

## 188 A conscience good and pure

The first letter to Timothy, written by the Holy Spirit through Paul, is filled with advice, guidance and instruction in the context of great pastoral love. Among the many topics covered in the letter is the importance of conscience. "But the end of the commandment is love out of a pure heart and a good conscience, and faith not pretended .... This charge I commit to you ....that you might war the good warfare by them, having faith and a good conscience ...." (I Timothy 1.5,19, JPGreen Literal).

Elsewhere in the New Testament we read that Paul worships God "in a pure conscience" (II Timothy 1.3). The writer of the letter to the Hebrews, in asking for prayer, believes he and his colleagues "have a good conscience, in all things wishing to behave well" (Hebrews 13.18). In I Peter 3.16 we are urged, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts .... having a good conscience", so that those seeking to accuse us have no grounds for doing so.

We see from these few examples how conscience has a key part to play in keeping our Christian lives on track, within a blend of love and purity, goodness and genuineness. It follows therefore that when we are aware in our lives of "un-love", impurity, badness and falsehood, these are warning signs from our conscience that things are not as they should be.

The conscience acts as that quiet, persistent, sometimes nagging "inner voice" which acts as a Holy-Spirit-motivated moral compass. We all know how easy it can be to ignore the conscience, or to overrule its message by fancy arguments of our own. But when those arguments are seen to be flimsy we soon find that the conscience has not been fooled or silenced - it is still there, "hands on hips" as it were, waiting for us to do what we know we have to do to put things right.

These efforts to set aside the conscience are nothing new. "Truly all things are pure to the pure, but to the ones being defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure, their mind and conscience has been defiled" (Titus 1.15, JPGreen Literal, in which we see from the singular verb "has been defiled" that the mind and conscience are so closely related that they can be seen as one). Similarly, back in I Timothy 1.19 regarding a good conscience - "which some having thrust away, made shipwreck concerning the faith, of whom (are) Hymenaeus and Alexander ....". We learn that the Greek word translated "thrust away" here has great force: these two Christian disciples have not just tried to sidle past their consciences, but have silenced them with strong, wilful, deliberate rejection - resulting in a "shipwreck concerning the faith".

The Holy Spirit warns us in I Timothy 4.1-2 that "in latter times some will depart from the faith, cleaving to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons, in lying hypocrisy being seared in their own conscience .... " - another example of attempts made to kill off conscience for once and for all. Here is a timely reminder that there will be those within the Church who will depart from the Christian Faith with various forms of false teaching. Unfortunately that is certainly the case these days.

So may we be obedient to Holy-Spirit-promptings within our own consciences. Above all we remember our spiritual status, as in Hebrews 10.19ff - "Therefore, brothers, having confidence for entering of the (Holy of) Holies by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, our hearts having been sprinkled from an evil conscience, and (our) body having been washed in pure water, let us hold fast the confession of the hope unyielding, for He who has promised is faithful". What a comfort! Any "evil conscience" at enmity with God is long gone from us, our hearts having been sprinkled by the shed blood of Jesus Christ our Lord.

We are saved and safe by the grace of God, a salvation we have received by simple faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. God's wish is that all may receive this wonderful salvation; may our lives, lived in the light of those good consciences, play their part in bringing this about.

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