

Conscience

Our society, under the control of Satan, has two objectives: **One is destroy the moral law, so that the conscience is misinformed.** Give them a new morality, not the morality of the Bible not God's law. It does not want people to think biblically.

The **second** objective is to tell you that your conscience that it is a liar. So our sinful, corrupt society wants to do two things, **misinform the conscience and desensitize it.**

CONSCIENCE = Suneidesis = literally means a "knowing with", being one's own witness in the sense that one's own conscience "takes the stand" as the chief witness, testifying either to one's innocence or guilt.

Conscience: It signifies knowledge along with; as a knowing with one's self; its fundamental idea is knowing together with one's self. 1 Cor. 4:4: "For I am conscious of nothing against myself." He connects the idea of knowing, with himself = "a knowledge one has together with himself."

e.g.. If I know a secret together with my neighbour, then this means not only that we both know the secret, but also that each knows that the other knows it. If I say that I know something together with myself, this means **not only that I know something, but that I am aware of the fact that I know it.**

It involves a consciousness of **his obligation to comply with God's Law, and there is in him the feeling that he ought to do what he himself recognized as his duty.**

Conscience is rather a moral consciousness which includes the feeling of obligation and duty. It 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 offence charged, and pronounces sentence.

Conscience: is the candle of the Lord. It shows you your enemy; is like a magnetic needle, which, if once turned aside from its pole, will never cease trembling; is the watchdog because it warns us when thieves breaking into our house; is like a swarm of bees.

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."*

1. **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.**
2. **Knowledge and convictions, except the natural knowledge of the Law, are acquired. But conscience is not acquired or evolved in man, it is born in 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 without it.**
3. **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.**
4. **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.

5. **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.
6. **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, 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.**

The close relation and connection between knowledge, conviction, and conscience:

1. **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.** 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. 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, set forth clearly and specifically what the Lord requires of them.
2. **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. Why?

We do not recognize the binding force of this church law, while the Jews do. It requires that we personally believe it to be right and binding upon us. Conscience never acts in matters which we ourselves do not regard as authoritative and obligatory.

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.

3. **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.

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. 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.

Conscience is not a function of some mysterious gland or nerve cell of the physical body, but of the rational soul. Its functions may 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.

But the soul is susceptible to impressions; to every thought and idea that enters the mind there is a certain repercussion in the heart. It is 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.** "For as he thinks 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, favourable or unfavourable, 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 (acts of the will). The emotions of the heart are not dead, but **they are dynamic. 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. 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 **intellect** 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 is a function of the soul which becomes active after the soul has acted through the intellect and before it acts through the will.

There are many kinds of feelings, not all are connected with the conscience. 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 blessings stir up the feeling of gratitude. **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 applies to **only to that feeling which is the immediate response of the heart to a recognized obligation and duty, the urge that we ought to comply with the rule which covers this particular case.**

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 after-effects of our actions are essentially emotional.** If we obey the prompting of our conscience, we experience in our hearts the pleasant feeling of satisfaction; contrariwise, there is the depressing feeling of guilt and shame.

These functions of the soul **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 **labourer feels that he ought to be on the job in time; otherwise his wages may be docked.**

III

Functions of Conscience

- 1) **It is not the business of conscience to set up those laws and rules that are to govern our moral conduct.** 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.

Thus conscience never sets up a moral rule or code for its own guidance, it merely prompts us to observe what we believe to be right and to avoid what we believe to be wrong.

- 2) **It is not the function of conscience to judge between right and wrong in itself and to evaluate 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 many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth,"** Acts 26:9.

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. In doing so the reason of man often errs, and its judgment and resulting convictions are wrong.

This 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.

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 (A Conscience that anticipates what we ought to do or to avoid or before the act).
- 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 to 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. 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 pretence and camouflage, but demands unconditional and full compliance with what we ourselves believe to be right.

Conscientia consequens (The consequence of the action resulting in the conscience commending, accusing, excusing, defending us or conscience after the act.) The words of Paul Rom. 2:15. 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 an equipment **every man has by nature**. Rom. 2:14,15.
2. **Conscience is a precious gift of God.** - 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**. Conscience, therefore, is a **powerful factor in the life of the individual and of the community**. Without it the moral structure of society would break down and communal life become an impossibility.
3. **Conscience is uniform in all men.** - **Conscience does not act differently in different people**. But the **sensitiveness** with which conscience responds to conviction and the force with which it speaks varies 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; all which depends upon the treatment it receives. Eg heart beat.
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 favour 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, but his conscience would have had none of it**. Unless the conviction is first changed, conscience abides by its judgment.
6. **Conscience is infallible.**- **Conscience is the urge of the emotions to comply with the law of the mind**. **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**.

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**" 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**.

A defiled, seared conscience: conscience is the window that lets in the light of His truth. If we sin against Him deliberately, that window becomes dirty, and not as much truth can filter through. Eventually, the window becomes so dirty that it no longer lets in the light. The Bible calls this a **defiled, seared conscience**. When you sin, the window of your conscience becomes dirty and filters out truth. Avoid sin in your life and live with a clean conscience. Every day feed yourself truth from the Word of God.

Paul mentioned to Timothy about a **seared conscience. Literally burned over**. For example: scar tissue in the middle of the back: **no feelings whatsoever. The nerves were permanently destroyed in that area**. To keep the conscience quite, all you have to do is just literally destroy it. Just burn it off, or callous it or wound it.

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**. 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 conscience 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.**

For example: 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 problem 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.**

But we ask, **Why does conscience not react in every instance in which our actions are likely to conflict with our conviction? 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 dwells 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 lusts against the Spirit . . . so that you cannot do the things you would," Gal. 5:17.**

Conscience centres 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.**

IV

The Treatment of Conscience.

- 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 car; 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.**

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.**

As conscience holds us responsible 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.

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.

For example: 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. 1 Cor. 8:10. 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 paralyse 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 doubts is damned**" [before his own conscience] "**if he eat, because he eats 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 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. 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 your 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 Decalogue.

— 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. For the sake of our own mental and spiritual peace 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.

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 believes that he may eat all things; another, who is weak, eats 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 commends 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 esteems 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 stumbling-block 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 is important 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 recognised 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.

C.

How 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 after-effects, 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 after-effects 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 offence.

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 offence toward God and man.**" Paul does not mean to say that he always succeeds, as little as he means to say Phil. 3:4 ff. that he is already perfect; but he exercises himself, he labours, 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 offence toward God and man. It is well to admonish our people that for their own peace of mind they must keep their conscience clean.

An evil conscience. - If one disobeys the voice of his conscience, 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.

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 spectre of guilt looms up in his consciousness. And when its furies are unleashed, they sometimes drive a person to despair and suicide.

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. 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 Saviour 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.

We are counsellors 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." [Translation: "Seek to meet (strike, hit) the conscience."] **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.**

Luther described the torment of a troubled conscience in this manner: "But a guilty conscience lights the flames of hell and stirs up feelings of horrible anguish in the heart."

Luther also supported the remedy of confession: "Great is the benefit derived from the use of the keys and private absolution. By it the conscience can be quieted."

Although confession of sins is a first step in comforting a troubling conscience, it is of no value unless the pastor adds the Gospel message of forgiveness through Jesus' blood. John assures us of the forgiveness we find in Christ: "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin." (I John 1:7). Because only Jesus' blood removes sin, it is the only effective means of removing the terror from a troubled conscience. Therefore the Gospel will dominate a counselling session with a troubled conscience. The pastor will lead a person with a troubled conscience to realize that his sin has been taken off his shoulders and placed on his Saviour. Only then will the burden of guilt be removed and the comfort of forgiveness will take its place.

I want a principle within
Of watchful Godly fear
A sensibility to sin
A pain to feel it near
Help me the first approach to feel
Of pride or wrong desire
To catch the wandering of my will
And quench the kindling fire
From thee that I no more may stray
No more thy goodness grieve
Grant me I pray
The tender conscience give. — Charles Wesley.