this is quite understandable. The ordinary man concerned himself little with the psychological concept of the *syneidesis* and *conscientia* of the Stoics; but in his everyday life he was confronted with laws and rules which he either knew by nature or had learned from others and which he recognized as binding upon him. He was conscious of his obligation to comply with them, and there was in him the feeling that he ought to do what he himself recognized as his duty. And it was especially to this last phase of his psychic experience that the term *conscience* was applied. Thus it appears that, on the one hand, the term *conscience* is narrower than the term *consciousness*, inasmuch as it is limited to that consciousness which one has within himself of his conduct as related to a moral obligation.

On the other hand, the term *conscience* is wider than the term *consciousness*, inasmuch as it exercises a definite function in that it determines, according to recognized norms, what is right or wrong in our conduct, urges us to perform what we know to be right, or to abstain from what we believe to be wrong, and approves or condemns our action. Hence conscience, as we understand the term, is not merely an intellectual consciousness of our conduct, but rather a moral consciousness which includes the feeling of obligation and duty.

From what has been said it is evident that conscience is not the mere intellectual knowledge of some law or rule that is to govern our conduct, nor is it the mere state of being conscious of such law or rule, but it is primarily a functioning faculty in man. Indeed, it does not and cannot act without there being present a knowledge of a law and of our obligation under this law. These postulates being given, however, conscience acts as a monitor that holds us to this law, judges our conduct in the light of this law, commends us when we have complied and condemns us when we have not complied with this law. We might compare conscience to a judge in court: he upholds the law, applies it to the offense charged, and pronounces sentence.

This view of conscience appears to be the conception also of Paul in Rom. 2:14, 15: "When the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do by nature the things contained in the Law, these, having not the Law, are a law unto themselves, which show the works of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile [between themselves] accusing or else excusing one another." That the Gentiles have by nature some knowledge of the Law, they show by doing the works required in the Law and by "their conscience also bearing witness." Paul differentiates between conscience and the natural knowledge of the Law. For if the conscience bears witness to the fact that the Law is written in their hearts, it cannot itself be this knowledge. Therefore knowledge of the Law is one thing, and conscience is another thing. "Das Gewissen ist eben nicht identisch mit dem Naturgesetz. . . . Es ist nicht die Quelle der Erkenntnis des Guten und Boesen, sondern es schoepft sein Urteil aus der natuerlichen Gesetzeserkenntnis." Stoeckhardt, *Roemerbrief*, p. 90.

There are other reasons why conscience cannot be identical with the knowledge man may have of right and wrong. — Knowledge and convictions, except the natural knowledge of the Law, are acquired. But conscience is not acquired or evolved in man, it is congenital with him. It is a gift of God, which all men have received, irrespective of their learning or ignorance. While it may not be equally alert in all men, there is no rational being with-

out it. — Knowledge and convictions in moral matters differ greatly among men. One regards as right what another regards as wrong. But there is no difference in the function of conscience; it acts alike in all men. While, therefore, the knowledge, according to which conscience acts, may be in error, conscience itself never errs in its unique function of urging man to comply with what he believes to be right. — Our opinions and convictions as to what is morally right change. What Saul regarded as right and God-pleasing, Paul regarded as wrong and damnable, Acts 26:9; 1 Tim. 1:13. But conscience never changes; it never approves what for the time being we know to be wrong, nor does it ever warn us against doing what we know to be right. — Knowledge is forgotten and convictions are lost, but no man ever loses his conscience. Its urgings and warnings may be weak at times, may even cease in certain instances, yet conscience itself is never lost.

While in loose thinking and speaking we often include knowledge and conviction in the concept of conscience, we must, strictly speaking, differentiate between them. There can be knowledge without conviction, and there can be convictions without a response of conscience, as we see from 1 Tim. 4:2: "Speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron." Conscience, therefore, is not mere knowledge of a moral code, nor is it the sum total of our moral convictions, but it is rather a faculty (*Vermoegen*), a function of the soul that operates on the basis of such knowledge and conviction as we have and that would bring our lives into conformity with the same.

While we distinguish thus between knowledge, conviction, and conscience, we must also emphasize their close relation and connection. As a judge cannot function without the knowledge of the law, even so conscience cannot function where there is no knowledge of some moral obligation. Paul writes Rom. 7:7: "I had not known lust, except the Law had said, Thou shalt not covet." Paul certainly knew that there was lust in his heart, but as long as he did not know the Law which forbade such lust, his conscience did not bother him. It is therefore foolish to appeal to the conscience of men before they know the law or rule whereby their conscience is to act. Unless we first teach men to know what is right, we cannot expect their conscience to urge them to do what is right. Hence it is necessary that we impart to them a right understanding of the Commandments. In doing so, we must not deal in meaningless generalities, but we must set forth clearly and specifically what the Lord requires of them.

Conscience, however, does not act upon mere knowledge of a law; there must also be, on the part of man, a definite recognition of its obligatory and binding force. We know the Old Testament

laws concerning meat and drink, holy days, new moon, and Sabbath days. But as we do not regard them as binding on us, Col. 2:16, 17, our conscience does not urge us to comply with them. We as well as the Catholics know the rule of the Romish Church not to eat meat on Friday. They feel in conscience bound to observe this rule; we do not. Why? We do not recognize the binding force of this church law, while they do. Thus, besides knowledge of a law, the recognition of one's personal obligation to this law is a necessary prerequisite for the functioning of one's conscience. Conscience does not require that the demands of the law be right and its obligation valid — as a matter of fact, this is not always the case — but it does require as a necessary prerequisite for its functioning that we personally *believe* it to be right and binding upon us. Conscience, therefore, never acts in matters which we ourselves do not regard as authoritative and obligatory. For this reason my conscience cannot act on another's conviction, but only on my own.

In teaching the Law, then, we must not only explain its sense and meaning, but must impress upon our hearers also its authority and obligatory force. The mighty God stands behind each one of His commandments, and very significantly He introduces His Law with these words, "I am the Lord, thy God" and adds, "I, the Lord, thy God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me." Ex. 20:2, 5. These are weighty words, which should impress all men with the mandatory force of these commandments and with their own personal responsibility to God. This is a point we must always bear in mind, both with respect to ourselves and with respect to those that hear us. Our learning and teaching of the Law is effective, not to the extent that we understand and have others understand what the words of the Commandments mean, but to the extent that we and they realize that God requires this obedience of us and that it becomes a matter of conscience with us to observe in our lives what we have learned from the Law. This realization, however, is possible only when we truly regard its commandments as binding upon us.

Conscience is a wonderful gift of God and a powerful help in our work. We may teach ever so clearly and impressively, yet we are not always with our people to watch over their conduct; but their conscience is an ever-present monitor, always urging them to do what they have learned. In fact, a live conscience does more in getting our people to observe in their lives what we have taught them than we may ever hope to do by personal influence. A conscience that is aroused by a knowledge of sin will do more in bringing a man to repentance than our most violent invec-

tives; and a conscience cleansed by the assurance of God's grace contributes more to the peace of mind and soul than anything we may otherwise say. In all our teaching, admonition, and comforting let us enlist the services of this co-worker, let us not merely instruct the intellect, but aim to reach the heart and the conscience of our people.

II

Psychology. — Man is born a rational being; he does not become such by subsequent environment, behavior, and training. All mental powers and faculties, which in the individual may later blossom forth in various degrees and directions, are embryonically present in the infant. While we can exercise and develop these innate capabilities, we cannot create them within ourselves. As little as we can impart to a student the fundamental intellectual powers, so little can we impart to anyone the fundamental essence of conscience. Conscience, therefore, is not something which man gradually acquires as a new accession to his psychic make-up, but it is something he has by nature. It is true that in an infant we do not observe the manifestations of a conscience; still, it is likewise true that as the child grows up and learns to know what he must not do, there is in his heart also the feeling that he ought not do it. The reason that conscience does not function in the infant is that there is as yet no conscious knowledge on the basis of which it can function. But as soon as even little children recognize an obligation, there is something active in them that urges them to comply. This does not mean that they will always follow the prompting of their conscience; still it operates in them, as we can observe when we watch their behavior. Thus we can impart to man the knowledge of moral principles; we can also stimulate and direct his conscience, but we do not create it in ourselves or in others. Conscience is not the product of environment, of habit, or of education, but it is congenital with man, it is a gift of God.

Conscience is not a function of some mysterious gland or nerve cell of the physical body, but of the rational soul. This soul may be viewed merely as the life principle in man, his *anima*. But this *anima* of man, as distinguished from that of the beast, has a rational side, which we may call his *mind*, taking this term in a wider sense. The functions of this *mind* may again be subdivided into intellectual, emotional, and volitional functions.

The intellect is that faculty of the soul which is engaged in all processes of learning, such as apperception, thinking, remembering, imagining, reasoning, knowing. It acquires information, compares and combines what it learns with what it already knows, draws conclusions, arrives at decisions, passes judgments, sets up rules,

etc. Its function is merely instrumental, and the net result of its activities is knowledge. Even when we speak of a creative mind, the mind functions only as an instrument, inasmuch as it makes novel combinations of material present in one's thoughts and arrives at novel conclusions.

Yet, if this were the only faculty of the soul, then all knowledge we acquire would leave us untouched. It would be dead knowledge, and we should be as little affected thereby as the paper in the book is by the wisdom or the nonsense printed on its pages. But the soul is susceptible to impressions; to every thought and idea that enters the mind there is a certain repercussion in the heart. And let us remember, it is not the mind as such that makes this impression, but rather what is in the mind; it is not the intellect that ever has any effect on the heart, but the thoughts, the ideas, and the knowledge which the intellect has acquired; it is not my reason that makes me hate, love, fear, or trust a man, but it is what I know of him that creates this or that attitude in my heart. These impressions are feelings, or emotions, and they are the soul's response and reaction to what the mind has learned and accepted. They are the innermost manifestations of a man's soul; for not what a man does, says, or knows, but how he feels about what he knows, indicates his personal attitude and character. "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he," Prov. 23:7.

While there is a large number and variety of emotions, each determined by the peculiar content of the thought that produced it, they are all either positive or negative, favorable or unfavorable, agreeable or disagreeable. Thus love and hate, conviction and doubt, trust and distrust, etc., are not purely intellectual states, but emotional attitudes, linked up with, and based on, intellectual data.

The soul is capable also of volition. The emotions of the heart are not inert and dead, but, as the very term indicates, they are dynamic and motor in tendency. They are themselves produced, governed, and directed by the thoughts of the mind, but they, in turn, press upon the will, which then starts the machinery to produce action. "Feeling, emotion, and sentiment are tremendously important determinants of volition" (Angell). This power of a certain thought to create an emotion, and the power of this emotion to initiate will, action, is at times modified, checked, and neutralized by inhibitory influences of other thoughts and emotions that dominate man.

The question now is, to which of these three, intellect, emotions, or will, must we assign conscience?

The intellect is the mental instrument by means of which we learn to know the meaning and the obligation of the law, but it does not supply that inward urge to comply with the demands of

the law. This is rather the function of the emotions, through which the soul operates. For when the duties of the law are impressed upon a person, there springs up the feeling that we ought to comply, either do what the law requires, or not do what it forbids. Hence the function of the intellect precedes the function of conscience.

When this feeling of personal obligation becomes sufficiently strong, it acts upon the will to carry out what the law demands. Thus under ordinary conditions conscience controls the will, and the will acts after conscience has acted.

Conscience, then, is acted upon by the knowledge of the mind, and, in turn, it acts upon the will; hence it must lie between the two and must essentially be a matter of feeling and emotion. In other words, conscience is a function of the soul which becomes active after the soul has acted through the intellect and before it acts through the will. What the discriminating power of the intellect has recognized to be right, that man feels he ought to do, and this feeling presses upon the will to carry it out.

In saying that conscience is essentially a matter of feeling and emotion, we would not be understood as saying that *any* feeling or emotion may therefore be called conscience. There are many kinds of feelings. Thus a recognized threat or danger may call forth the emotion of fear; recognized kindness and love of others toward a person calls forth in him the emotion of love towards them; recognized benefactions stir up the feeling of gratitude; recognized promises create faith, etc. Now, when a person recognizes a certain duty and obligation, the emotional reaction is the feeling that he ought to comply with it. And it is this feeling that we call conscience. Hence the term *conscience* does not apply to any kind of feeling one may have, but only to that which is the immediate response of the heart to a recognized obligation and duty. By whatever agency the rules which are to govern our conduct are imposed upon us, when our reason has acknowledged them, there will be, whenever they are put to a test in practical life, in our hearts the urge that we ought to comply with the rule which covers this particular case. This feeling of "oughtness" is the very essence of conscience.

This feeling may be strong, or it may be weak. If weak, it is likely to be overshadowed by other and stronger feelings, and no action results; if it is sufficiently strong, it will induce the will to act in agreement with the thought or idea which produced the feeling. But whether weak or strong, it always urges us on to do what we believe to be right or warns us against doing what we believe to be wrong. Also the aftereffects of our actions are essentially emotional. If we obey the promptings of our conscience,

we experience in our hearts the pleasant feeling of satisfaction; contrariwise, there is the depressing feeling of guilt and shame.

Looking at these functions of the soul, described as conscience, purely from a psychological viewpoint, we must admit that they operate also in matters other than moral. If we know of a certain rule of grammar, we feel that in speaking and writing we ought to observe it; if we neglect to do so, we feel "guilty" under this rule. The laborer feels that he ought to be on the job in time; otherwise his wages may be docked. Having made a promise, we feel that we ought to keep it; if not, we ought to feel very much ashamed of ourselves. Living in a community, we feel that we ought to observe conventional proprieties; if we do, we feel at ease; if we do not, we feel embarrassed. Whenever, therefore, we know ourselves to be under certain obligations, whether assumed or imposed, we have the feeling that we ought to comply with such obligations and that we are at fault if we fail to do so. Psychologically, this feeling of "oughtness" in these cases is identical with conscience. However, we ordinarily reserve the term *conscience* for our emotional reactions to moral obligations. While some may perhaps include in a definition of conscience some intellectual and volitional processes, strictly speaking, *conscience is the emotional reaction of the heart to a moral duty the mind has recognized.*

Webster defines conscience as "moral consciousness in general." This is rather vague. We should prefer "consciousness of one's own obligation to some recognized moral standard." Then he adds, "the activity or faculty by which dictinctions are made between the right and the wrong in conduct and character; the act or power of moral discrimination; ethical judgment or sensibility." With this part of the definition we do not agree. For the faculty to distinguish, to discriminate, and to judge between right and wrong rests not in conscience, but in the intellect and reason of man, as will be pointed out below.

The Standard Dictionary has this: "Sense or consciousness of right or wrong." We should amplify this definition to include "the sense or consciousness of the rightness or wrongness of our acts according to an accepted moral principle." The second definition is more acceptable: "Sense or consciousness of the moral goodness or blameworthiness of one's own conduct, intention, or character,' together with a feeling of obligation to do or to be that which is recognized as good, often with special reference to feelings of guilt or remorse for ill-doing."

In his *Treatise on Conscience* Charles Scaer defines conscience and its relation to the mental powers thus: "Conscience is that God-given feeling or emotion which, before the act, prompts us to do that which we believe to be right and deters us from doing that

which we believe to be wrong. And after the act it commends us for having done what we believed to be right, or condemns us for having done what we believed to be wrong.

"What relation, then, does conscience bear to the other powers of the mind, the intellect and the will? As all other feelings are entirely dependent upon the intellect, so also conscience. As every judgment is followed by some feeling, so a judgment that is concerned with moral questions, *i. e.*, right or wrong, is followed by a moral feeling, which is conscience.

"So also it is closely related to the will. As every other feeling presses upon the will to make a choice or decision and to carry that decision into action, so also conscience presses upon the will to make a choice for the right and to carry it out into action."

We hold this definition of conscience and of its relation to other powers of the mind to be correct.

III

Functions of Conscience —

We have repeatedly touched upon the functions of conscience. For our better understanding it may be well to set forth more definitely and in detail what the function of conscience is not and what it is.

1. It is not the business of conscience to set up those laws and rules that are to govern our moral conduct. Buechner, *Handkonkordanz*, p. 493, errs when he says: "Das Gewissen ist das geistige Vermoegen, welches dem Menschen ein unbedingt gueltiges Gesetz fuer sein Handeln aufstellt und ihn richtet. . . . Das Gewissen ist daher teils gesetzgebend, teils richtend. Es ist die innere Stimme Gottes, von Gott dem Menschen gegeben." It is true that conscience is a gift of God and that it judges the conduct of man according to some moral law. But it is not true that it sets up these laws, it is not the voice of God in the sense that through it God tells man what he should do. If that were the case, no heathen could for conscience' sake worship his idol, and no Catholic could for conscience' sake pray to the Virgin Mary. Conscience has no legislative, but only executive and judicial powers; it only urges man to comply with acknowledged laws and judges his action in the light of these laws.

a. It is God, and God alone, who determines what is morally right or wrong, good or evil, and in His Law He tells us what we are to do and not to do. "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God," Micah 6:8. "The statutes of the Lord are right. . . . The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether," Ps. 19:8, 9. The conscience

of man has absolutely nothing to do with determining and formulating the moral demands and standards laid down in the Bible.

b. Men also enact laws and set up rules. Because God so demands it, we for conscience' sake submit ourselves to every ordinance of man, 1 Pet. 2:13; Rom. 13:5. Yet our conscience does not enact these laws of the civil government. The Romish Church burdens the conscience of its people with many man-made rules, and while the devout Catholic submits to them, his conscience did not establish them.

c. Private opinions sometimes control the conscience of men. For conscience' sake some of the early Christians would not eat meat of animals that had been sacrificed to idols, 1 Cor. 8:7. It was not wrong to eat of that meat, as we see from v. 8 and from 1 Cor. 10:25. But these weak brethren thought they became guilty of idolatry if they ate of this meat. It was a private opinion which had grown into a conviction that controlled their conscience. Yet it was not their conscience that gave them this idea; it merely urged them to comply with it.

Thus conscience never sets up a moral rule or code for its own guidance, it does not establish the ethical principles of our conduct, it merely prompts us to observe what we believe to be right and to eschew what we believe to be wrong.

2. It is not the function of conscience to discern between right and wrong *per se* and to evaluate the ethical value of the moral principles to which it submits. When Saul persecuted the Church and blasphemed the Christ, his conscience did not censure him for doing a thing that was essentially wicked; on the contrary, he says, "I verily thought with myself that I ought to do (δεῖν πολλὰ ἐναντία πρᾶξαι, *dein polla enantia praxai*) many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth," Acts 26:9. And the conscience of Ravaillac did not discern that he was committing murder when he killed Henry IV of Navarre, 1610, but he thought he was doing God a service. Conscience, indeed, judges the rightness and wrongness of our own actions according to the norm we have ourselves adopted; yet it does not judge the rightness and wrongness of the norm itself. To do this, is the function of the intellect of man on the basis of such considerations as seem sufficient unto him. In doing so the reason of man often errs, and its judgment and resulting convictions are wrong. Yet conscience never revises or corrects the judgments of the intellect; whatever they may be, right or wrong, it will enforce them, urging man to comply with what at the time he believes to be right.

This certainly must bring home to us our tremendous responsibility in teaching our people. We dare not be careless as to what we teach, hoping that their conscience will set right what we say

wrong. If an erroneous teaching has taken root in our hearers, their conscience will urge them to comply with it. Only when their conscience is controlled by the right kind of knowledge, obtained otherwise, will their conscience refuse to be guided by any false teaching we offer.

3. It is not the function of conscience to establish and to recognize the binding force of a law or moral code. Whether a law applies to us, we must learn from the law itself; whether we submit to it, depends upon our recognition of the authority of him who stands behind this law. But no sooner have we acknowledged our duty under this law, we at once feel obligated to observe it. Whenever, then, a situation develops where this law applies, we feel that we ought to do what the law requires. Thus the Seventh-Day Adventist is convinced in his own mind that the Sabbath laws of the Old Testament are still in force and binding upon all men; hence his conscience constrains him to observe the seventh day of the week. We also know these laws; but having learned from Col. 2:16, 17 and Rom. 14:5, 6 that they are no longer in force, we do not recognize them as binding upon us. For this reason it is not a matter of conscience with us to observe any particular day. However, in neither case is it the conscience of man that determines whether or not the observance of these Sabbath laws is obligatory, but it is rather the understanding, right or wrong, which a person has of these Bible texts.

What, then, is the function of conscience? Briefly stated, it is this: Conscience holds us to comply in practice with those moral principles our mind has recognized to be binding upon us. However, we may distinguish between its function before and after the act, between *conscientia praeveniens* and *conscientia consequens.*

Conscientia praeveniens. — Before the act there is in our heart the distinct feeling that we ought to do what we believe to be right, and thus conscience is that inward urge or drive toward right action and conduct; or, there is the feeling that we ought not do what we believe to be wrong, and thus conscience is that inward monitor that would keep us from doing evil. Conscience is the "categorical imperative" in man. After he has learned and accepted a moral principle, his conscience tells him with an imperative tone and with an authority from which there is no appeal that he must now comply with the same. It does not merely advise man or plead with him, but categorically it commands and insists that he act according to his convictions; it tolerates no evasion, accepts no excuse, and is not deceived by pretense and camouflage, but demands unconditional and full compliance with what we ourselves believe to be right. Any appeal from our conscience is futile because conscience merely enforces those moral

principles we have ourselves adopted. You cannot get away from your own conscience.

Conscientia consequens. — Conscience does not cease to function after the deed is done. The words of Paul Rom. 2:15: "Their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts between themselves accusing or else excusing one another," point to this *conscientia consequens.* When we have obeyed the voice of conscience, there arise in our mind thoughts that excuse and defend us against whatever may challenge the correctness of our conduct, and our conscience justifies and commends us for having acted as we did. As a result we experience that peaceful and gratifying feeling which we call a good conscience. — But if we have acted contrary to the dictates of our conscience, there arise in our mind thoughts that accuse us and uphold the charge of guilt over against any attempt to justify our action by spurious arguments, and our conscience reproves and condemns us. As a result we have that disquieting and annoying feeling of shame and guilt which we call an evil conscience.

Attributes of Conscience —

1. *Conscience is universal.* — Conscience is not a peculiar gift of grace bestowed upon Christians in their conversion, but it is an equipment every man has by nature; it is congenital with him. Paul tells us that also the Gentiles have it, Rom. 2:14, 15, and we can observe its influence even in the life of the savage. While for certain reasons it is not equally sensitive and active in all men, there is no man on earth without a conscience. Beside the intellectual powers of thinking and reasoning, it is especially conscience that distinguishes man from the irrational brute, which is never influenced in its actions by moral considerations.

2. *Conscience is a precious gift of God.* — It is for a very definite purpose that God preserved in man not only a rudimentary knowledge of His Law but also a conscience. The natural knowledge of the Law shows man, in a measure, what he should and what he should not do, but it is conscience, bearing witness to this Law, that urges man to comply with the Law. The Law shows us the way, but conscience prompts us to go this way; it is that ever-present monitor that would have us walk in the light of the knowledge we have, it is the deputy of God to enforce His Law. Conscience, therefore, is a powerful factor in the life of the individual and of the community. Without it man's knowledge of right and wrong would remain dead and not influence his conduct; without it every Dr. Jekyll would be a Mr. Hyde; without it the moral structure of society would break down and communal life become an impossibility. Because of his greater intelligence the conscience-

less man would be far more dangerous to his fellow men than the conscienceless wolf, for as there would be no inward urge to hold him to a moral code, only carnal appetites and selfish interests would sway him and direct his actions. How often in our own lives has not that little voice of conscience determined our course? And may we not assume that it has acted likewise in others? It is true that the conscience of many is often misguided and that men do not always conform to recognized standards of morality for conscience' sake but rather because they find it expedient to do so. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that by and large conscience is a powerful determinant in the lives of men.

3. *Conscience is uniform in all men.* — Conscience does not act differently in different people. As the physical heart beats alike in all men, so conscience acts alike in the Greek and in the barbarian. That two men, each obeying his conscience, act differently in a given case, is not due to a different functioning of their conscience, but to a difference in their moral conviction. We also grant that the sensitiveness with which conscience responds to conviction and the force with which it speaks vary not only in individuals but also in the same person. With some it is quite alert, with others it is rather sluggish; at times it speaks with a loud voice, then again it is but a faint whisper; it may continue to work on us for a longer or a shorter time, all which depends upon the treatment it receives. But as to its essential function, there is no difference between the conscience of the cultured man and that of the savage.

4. *Conscience is unchangeable.* — Opinions and convictions change. What at one time we believed to be right we now know to be wrong, and *vice versa*. But this does not involve a change in conscience. Whatever for the time being may be a man's conviction, that his conscience urges him to do. As far as his conscience was concerned, it acted alike both when Paul persecuted Christ and when he preached Christ Crucified; in both instances he did what he thought he ought to do.

5. *Conscience is incorruptible.* — Men can be bribed to do what they know to be wrong, but they can never bribe their conscience to sanction their wrongdoing. There may be other considerations, such as the fear of men, the desire to please and to favor someone, the need in which we find ourselves, that would approve and seemingly justify a wrong act, but conscience will never do so. Peter might have tried to use as an excuse for his denial of Christ the danger in which he found himself or a momentary weakness of faith, but his conscience would have had none of it. Because conscience acts on man's own conviction, it cannot do otherwise than approve what he believes to be right and disapprove what he

believes to be wrong. Unless the conviction is first changed, conscience abides by its judgment. "Conscience is the only incorruptible thing about us." Fielding.

6. *Conscience is infallible.* — Those who deny the infallibility of conscience evidently include in their concept elements that are, strictly speaking, not of the essence of conscience. In its proper function, conscience is the urge of the emotions to comply with the law of the mind. And in this it never makes a mistake, it never tells us to do what we know to be wrong and never warns us against doing what we know to be right. If men act contrary to their convictions, it certainly is not their conscience that prompts them to do so. It is true, the conscience of Paul moved him to do what was wicked, but at the time he was convinced that he ought to do that very thing, Acts 26:9. For men often err in their judgment as to what is right or wrong, and conscience will urge them to follow their conviction; but even in this case conscience does not err in its specific function, it simply prompts man to walk in the light he has. The mistake was made by the intellect of man. "Reason deceives us often, conscience never." Rousseau. "Conscience is infallible as a prompter to action, but not as judge between right and wrong." Scaer.

Saying that conscience is infallible does not mean that it will inevitably function in every instance in which a man is about to do what he knows to be wrong. For if one persistently disregards, and wilfully acts contrary to, the promptings of his conscience, these become weaker and weaker until they finally cease. This is what Paul means when he speaks of a "conscience seared with a hot iron," 1 Tim. 4:2, and of the "hardness of their [Gentiles] heart, who being past feeling (ἀπηλγηκότες, apelgekotes)," Eph. 4:18, 19. Though they speak lies in hypocrisy and give themselves over to lasciviousness, there is in them no feeling of shame and guilt. Their conscience no longer responds, it neither warns them before the act, nor does it accuse them after the act. However, this does not mean that it is altogether dead or that such people have entirely lost the faculty of conscience. For while it may be callous and hardened with respect to certain sins, it may be sensitive and active in other respects; there is an honesty among thieves. And it frequently happens that an apparently dead conscience again becomes active, yea, violently active, even in those matters where it had ceased to function.

This brings up the question *Is conscience always active?* Our answer is "No." The faculty and power of conscience is always present in man, but there must be something that starts it. The motor in your car may have a thirty-horse-power capacity, but there must be something to start it. What is it that starts con-

science to function? Knowledge of the Law and consciousness of our obligation under the Law are necessary prerequisites for the functioning of conscience; yet of themselves they will not incite conscience to act. Conscience actually functions only when in a given life situation our moral convictions are put to a test. A monitor and judge cannot function where there is no occasion for admonition and judgment. Thus we know the Fifth Commandment and are convinced that it is binding upon us. Yet, as long as there is in our conduct no possible conflict with its demands, our conscience is quiet. But as soon as a contingency arises where we might possibly act contrary to this Commandment, conscience at once springs into action, warning us not to do what we know to be wrong and commending us for having listened to its warning or condemning us for having acted contrary to our conviction. Also the remembrance of past sins, committed perhaps many years ago, may now or in the future stir up our conscience to accuse and condemn us. Thus David prayed Ps. 25:7: "Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions." From personal and professional experience we know that the remembrance of past sins often causes a good deal of conscience trouble.

But we ask, Why does conscience not react in every instance in which our actions are likely to conflict with our conviction? Why does conscience not always respond, and why does the will not always yield to its urgings? Since it is the same soul that operates through the mind and the conscience and the will, one should think there would be neither hitch nor halt in the operation. That which the soul through the mind recognizes to be right and which the same soul through conscience urges us to do, this same soul through the will should also put into practice. Why should the soul operating through the will fail or refuse to do what the same soul operating through conscience urges the will to do?

The answer we find in Rom. 7:14–23. We have here the confession of a believer. Paul confesses that the Law is good and right, v. 16, and he delights in this Law after the inward man, v. 23, and would therefore gladly follow its precepts. Yet he finds that in his flesh dwelleth no good thing, v. 18, and that the law in his members, that is, the law of sin, v. 25, the original depravity of his nature, wars against the law of his mind, v. 23. The soul of a Christian is the battleground of two conflicting forces; it is swayed either by the new man or by the old man. According to the new man the Christian delights in the Law of God and is willing to comply with it, but the old man often interferes and will not let him carry out what his conscience would have him do. All Christians have had this experience. They were impressed by a sermon they heard, their conscience urged them to do what they had

learned; but before they carry out their resolve, the old Adam bestirs himself, "their flesh lusteth against the Spirit . . . so that ye cannot do the things ye would," Gal. 5:17.

In a way this applies to the Gentiles also, whose conscience bears witness to the Law of God written in their hearts and would, if obeyed, effect a *justitia civilis*. However, the demands of this Law, which even the Gentiles recognize to be right and good, do not always agree with the selfish interests of man. As these interests gain the ascendancy in his mind, he will ignore the voice of his conscience. It is, therefore, the natural depravity of man that often hinders and prevents him from doing what his conscience demands. Man is "double-minded," Jas. 1:8, has a dual personality, is both a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde. Goethe expresses a similar thought in *Faust:*

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach, in meiner Brust!
Die eine will sich von der anderen trennen:
Die eine haelt in derber Liebeslust
Sich an die Welt mit klammernden Organen;
Die andere hebt gewaltsam sich vom Dust
Zu den Gefilden hoher Ahnen.

This phenomenon can be explained psychologically. As pointed out above, conscience centers chiefly in the emotions, it is a feeling that we ought to do what we know to be right. But the heart is capable of other feelings, *e. g.*, the feeling of fear. One may perhaps fear that he will be in mortal danger if he acts according to the dictates of his conscience. Now if this feeling of fear becomes stronger than the feeling of duty, then fear will induce the will to do its bidding. It was fear of men that made Peter set aside his conscience and deny the Lord. It was love of money that made Judas ignore the warnings of his conscience and steal from the bag. It is the desire to please men, the fear of their ridicule, the love of sin, etc., that often move men to override the dictates of their conscience. Whatever emotion is strongest in the heart, controls the will and leads to action. It must, therefore, be our aim so to direct and strengthen conscience in ourselves and in others that it may hold its own over against the evil inclinations of the heart.

A psychoanalytical study of conscience and its function is a great help to us in the treatment of conscience.

IV

The Treatment of Conscience. — If conscience is to serve its God-intended purpose, it must be properly treated. We may discuss the treatment of conscience under the following headings:

A. *How to prepare conscience for proper action.*

B. *How to treat conscience when it acts.*

C. *How to deal with conscience after man has acted.*

A

How shall we prepare the conscience of our people for right guidance and action in life? We hear it said again and again, "Let conscience be your guide." This is correct, inasmuch as the voice of conscience must always be obeyed. Yet, if we are to follow conscience as our guide, it must itself be properly guided. Conscience is like the gas and the motor in our automobile; they make the thing go, go anywhere, but it depends upon the driver to steer this moving power in the right direction. Conscience is the moving power that urges us to do what we believe to be right and to avoid what we believe to be wrong. But as to what is right and wrong, conscience is blind. It does not examine and question the correctness of our beliefs and convictions, whatever they may be; it impels us to go through with them. For conscience' sake Paul persecuted the Church, Acts 26:9; for conscience' sake men offered their sons as burnt offerings to Baal, Jer. 19:5; for conscience' sake some would not eat meat of animals that had been sacrificed to idols, 1 Cor. 8:7; for conscience' sake the devout Catholic will not eat meat on Friday. For conscience' sake men have done the most foolish and also the most abominable things. Conscience guides us in our actions, as it is itself guided and directed by the knowledge of the mind. Teach a man wrong principles of moral conduct, and his conscience will urge him to observe them. Conscience has no light of its own, but it lives and acts in the light of what man has learned. Hence the importance of proper instruction.

The source from which we can get reliable information as to what is morally right in the sight of God and man is the Bible. Here God Himself speaks to us and shows us what is good and what He requires of us, Micah 6:8. His Word, therefore, is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path, Ps. 119:105. By taking heed unto His commandments we shall lead a clean, virtuous, and godly life, Ps. 119:9.

As conscience holds us responsible to a Higher Power, to God, it should be bound and controlled by nothing but the Word of God. Hence we who are called to guide the conscience of others must be careful that we do not impose upon them our own ideas and man-made laws but that we teach only what God has commanded, Matt. 28:20. In so doing we must also impress upon them that it is by no means optional with them whether or not they do these things, but they must be led to realize that God requires obedience to His commandments and will hold him responsible who fails in the least, Jas. 2:10; Lev. 10:2. If, then, conscience is to guide us in the right way, we must have the

correct understanding of the meaning of God's Law and must recognize our personal obligation under this Law.

In this connection we may speak of the erring, the doubting, and the enslaved conscience.

The erring conscience. — Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as an erring conscience. Conscience never errs in its single function to urge man to do what he believes to be right. The error lies not in man's conscience but in his cognition and knowledge. Because his conviction is wrong, his consequent conduct will be wrong. Conscience never questions the rightness of a man's convictions; whatever they may be, it simply urges him to live up to them. It is, therefore, not conscience that errs in its function but reason that erred in its judgment.

There were people at Corinth who had a conscience with respect to eating meat of animals that had been sacrificed to an idol, 1 Cor. 8:4, 7. Now, there was no harm in eating this meat, nor was there virtue in not eating thereof, v. 8; 1 Cor. 10:25-27. Yet these people thought it was wrong. "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." It was not their conscience that erred, but it was their knowledge and understanding that was at fault; they believed something to be wrong which God had not forbidden.

We also have people in our congregations to whom indifferent things, and sometimes very trivial things, are weighty matters of conscience. The proper treatment of these people is not to tell them to ignore their conscience but rather to instruct them, so as to bring about a change in their conviction. We must also be careful that by our example we do not lead a weak brother to act against his misdirected conscience. "For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in an idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols, and through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died?" 1 Cor. 8:10. "Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother offend," v. 13. See also 1 Cor. 10:27-33.

The doubting conscience. — Again, there is no such a thing as a doubting conscience. The doubt lodges in the mind; we do not know whether or not what we are about to do is right. And because we are not sure of ourselves, our conscience does not and cannot urge us to action. We do not see clearly the way we should go; hence there is a feeling of uncertainty in our hearts, which tends to paralyze all action. Where there is conviction, conscience acts, and where there is no conviction, conscience does not

act. — But while conscience will not impel man to acts which to him are doubtful, it will function after he has acted in such cases. For now there is something sure, he has acted, and he has acted in doubt. And at once his conscience will accuse and condemn him. This is what Paul teaches Rom. 14:23: "And he that doubteth is damned" [before his own conscience] "if he eat, because he eateth not of faith" [with the conviction that he is doing the right thing]; "for whatsoever is not of faith is sin." In such cases we must suspend action until we become "fully persuaded in our mind," Rom. 14:5, as to what we should do. The proper treatment of persons with a "doubting conscience," is not to cajole them to override their scruples but to remove these scruples by patient instruction, which must be very clear and well authenticated from Scriptures.

The enslaved conscience. — An enslaved conscience is controlled by one's own superstitions and imaginations or by the dictates and opinions of men. The conscience of many a pagan is a slave to his superstitious notions, and the Romish Church has burdened the conscience of its members with many man-made laws and ordinances. And there are others who seek to enslave their fellow men by foisting upon them their own ideas as the commandments of God. But we read 1 Cor. 7:23: "Be not ye the servants of men." This is particularly true in all matters of conscience. Conscience holds us responsible to God; therefore He, and He alone, can bind it, not man. It was this liberty of conscience that, under God, was restored to mankind by the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther. Let us zealously guard it; let not our own conscience be enslaved by others, nor let us enslave their conscience by spurious teaching. The proper treatment of an enslaved conscience is again instruction. Men must learn that neither priest nor Pope nor anyone else may impose upon their conscience man-made laws, nor should they themselves burden it with obligations of their own invention. Only when it is directed and controlled by the Word of God, does conscience serve its God-intended purpose.

B

How are we to treat conscience when it actually functions? The answer is very simple: The voice of conscience must be obeyed in every case. We submit the following three reasons.

1. To act against conscience is sin. Paul writes Rom. 14:23: "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin." The word *faith* here does not mean the faith which trusts in the merits of Christ, but being in this verse contrasted to *doubt*, it means *conviction*. Ordinarily conviction acts on conscience in such a way as to produce in the heart the feeling that we ought to do what we know to be right;

hence, to act against one's own conviction is to act also against one's conscience. And to do this is sin. Nor must we regard it a minor offense, which is of no serious consequence, but being a transgression of a plain statement of God's Word, it brings judgment and perdition upon the offender. For 1 Cor. 8:11 we read: "And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died." Paul means to say that if by our example we lead a weak brother to sin against his conscience, then the weak brother does something because of which he shall perish. Hence sins against conscience invoke the wrath and punishment of God as fully as sins committed against the Decalog. — This is a point we must bear in mind for ourselves, and to which we must again and again call the attention of our people. It is a sin when we act contrary to the First or the Second or any other Commandment, but it is just as much a sin when in any matter that involves a moral issue we act contrary to the dictates of our conscience. Conscience is God's deputy in our hearts, a monitor, whose admonitions and warnings must always be obeyed.

2. To act against conscience brings personal discomfort and distress. There will arise thoughts that accuse us, and though we may cast about for all manner of excuses, conscience will not be deceived, it will tell us, "You cannot plead ignorance, you knew that you should not have done this thing, I warned you; but you would not listen, you stand condemned by your own conviction." A guilty conscience takes the joy out of life and gives one a foretaste of hell. If, however, we obey the voice of our conscience, we experience a definite satisfaction, which makes for peace of mind and joy of heart. "Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen." For the sake of our own mental and spiritual tranquillity we should always obey the dictates of our conscience.

3. To act against conscience tends to weaken its influence and to destroy moral character. As man abuses his conscience by continually disregarding its voice, he weakens its force until it finally ceases to function. He reaches a point where he commits the grossest crimes "without feeling" the sinfulness of his acts, Eph. 4:19. And this destroys his moral character. For moral character consists not in the mere knowledge of moral principles, but in their constant observance. As conscience is the very power that urges man to observe these principles, his moral character is definitely tied up with his conscience. Thus to act against conscience has, if continued, the most devastating effect on character. Hence "labor to keep alive that little spark of celestial fire called conscience." Washington.

With reference to the things in which conscience demands our unqualified obedience we may distinguish three possibilities:

they may be allowed, they may be commanded, they may be forbidden in the Word of God.

1. *In matters allowed.* — In Rom. 14 Paul speaks of weak brethren who had scruples of conscience concerning things which God had neither commanded nor forbidden, concerning which, therefore, one could do what he pleased. "For one believeth that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eateth herbs," v. 2. For some reasons these people thought it was wrong to eat certain meat. But in v. 14 Paul tells us: "I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself." Hence there is no law that we must abstain from certain food. See also 1 Tim. 4:3. Therefore he writes 1 Cor. 8:8: "Meat commendeth us not to God; for neither if we eat, are we better; neither if we eat not, are we worse." While the eating of meat is an adiaphoron, yet Paul tells us: "But to him that esteemeth anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean," Rom. 14:14. If such a person, then, were to eat what according to his own conviction he ought not to eat, he would defile his conscience, 1 Cor. 8:7, and would be committing a real sin in a matter which, of itself, is allowed. "For whatever is not of faith is sin," Rom. 14:23. Thus we know that we are free to eat meat on Friday and during Lent; but if a Catholic, whose conscience is bound by the law of his Church, would do so, he would not merely transgress a man-made rule but would also be sinning against God inasmuch as he acts contrary to his conscience. Therefore even in matters which God allows we must not disobey our conscience nor prevail upon others to do so; while an erroneous conviction must be corrected by proper instruction from the Word of God, its promptings must in the meantime be obeyed.

In matters which God has neither commanded nor forbidden we are free to act as we please; yet we must take heed "lest by any means this liberty of ours becomes a stumblingblock to them that are weak," 1 Cor. 8:9. If by an inconsiderate use of our liberty in matters allowed we lead a brother to act against his conscience, emboldened by our example to do what in his heart he believes to be wrong, then we sin against him and wound his conscience, and in so doing we sin against Christ, 1 Cor. 8:9-13. As far as our own conscience is concerned, we are free to act as we please, but for the sake of a weak brother's conscience we must at times refrain from using our liberty, 1 Cor. 10:28-32. Thus it becomes a matter of conscience for us to respect the conscience of them that are weak.

However, if the erring brother is so set in his mind that our example would not mislead him; if he insists that we also abstain from things which God has allowed; if he demands that by our

compliance we recognize his erroneous views as though they were divine requirements, then we must by no means yield to him. For the sake of charity to a weak brother we should be ready not to make use of the liberty we have, Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 8:9; but if a confession of the truth is involved, Gal. 2:3–5, then we must stand in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free and not be again entangled with the yoke of bondage, Gal. 5:1, nor let our liberty be judged by another man's conscience, 1 Cor. 10:29.

2. *In matters commanded.* — The situation is worse when a man acts contrary to convictions that are in full agreement with the Word of God. He knows that God does not want him to steal, his conscience also warns him not to do it, and yet he steals. In this case he commits a double sin, one against the Seventh Commandment, the other against his conscience. This is a very serious matter, this kills faith. For Paul tells us 1 Tim. 1:19: "Holding faith and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." He means to say that he who puts away a good conscience by acting contrary to its demands makes shipwreck concerning his faith, *i. e.*, loses faith. We cannot trust in God for the forgiveness of our sins while at the same time we are intent on committing sins against Him. "Faith cannot exist and abide with, and alongside of, a wicked intention to sin and to act against conscience." *Trigl.*, p. 795. If persisted in, such sins will "sear conscience as with a hot iron," 1 Tim. 4:2, so that man is "past feeling" the sinfulness of his act, Eph. 4:19, and thus they *may* ultimately lead to hardening of the heart and to the sin against the Holy Ghost.

When speaking to our people about sin, we certainly must impress upon them that sin is the transgression of the Law and brings God's wrath and curse upon them; but at times it is advisable also to tell them that by sinning they violate their conscience, disturb their peace of mind, kill their faith, and drive the Holy Spirit from their hearts. Because of the complacency we sometimes find in our own hearts and among the members of our congregations, it may be well to remind ourselves and them of the fact that the grace of God indeed covers all our sins, but that no one can *have* and *enjoy* this grace if he lives in sins against his conscience, for thereby faith, by which he lays hold of the forgiveness prepared for him, is destroyed.

3. *In matters not recognized as forbidden.* — A most difficult situation arises when a man feels himself in conscience bound to do what, unbeknown to him, is forbidden by God. Thus it may happen that with a good conscience he will do what is evil in the sight of God. Paul says of himself: "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day," Acts 23:1; and 2 Tim. 1:3 he

tells us that "from his forefathers" he served God with a pure conscience. But the same Paul confesses that he had been a blasphemer and a persecutor and injurious, 1 Tim. 1:13. How can that be? When Paul persecuted the Christians, he acted according to the dictates of his conscience. "Verily, I thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth," Acts 26:9. Thus Paul sinned; still, because he did not know better, he had, while making havoc of the Church, a good conscience before God. After he was converted, his sins, indeed, weighed heavily upon him, as we see from his confession 1 Tim. 1:13–15. Even so a heathen to this day may have a good conscience when he worships his idol; in fact, his conscience urges him to do so; but in obeying his conscience he is sinning against the First Commandment. If, on the other hand, he would not worship his idol, he would sin against his conscience, which is likewise forbidden by God. The same is true of a devout Catholic; he sins whether he prays to the Virgin Mary or whether he does not.

How shall we treat such a case? Shall we insist that a man give up his sinful practice even before he is convinced, or shall we let him continue in his sin until we have convinced him? By no means should we advise such a one to act against his conscience, for that also would be a sin, and it would tend to destroy his moral character, inasmuch as thereby we break down in him that very power which urges him to do what he believes to be right. Besides, if we teach him to disregard his conscience when it prompts him to worship his idol, he may learn the lesson so well that he will with equal ease disregard his conscience when it prompts him to worship the true God. No man is so foolish as to destroy the motor of his car because it is headed the wrong way; the thing to do is to turn it in the right direction. Even so we must not weaken or destroy the driving power of a moral life by inducing anyone to act contrary to the dictates of his misdirected conscience, but rather let us teach him from the Word of God the way he should go.

We are here not discussing the question whether such a person should be received or retained as a member of the Christian congregation. In God's Church God's Word alone shall rule, and by it the conscience of every Christian must be governed. Whoever teaches and lives otherwise than God's Word teaches, cannot, even if it be a matter of conscience with him, become or remain a member of the Christian Church. But also in this case instruction must not be neglected. — If it is in our power to do so, we must also prevent people from doing a wicked thing which they think they ought to do, Acts 23:12-24. If someone thinks he is doing God a service and therefore ought to kill a person, John 16:2, then

we must try to set him right by proper instruction; if we do not succeed, we must seek to prevent him from carrying out his wicked purpose. There is a difference between preventing a man from acting according to his conscience and persuading him to act contrary to his conscience; in the one case he does not defile his conscience, and in the other he does.

C

How are we to deal with the "conscientia consequens"? The primary function of conscience is to urge man to comply in his conduct with those moral laws which he himself recognizes as binding upon him. But after man has acted, either obeying or disobeying that inward monitor, there are certain aftereffects, pleasant or unpleasant, which "register" in his conscience. The primary function may be brief, and it comes to an end the moment the deed is done, but the secondary function may continue for a long time after. Also these aftereffects have a pedagogical value; if they are pleasant, they will encourage us to obey our conscience in the future; if they are unpleasant, they will discourage us to repeat the offense.

Under this heading we shall speak of a good conscience, an evil conscience, and a callous or hardened conscience.

A good conscience. — If man obeys the voice of his conscience, his thoughts will approve his action. Conscious of having done what he felt he ought to do, there is in his heart a pleasant feeling of satisfaction and contentment. A good conscience is a precious boon, well worth the efforts of any man to obtain and to retain. Paul says Acts 24:16: "Herein do I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offense toward God and man." Paul does not mean to say that he always succeeds, as little as he means to say Phil. 3:12 that he is already perfect; but he exercises (ἀσκῶ, *asko*) himself, he labors, he disciplines himself, to have a good conscience. Because of the depravity of our nature it is not always an easy matter to be successful. Carnal appetites, selfish interests must be repressed, and whatever would turn us from the path of recognized duty must be pushed aside. This means self-discipline, self-denial. But with the help of God's Spirit we must diligently and constantly strive to have a conscience void of offense toward God and man. While a good conscience as such requires no special treatment, it is well to admonish our people occasionally that for their own peace of mind they must keep their conscience clean.

An evil conscience. — If one disobeys the voice of his conscience, it will for this reason not simply cease to function. But his thoughts will accuse, convict, and condemn him for having

done what he knew to be wrong, and there will be in his heart that mortifying feeling of guilt and shame. A guilty conscience is the worst thing a man can suffer in this life. This truth was realized even by the pagan Greeks. The Erinyes, those snake-haired women who pursued the evildoer and inflicted madness, were personifications of the evil conscience. Schiller in "Die Kraniche des Ibikus" graphically describes these Furies:

Wohl dem, der frei von Schuld und Fehle
Bewahrt die kindlich reine Seele!
Ihm duerfen wir nicht raechend nahn,
Er wandelt frei des Lebens Bahn.
Doch wehe, wehe, wer verstohlen
Des Mordes schwere Tat vollbracht!
Wir heften uns an seine Sohlen,
Das furchtbare Geschlecht der Nacht.

Und glaubt er fliehend zu entrinnen,
Gefluegelt sind wir da, die Schlingen
Ihm werfend um den fluecht'gen Fuss,
Dass er zu Boden fallen muss.
So jagen wir ihn ohn' Ermatten —
Versoehnen kann uns keine Reu' —
Ihn fort und fort bis zu den Schatten
Und geben ihn auch dort nicht frei.

A person may live in luxury and plenty, he may enjoy the respect and acclaim of his fellows, yet within there is that gnawing worm, his guilty conscience; the evil he has done is haunting him, disturbing his slumbers, and taking all joy out of life. He may repent of his sin, pay conscience money, as Judas did, Matt. 27:3-8; yet tears will not wash away his guilt, and contrition will not restore peace to his heart. He will try to forget, and in the stress of activity and the whirl of pleasure he may forget for a time, but again and again the specter of guilt looms up in his consciousness. And when its furies are unleashed, they sometimes drive a person to despair and suicide. But even death will bring no relief, "for their worm shall not die," Is. 66:24.

How must such a conscience be treated? That friends excuse our action and even praise our courage, will not relieve us of the compunctions of conscience and rid us of its terrors. Even if the priests and Pharisees had tried to comfort Judas in his distress — which they did not even try to do — it would not have appeased his conscience. Conscience holds us guilty before God; any easement must, therefore, come from Him. There is nothing in the wide world that can restore peace to a troubled soul except the assurance of God's grace and forgiveness. And thanks be to God, this assurance we have in the Gospel. "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart," 1 John 3:20, and His grace is greater

than our guilt, Rom. 5:20. The blood of Christ can purge our conscience from dead works, Heb. 9:14, and in the assurance of faith we have our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, Heb. 10:22. Faith in the atoning merits of our blessed Savior is the *only* and the *sure* cure for an evil conscience.

When our people gather in church to hear from our lips the Word of God, let us bear in mind that there may be among them such as are secretly troubled in their conscience either by some sin recently committed or by the remembrance of the sins of their youth, Ps. 25:7. They are in need of comfort. And to us God says, "Comfort ye, comfort ye My people," Is. 40:1. Let us not fail them. While on the one hand we must arouse the conscience of our people to a realization of their sin and guilt before God, we must, on the other hand, comfort and establish their hearts with the assurance of God's forgiving grace.

A callous or dead conscience. — This condition of conscience is brought on by consistently ignoring its warnings and accusations. In this case it becomes less and less responsive, until it finally ceases to act. However, it is not quite correct to say that it is dead. For while it may not function in those things in which its warnings were not heeded, it may be very active in others, and it may also become active again even in those matters in which it was dormant for some time. Judas was a thief, John 12:6. At first his conscience, no doubt, reproved him for his pilferings, but as he disregarded its warnings, it gradually became callous in this respect. He went from bad to worse and finally betrayed his Master for thirty pieces of silver. But when he saw that Jesus was condemned to be crucified, his conscience was furiously aroused, accusing him not only of the betrayal of his Lord, Matt. 27:4, but, no doubt, also of his love of money that led him to commit this terrible crime.

To treat a hardened conscience is not an easy matter. It may be necessary to ban and damn the man to bring him to his senses. God Himself sometimes uses severe measures and bitter life experiences to break the hardness of the heart. But as for conscience itself, man must be led to recognize his obligation under the Law and to realize his responsibility to God. It may be advisable to approach him along those lines where his conscience still functions and from there proceed to those points where it is seemingly dead.

From the preceding discussion it must be apparent that conscience is a powerful factor in the life of man. The knowledge of moral principles would be dead and inoperative except for the executive power of conscience which puts them into effect. Itself controlled and directed by those laws which man has recognized and adopted, it, in turn, directs and controls the conduct of man.

While it is true that the affections and lusts of the old Adam enter largely into the life of every individual, it cannot be denied that conscience, operating on sound moral principles, develops a moral character and produces a moral life. Its influence enters into the various ramifications of human conduct, and, subjecting man to the judgment of God, it reaches out into eternity.

We are counselors of conscience to our people. What a responsibility! Let us see to it that in all matters of moral conduct we give them sound counsel and instruction from the Word of God. But at the same time, let us address ourselves not merely to their intellect, but follow the advice Dr. F. Pieper gave his students: "Suchen Sie das Gewissen zu treffen." If the things we teach our people become a matter of conscience with them, then their conscience will urge them to observe in life what we have taught them. In our pastoral practice we have to deal with all sorts of consciences, and it requires wisdom and tact to treat them properly. Professionally, therefore, it is of importance to us to give some thought and study to the functions and the treatment of conscience.

River Forest, Ill. E. W. A. KOEHLER

Outlines on the Wuerttemberg Epistle Selections

Fourth Sunday after Easter

1 Thess. 2:9-13

Work, work, work! Each and all, severally and jointly, as individuals, as congregation — work! Some complain that they are overtaxed by legalistic compulsion or overworked by overorganization. Before a congregation can work at all, work must have been done upon it; if it should continue working, work upon it must keep it in working condition. Today, then, we shift from work rendered by the congregation to work done upon the congregation for its welfare.

The Welfare of the Congregation Requires Work

1. God's work 2. The pastor's work 3. The Word's work

1

The Gospel of God is mentioned v. 9, and v. 13 we find the word ἐνεργεῖται, energize, exert energy. Paul preached the Gospel of God to the congregation. He preached that Christ died for them and that He arose again. Justification. Christ worked to obtain it for man; He labored to redeem, Is. 43:24, 25; 53; Eph. 5:2, 25-27. Active and passive obedience. — Christ justified the Thessalonians by His travail and triumph before they knew of it. Rom. 5:8, 10. He worked for the congregation before it existed by working that it