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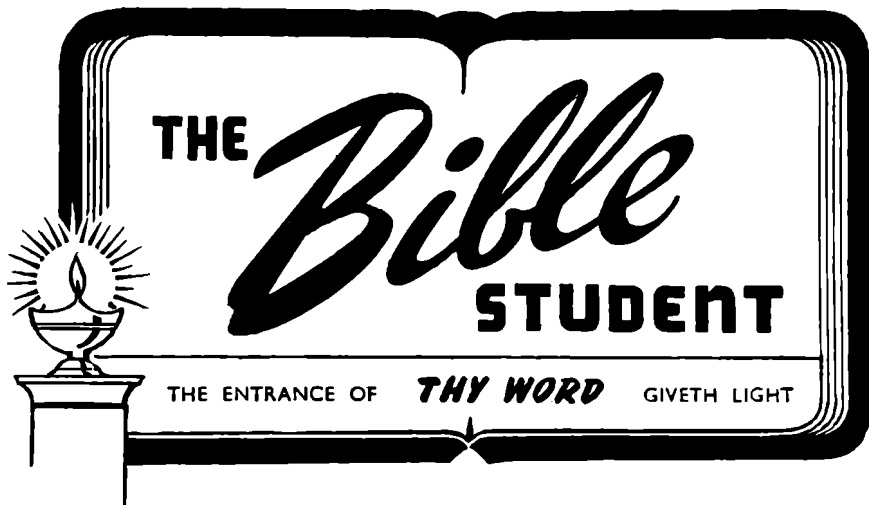
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New Series
Vol. XXV. No. 4

OCTOBER
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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

The Bible Student

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NEW SERIES

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CONSCIENCE¹

L. W. G. ALEXANDER

The meaning of the word conscience is both interesting and instructive. It is a compound word consisting of 'con' and 'science'. The prefix 'con' means 'with' or 'together with'. The word 'science' means 'knowledge' that is, 'ascertained truth'. It appears therefore that conscience means 'knowledge with', or 'apprehension of ascertained truth in conjunction with another'—that other, in all probability, being God.

Conscience is not an acquired faculty. It is an integral part of man's human nature, an indefinable link between God and the human soul, which is as mysterious as it is real.

It is therefore that unique faculty pertaining to humankind which in great measure distinguishes man from the lower orders of creation. Man is not a glorified ape. Scripture declares that man is *the image and glory of God*; that he was *made a little lower than the angels*; that he was *made in God's image after His likeness*; and conscience is that mysterious element of the divine image in man which ever recognizes, and bears witness to the fact

¹This is the first portion of an article on a subject seldom touched upon even in religious magazines in these days. And yet it is one which lays claim to far greater attention, and even study, than it gets. Whilst the fact of conscience is generally acknowledged, yet what is not understood by many good people is its actual functioning in personal daily living. We commend these studies to all our readers; they have been written by a well known friend, a Bible teacher with many years experience in public ministry in the U.K., which has been a great blessing to many.

that in the moral universe there are such things as good and evil, right and wrong.

Conscience of itself, however, cannot indicate to anyone what is right and what is wrong. Although it is widely believed that conscience does this; nevertheless it does not appear to be the function of conscience to do so. Man's judgment, guided by the known revelation of God, enables him to distinguish between right and wrong; and the work of conscience is to bear witness with God in favour of the right where right is known, and to bear witness with God against the wrong where wrong is known.

It is of the first importance to discern that conscience of itself cannot indicate to anyone what is right and what is wrong. It must have a standard by which to judge. If that standard is a righteous one then conscience reproves all unrighteousness practised in the life, or it acquits when the life pursued is according to righteousness.

Among enlightened peoples conscience, normally, bears witness against such things, for instance, as stealing and lying, because these peoples have learned by revelation from God that to steal and to lie are evil things; but peoples could easily be found on earth today among whom stealing and lying are in great measure regarded as virtues; hence when these peoples steal or lie conscience offers no remonstrance. It is not that these peoples are not possessed of conscience, it is not conscience that is at fault in the matter at all: it is the *standard* by which conscience judges that is at fault. Conscience is true to its standard but its standard is false. Thus we may confidently conclude that conscience cannot possibly be the criterion; that before it can be a righteous judge it must have a righteous standard by which to judge: and that before it can be a safe guide it must have unerring directions by which to guide.

Further evidence that conscience is not the criterion may be adduced from the fact that it is no uncommon thing to find conscience justifying in one person what it condemns in another; or indeed, justifying in the same person at one point in his life what it condemns at another point, or *vice versa*. The reason for this

is that in the former case the two persons had different conceptions as to what the will of God was, hence conscience acknowledged two different standards; and in the latter case, with the same person, his standard changed as increasing years brought increasing light.

Probably we have all encountered a person who declared that he pursued a certain path with a perfectly good conscience, and in so saying that person may have been declaring nothing but the truth; nevertheless that is no guarantee that the path in question was well pleasing to God. That person's conscience may have required to be instructed by the Scriptures as to what the will of God was, and a more accurate apprehension of the Divine Will might have compelled him to abandon the path he previously pursued. Indeed, it is probable that some of us permitted in our lives at one point, with a perfectly good conscience, what at a later period we had to cut out of our lives, in order to maintain a good conscience.

At this juncture it may be profitable to consider what others have said regarding this subject.

Writers such as Kant, Emerson and John Henry Newman all appear to have been exponents of what may be termed the 'Absolutist' view of the subject. They regarded conscience as being absolutely inerrant. That when it speaks with its true imperial authority it is magisterial and infallible. If the testimony of conscience in all men was unvarying and consistent this view might prove acceptable: but it fails entirely to account for the phenomenon already referred to that men, equally sincere and equally desirous of doing the right, in all good conscience, frequently form opposite conclusions as to what is right. It does not therefore appear to be corroborated by the actual experience of men.

Socrates, who lived four to five hundred years before Christ, frequently referred to 'an oracle which came to him' as a divine thing,' and which we identify as conscience. On one occasion he is reported to have said: 'It is the voice that comes to me and always forbids me when I am going to do anything wrong'. These are very simple words but they are exceedingly apt and true. Of course they clearly presuppose the knowledge of what is wrong.

Bishop Butler said, 'Conscience has a prophetic office. Without being consulted it exerts itself magisterially, and if not forcibly stopped it goes on to anticipate a higher and more effectual sentence which shall hereafter second and affirm its own'. Here the imperious nature of the voice of conscience is emphasised. It never questions or argues: authoritatively it asserts its decisions and insists that these be obeyed.

Carlyle said, 'Conscience is the sense of the infinite nature of duty. It is the central part of all that is within us, a ray of eternity and immortality'. Here again, it is to be observed, 'the sense of the infinite nature of duty' presupposes the knowledge of duty.

Dr. F. B. Meyer stated in an article in *The Christian* some years ago: 'It is that faculty in our moral nature which carries with it the distinction between right and wrong. It distinguishes between right and wrong in morals as the tongue distinguishes between sweet and bitter in taste'. Here, one ventures to think, that the function of conscience is distinctly overstated. The ability to distinguish between sweet and bitter is *inherent* in the tongue. Intuitively it does this because it possesses this *innate faculty*. With conscience it is otherwise. Its action is dependent upon acquired knowledge as to what is right and what is wrong; and it will call sweet bitter, or bitter sweet, according as its possessor regards these. The ability to distinguish between right and wrong does not appear to be innate in conscience; otherwise it is difficult to discern the necessity for the Moral Law; but that Law was given by God expressly for the purpose of enlightening man's mind and thus educating man's conscience as to what is right and what is wrong.¹

This point was ably emphasised by Dr Chas. Inwood years ago at a Keswick Convention. He said: 'One great function of the moral law is to educate conscience. Many Christian people have never given proper attention to this important question of the education of conscience, and the results of the lack of it are disastrous in the extreme. The moral law invests the conscience with authority. The great function of the conscience is this:

¹ 'The primary and vital deficiency in the conscience of the heathen is that it cannot distinguish the will of God clearly enough to see that man should be

it is the judge of our conduct in its moral and spiritual aspects. But a judge does not *make* the law; he rightly *interprets and applies the law*. If a judge be ignorant of the law he is bound, sooner or later, to give wrong judgments, and someone will suffer as the result. That is happening among professed Christians today. Conscience does not make anything we do right or wrong; conduct is judged, not by the approval or disapproval of conscience, but by whether it is in harmony with the revealed will of God. Christian people are tolerating all sorts of perilous things and saying that they do it with a clear conscience. That means that the individual conscience is not sufficiently enlightened and educated. An unspiritual and uneducated conscience will never condemn any perilous thing which the heart desires and loves'. With this testimony one finds oneself in the most hearty agreement.

It has been well stated that: 'The full meaning of the voice of conscience is never understood till men hear the voice of a Personal Lawgiver uttering from without us His clear "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not", as well as the voice of that same Personal Lord speaking within us, and compelling us, often in spite of our very selves, to acknowledge the eternal validity of moral law' ¹.

These testimonies from eminent men demonstrate how very difficult it is to define the exact nature and authority of conscience. Clearly their testimony varies considerably in important details; and if their conceptions differ, we may safely assume that a good deal of loose thinking exists regarding the subject in less instructed quarters.

judged according to the moral foundation of his whole being, according to the sinful state of soul from which all his particular sins proceed. . . . We would underline the fact that the conscience of fallen man alone is not able to convince man of his sinfulness. It is true that he can in his conscience sense the fact that he is committing sin against both God and man. But he cannot learn to know the true nature and eternal consequences of sin through his conscience alone. And the reason is simply this, that fallen man has lost the true knowledge of the will of God; He has therefore to reveal Himself to fallen man.'—*Conscience*: O. Hallesby, Ph.D.

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