

CONSCIENCE AND CONSECRATION

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I.

Wesley, in one of his hymns, sings:

"Quick as the apple of an eye,
O God, my conscience make!
Awake my soul, when sin is nigh,
And keep it still awake."

In my student days I was always stirred by the writings of Joseph Cook, that great prophet of Boston. It was my privilege to get into one of his Monday Lectures. Cook said once:

"Beware how you put your finger on the quivering needle of conscience, and forbid it to go North, South, East, West; beware of failing to balance it on a hair's point; for whoever tutors that primordial, necessary universal, infallible perfection, tutors a personal God."

Rev. William Jay, one of England's brilliant preachers of long ago, said: "Conscience is a bosom friend or a bosom fury; it is God's vicegerent on earth; his tribunal within; the quarter sessions before the grand assize."

The Old Testament has no such word as conscience in it, but it abounds in tragic instances and illustrations of conscience at work. Think of Joseph's brothers and their guilty consciences smiting them. Think of Adam's guilty conscience as he hides himself from God. "Adam, where art thou?" and he said: "I heard thy voice . . . I was afraid . . . I hid myself" Genesis 3:9-10.

In these words we have in brief the history of human sin throughout the ages. What is there in all poetry that sets forth sin and a guilty conscience more tragically than Psalm 51. The book of Job and the wisdom books of the Old Testament have their centers in matters of conscience. "It is the problem of conscience that imparts its chief interest in the book of Job. One reason why the Psalms have been so highly prized is because they are the cries of a convicted, contrite heart," writes Alexander.

The word conscience occurs thirty-one times in the New Testament, but once in the gospels. It occurs twice in Acts, five times in Hebrews, three times in the Epistles of Peter and over twenty times in Paul's doctrine of conscience as set forth in Romans 2:14-15, which states that the Gentiles being a "law unto themselves," inasmuch as they possess a "law written in their hearts," "their conscience bearing witness therewith, accusing or excusing them."

- (1) All men are morally responsible for their actions.
- (2) For their condemnation in sin.
- (3) For their acceptance in righteousness.

And further, it is taught man has received a revelation in all stages of history sufficient to make him morally responsible, and that he possesses a moral faculty—Conscience.

II.

Conscience may be briefly and provisionally defined as a faculty including a perception and feeling. A perception of right and wrong in the nature of choices and intentions, and a feeling that right ought, and wrong ought not, to be carried out by the will. Conscience is that which perceives and feels rightness and obligations in choices. It is the faculty, power or principle within us that enables us to judge of the moral or immoral character of our actions and thoughts, and approves or

condemns, accordingly. Conscience, according to the loose popular idea of it, is the soul's sense of right and wrong. Conscience, according to the strict scholarly idea of it, is the soul's sense of right and wrong in its moral motives; that is, in its choices and intentions.

Conscience in full activity includes a direct perception of right and wrong in choices. A feeling that right ought and that wrong ought not to be performed. Complacency in the right, and displacency in the wrong.

A sense of personal merit in the performance of the right, and of demerit in the performance of the wrong. A delight or pain, bliss or remorse, according as the choices are right or wrong. A prophetic anticipation of reward for the performance of right, and of punishment for the performance of wrong.

Conscience in full activity implies a direct perception of the freedom of the will is not one of the activities of conscience; but the fact of such freedom is a necessary inference by a single step of reasoning from the sense which conscience gives us of personal merit and demerit; for it is self-evident that these can be the qualities of only voluntary action. A direct perception of the fact of the divine existence is not only of the activities of conscience but the fact is a necessary inference by a single step of reasoning from the perception of a moral law and the sense of obligation to it included in conscience. A direct perception of the fact that a future state of personal existence awaits man is not one of the activities of conscience, but is an inference from the prophetic anticipations irresistibly asserting themselves in conscience, and that reward and punishment await him beyond death.

III.

A guilty conscience is one of the most dreadful of moral calamities. Many cannot stand it and commit suicide. Romans seven portrays somewhat the conscience of the sinner awakened to a sense of sin and its condemnation. I do not think that Romans seven reflects the Apostle Paul "O wretched man that I am; who shall deliver me?"

Ovid said:

"My reason this, my passion that persuades;
I see the right and I approve it, too;
Condemn the wrong and yet the wrong pursue."

No great writer excelled Shakespeare in his setting forth of a guilty conscience. The remembrance of crime haunts the criminal as Banquo's ghost haunted Macbeth with its silent but awful horror. As the shades of those that King Richard III. had foully murdered, appeared one by one, before him in his sleep just before his last tribute, and, recounting the crimes that he had done upon them, cries: "Despair and die. Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow;" so every dead sin sends its ghost to haunt the soul of the guilty. Like the blood-red stone in the flood of an old church in Scotland, on which the legend says murder has been committed, which stares at you from the gray stones around it, and which has resisted all attempts to remove the tell-tale color, so sin ever stares the evil-doer in the face and fills his soul with remorse and gloom. Many a one has hated himself for hateful deeds committed. And the brief remorse that conscience brings against every transgressor is one of stern and just condemnation. The self-accusation of Richard III. has been that of many a one:

"My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,

And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain."

Shakespeare has some notable passages on Conscience:

"The dread of something after death puzzles the will. Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all."—Hamlet.

"Conscience is a thousand swords."

IV.

Nothing is more perilous than a dull, read, unawakened conscience; a conscience that fails to respond to the emotions and calls of the good. Hart, in one of his hymns, prays for a moral awakening in these lines:

"O for a glance of heav'nly day,
To take this stubborn heart away,
And thaw with beams of love divine
This heart, this frozen heart of mine!"

"The rocks can rend; the earth can quake!
The seas can roar; the mountains shake;
Of feeling all things show some sign,
But this unfeeling heart of mine."

"To hear the sorrows thou hast felt,
O Lord, an adamant would melt!
But I can read each moving mine,
And nothing moves this heart of mine."

"Thy judgments, too, unmoved I hear,
(Amazing thought!) which devils fear:
Goodness and wrath in vain combine
To stir this stupid heart of mine."

"But something yet can do the deed;
And that blest something much I need:
Thy Spirit can from dross refine,
And melt and change this heart of mine."

V.

Let's relate Conscience to Consecration. The awakened soul cannot rest till it finds forgiveness at the cross and the kiss of reconciliation through the redeeming merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. It then moves on toward holiness and full salvation which always carries the soul into the place of sacrifice and consecration. The language of consecration is: "The knee that thou hast shaped shall bow to thee: the tongue which thou hast tuned shall chant thy praise; and thine own image—the immortal soul—shall consecrate herself to thee forever."—Pentecostal Herald.

IN QUEBEC

Catholics and the Bible: In 1933 a city by-law was passed in Quebec forbidding the distribution of books and pamphlets without written permission of the chief of police. This prohibition has now been extended to the distribution of the New Testament. When Ernest Anex, of the Grande Ligne Mission, applied for a permit he was refused. He protested, and the Quebec chief of police, Gagnon, replied, "I'm not going to give you any reason, and I have nothing to learn from you. My career as a police officer and the course I have followed are sufficient for me to judge of the situation. What I have written must be sufficient."—Sunday School Times.

In a report just made to the annual Methodist Conference of New York, the Rev. Dr. Arthur Hewitt, of Riverton, Vermont, asserts that there are 30,000 villages in America without pastors and 10,000 without churches of any kind.—Pathfinder.