

The Role of Conscience In Religion (2)

by Walton Weaver

The sense in which conscience is to be understood as supreme is clearly stated by A. R. Scherling in his published debate with J. C. Bailey. Scherling says, "Supreme in this sense, having done my utmost to avail myself of the truth there can be no higher authority for me, than the voice within which says, 'this you ought to do, that you ought not to do.'"

Notice again:

"The man who obeys his conscience is benevolent, and thus is virtuous in his inner purpose, he fulfills obligation, or, as we express it, 'has a right heart.' In outward conduct he does what benevolence seems to him to require, that which is duty to him. He performs what we may call subjective duty. If he is mistaken in his judgment of practical or outward duty, he is still virtuous, right at heart, but mistaken. He fails in what may be called objective duty; that which would be duty if the facts were understood by him. But as they are not understood, the objective duty is not binding."

In the matter of external authority, Scherling says, "The right to be any kind of Protestant implies the right to worship God in accordance with the dictates of one's conscience. It logically follows that no external authority whether of the parent, state, priest or the Bible, can ever reach the ruling power of the Soul."

Scherling's position that conscience is supreme is unquestionably the general view held today because people think of conscience as being the supreme authority in morals and religion. People think of conscience as being the law, but in fact, as already noted, conscience is moral judgment, not law. Conscience passes judgment on law, it is not law itself. Scherling and all classical intuitionists make judgment on the law equal to the law itself. Conscience can never go beyond the making of a judgment, and the judgment which conscience makes can never be more than a "maybe, perhaps," or, as J. C. Bailey puts it, "it can speak no louder than to say this way SEEMS right." Joseph Butler, A. R. Scherling, and all others who hold that conscience is supreme, make every man a "law unto himself" by assigning to conscience the role of supreme authority.

Isn't it interesting that the way of determining what is right, according to Scherling, is the very way Scripture itself specifically condemns? If a thing is made right because the one who believes it is "right at heart," what could be the meaning of the passage of Scripture which says, "There is a way that SEEMETH right unto a man; but the end

thereof are the ways of death” (Prov. 16:25)? If I am understanding Scherling at all, he is saying that as a man does what SEEMS right to him, that makes it right because he is right at heart .

It must be conceded that “conscience can speak no louder than to say this SEEMS right” (J. C. Bailey), but, according to Scripture, it is for this very reason that conscience is not the standard of right in the areas of morals and religion. Only God can establish what is right and what is wrong in these areas, and Scripture claims for itself this authoritative role as the voice of God to man (2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3; 1 Cor. 4:6; 14:37). In an area where a thing is right in itself (like the eating of meats, Rom. 14 and 1 Cor. 8) one must respect his conscience, but it is not his conscience that makes it right. It was already right to eat meat. If one’s conscience judges the eating of meats to be wrong, even though it is right, he still must respect his conscience and not eat such meats. Again, the eating of these meats is not made wrong by his conscience. It is still right to eat meats. But in an area of indifference where one may either do or not do a thing, God requires that one be true to himself. He must maintain a good conscience whichever choice he makes.

If man does not have objective guidance (authority outside himself) then sheer subjectivity results and man becomes a “law unto himself.” Ignorance then becomes a premium—an advantage rather than a disadvantage—because all that one does ignorantly becomes right as long as one is “right at heart.” Would it not follow that if authority begins and ends in man himself then to remain ignorant of any and all external demands would be best for man?

This approach to authority of course makes the Great Commission meaningless. Why go into the world with a gospel which presents a choice that one must make when he is already following his “highest authority,” his conscience? One writer expressed it this way: “If his heart is right why would anyone present ‘good news’ to him since it would tell him that his heart is not right? Would it be, in fact, ‘good news’ on this premise?”

Another fault with this view is that it requires that all sin be voluntary sin. To hold that conscience is supreme makes it impossible for there to be such a thing as a *conscientious* sin. If one is convinced that he is right it would be impossible for him to be wrong! What does that say of Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy, and others like them, if they were conscientious? It says they committed no sin, no wrongdoing of any sort, in passing off their writings as inspired revelations from God. It also says that those who follow their so-called revelations commit no sin as long as they follow them conscientiously.

This means that this view actually eliminates special, external revelation, but we knew that already. Scherling said, you remember, that “no external authority whether of the parent, state, priest or the Bible, can ever reach the ruling power of the Soul.” So

nothing can be binding upon an individual except what he deems to be authority for him. This view of authority can never be harmonized with the case of Saul of Tarsus. His conscience was clear while persecuting Christians (Acts 23: 1; 24:16), yet he says that he received mercy because he did these things in ignorance and unbelief (I Tim. 1:12-16). Now think about that for a moment. Why would a “blasphemer,” “persecutor” and one “injurious” to the saints, one who did these things “ignorantly,” *need mercy* unless he had *sinned conscientiously*?

THE TRUE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE

What then is the true function of conscience? In view of the case of Saul just noted and the other statements of Scripture we have considered earlier about conscience, it is clear that the role of conscience is not authoritative; conscience is *not* intended to be a *guide*. The role of conscience is *to make a judgment*, but the judgment conscience makes is not infallible; therefore conscience is not an infallible guide. Why does the conscience not make a right judgment every time? Because its judgment is based upon the information one receives as truth, and one may be taught wrong, or he may receive the wrong information. Saul had not received the right information about Jesus Christ, but he thought he had been taught the truth about Him until he later learned better. His conscience was clear even while he acted upon a lie about Jesus.

The only infallible *guide* we have from God is Scripture itself. As “the perfect law of liberty” (Jas. 1:25) it gives us all the correct information. It furnishes “completely unto every good work” and is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness that the man of God may be complete” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As long as man follows this infallible guide he will have the approval of his conscience. He is right because he is receiving the right information, not because his conscience is clear. Conscience is not intended to make wrong right just because one is “right at heart.” If that were the case then there would be no need for the Scripture to be given to make one perfect or complete. He could be made complete without it.

It is obedience to the truth that purifies the soul (1 Pet. 1:22), and it is the implanted word that is able to save the soul (Jas. 1:21). Jesus said, “If ye abide in my word, then are you truly my disciples; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn. 8:31-32). The old idea that one should “let your conscience be your guide” makes a lie, or the wrong information, equal to the truth as long as one is “right at heart,” or has a clear conscience. It would make all these Scripture passages about the saving power of the word of God meaningless and absurd if conscience itself becomes authoritative over the word of God.

Therefore we must conclude that the word of God alone is authoritative in religious matters, and that even if one has the approval of his conscience on a matter he does not have the approval of God unless he also believes and obeys the truth of God. Remember,

conscience is that feeling of pleasure when you *think* you are right (not just when you are right), and that feeling of pain when you *think* you are wrong (not just when you are wrong).

Conscience is not therefore an infallible guide.