

Conscience: Its Uses and Limits

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“**H**ERE I STAND, I can do no other. . . .” Martin Luther uttered these lines to the Emperor and Papal representatives at the Diet of Worms in 1521, refusing to disavow his books and writings. These are the famous words that some regard not only as chartering the Protestant Reformation, but as establishing the freedom of individual conscience at its foundation. Yet as they stand here, these words are an equally famous instance of selective quotation. It is true that Luther took his stand on conscience, but neither Luther nor Calvin ever imagined the sort of individualism and autonomy that have come to define the conscience of many today, including many Christians. It is worth recalling Luther’s reply to the Emperor at greater length:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.¹

Luther’s fuller remarks make it clear that while he did indeed take his stand on conscience, his conscience was itself “captive to the word of God”—determined not by his independent judgment per se, but ultimately by what he had been taught by the Bible. In other words, while Luther had strong convictions, based on conscience, he truly was willing to be corrected by Scripture and change his mind.

Let Your Conscience *Have* a Guide

Luther’s keen awareness of how conscience must depend on the authority of Scripture was shared by John Calvin and came to permeate the Reformed tradition. It is repeatedly affirmed in our own “Historic Principles of Church Order,” which dates from 1788 and begins with a direct quote from the Westminster Confession, that “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.”² The central and prior place of the Bible is unmistakable here. Indeed, the Bible is “the only rule of faith and manners,” so that “no Church governing body ought to pretend to make laws to bind the conscience in virtue of their own authority” but rather base “all their decisions . . . upon the revealed will of God.”³ What’s especially significant is that the Reformed tradition (like Luther) is perfectly willing to bind the conscience, but only to the word of God and not to human traditions. For while the conscience is a wonderful organ, it can be misdirected by sin and error—just like all our other parts—and that is why we can let our conscience be our guide only when our conscience has a guide, namely, the higher authority of God’s word, God’s rules, and God’s laws.

Conscience and the Hierarchy of Authority

Many of us, of course, will be quick to note that Presbyterians do, in fact, contrive new rules and laws—lesser laws, to be sure, and rules that attempt not to circumvent or flout the Bible but to interpret and apply it. Implicit within these “historic principles” is a deep suspicion of human authority, because our own weakness (our total depravity, if you will) is always liable to distort and subvert even our best intentions. Accordingly, this same passage affirms (much as Luther did) that “all synods and councils may err”—presumably, even Presbyterian and Reformed ones—on account of “the frailty inseparable from humanity.”⁴

Deference to Scripture is thus a safeguard, for “there is much greater danger from the usurped claim of *making* laws than from the right of *judging* upon laws already made and common to all who profess the gospel.”⁵ In other words, it is better that we should strive for the right interpretation and application of the precepts God has already given us in the Bible than that we should ever presume to contrive new rules and laws that claim anything like the allegiance we owe to Scripture. That is also why the hierarchy of constitutional authority in our church runs only one way: from the Bible, through the *Book of Confessions*, to the *Book of Order*.

Remarkably, and despite the wariness of the historic principles regarding making new laws and rules, Presbyterians are quite good at all sorts of legislation, as we can see from the ever-expanding *Book of Order* itself or from the mountains of paper generated by General Assembly. To be sure, part of that impulse is scriptural: the Bible itself exhorts us to act for decency and order, and those values require careful deliberation and, quite often, rules for how to *be* biblically decent and ordered.

At the same time, it is a virtue of Presbyterian polity to recognize that there is always a dialogue if not outright tension between the consciences of individual Christians and the less-than-unanimous consensus that church bodies may hold as to what the Bible may mean or how the Bible is to be applied. Majority decisions and discernment regarding the meaning of the Bible *are* determinative for the church, but not by silencing minority voices and not by pretending that we all read the Bible in exactly the same way. Again, the *Book of Order* speaks eloquently:

It is necessary to the integrity and health of the church that the persons who serve in it as officers shall adhere to the essentials of the Reformed faith and polity as expressed in the *Book of Confessions* and the Form of Government. So far as may be possible without serious departure from these standards, without infringing on the rights and views of others, and without obstructing the constitutional governance of the church, freedom of conscience with respect to the interpretation of Scripture is to be maintained. It is to be recognized, however, that

in becoming a candidate or officer . . . one chooses to exercise freedom of conscience within certain bounds. His or her conscience is captive to the Word of God as interpreted in the standards of the church so long as he or she continues to seek or hold office in that body.⁶

The passage impressively balances freedom and authority, the corporate and the individual. At the end of the day, however, the identity and integrity of the church must not be set aside.

Using the Conscience Conscientiously

In the passage cited earlier from the Westminster Confession, a good deal of its advice was prompted by memories of Roman Catholic abuses in the form of human laws that had bound the conscience of Christians by claiming (for instance) that ignoring a Lenten fast could endanger one's salvation. However, as that passage continues, it is evident that the Westminster divines were worried not only about those who believed too much, but also those who believed too little.

Accordingly, the Confession repudiates dogmas that lack biblical foundation, for "to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience."⁷ But at the same time, the very next sentence warns us against all those who would use conscience as a cloak for immorality: "They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life."⁸ In other words, if sometimes the conscience sounds a false alarm and needs the guidance of Scripture to correct it, there are other times when the conscience is silent (or, worse, has itself been silenced by bad faith or bad habit) and needs to be reactivated and recalibrated according to biblical standards and God's call to holiness.

Yet not all consciences work the same or register identical feelings or convictions. Recently, we have begun to revive an interest in the old practice of "scrupling," of registering our doubts or reservations about majority declarations. One always hopes that such scruples or hesitations will not be on essential matters of faith or morals, but sometimes they are. Then it becomes a matter for the church to discern just how essential or how tolerable the scruple may be. Such situations are addressed in our *Book of Order* in considering protest and dissent. G-9.0304 thus approves

"decorous and respectful" protests as expressions of our "right of conscience"—but it does not thereby countenance disobedience, even on the part of those who protest.

The same principle is even more helpfully addressed in a footnote to G-6.0108b that takes us back all the way to 1758: "When any matter is determined by a major vote, every member shall either actively concur with or passively submit to such determination; or if his conscience permit him to do neither, he shall, after sufficient liberty modestly to reason and remonstrate, peaceably withdraw from our communion without attempting to make any schism."

This stark but irenic account goes on to add that the counsel for withdrawal really bears only on "indispensable" matters of doctrine or polity, yet it remains salutary advice, a reminder that the church is and must be governed first and foremost by the word of God, which our consciences must *obey*, not *oppose*.

I have my own rule of thumb here. I constantly ask myself, in order to check any rise of smugness or complacency, Can the Bible tell me or my conscience *anything* that I'd prefer not to know? If the Bible's precepts ever cease to challenge or nag at me, I ought to start worrying that my own "human frailty" has stepped out of its rightful role as pupil and needs to return to Scripture, to that which Calvin himself regarded as "the school of the Holy Spirit."

Further Reading

1. Randall C. Zachman. *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993. (Especially chapter one, "The Idolatrous Religion of Conscience").
2. Thomas F. Merrill. Introduction to *William Perkins, 1558–1602, English Puritanist: His Pioneer Works on Casuistry: "A Discourse of Conscience" and "The Whole Treatise of Cases of Conscience"*. Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1966.
3. Margo G. Houts. "A Balancing Act." What Presbyterians Believe. *Presbyterians Today* (March 2003). <http://www.pcusa.org/today/believe/past/mar03/balancing.htm> (accessed April 16, 2010).
4. PC(USA). *195th General Assembly Report: Historic Principles, Conscience, and Church Government*. (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, 1983). <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/publications/historic-principles.pdf> (accessed April 16, 2010).

Notes on "Conscience"

1. English text is from "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 32: *The Career of the Reformer II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 112.

2. PC(USA), *Book of Order 2009/2011*, G-1.0301.

3. *Ibid.*, G-1.0307

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*, G-1.0305, slightly repunctuated; italics mine.

6. *Ibid.*, G-60108ab.

7. PC(USA). *Book of Confessions 2007*. Westminster Confession 6.109.

8. *Ibid.*, WC 6.110.

9. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) 3.21.3.