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LUTHER'S CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. NATURE OF CONSCIENCE	3
III. FUNCTIONS OF CONSCIENCE.	34
IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE.	42
V. CONCLUSION	52
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The subject "Luther's concept of conscience" was chosen because of the stress Luther himself placed upon the dictates of his conscience. Many people who are opposed to Luther's teaching and the Lutheran Church in general have commented that he was fanatical and could not control his emotions. An examination of his use of the term "conscience" sheds light on the motives for his actions.

How serious was Luther in his statement: "I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe"? With such questions in mind, Luther's works were studied to see how consistently he held to that statement.

The object of this thesis is not to determine what others have said, though some comparisons are made in order to point up Luther's view. The etymology of the term "conscience" and the historical background are not included. Related subjects are touched on only insofar as they contribute to the problem as stated. Various practical applications are referred to because Luther referred to conscience mostly in actual experienced cases.

The source of information for this topic is mainly the statements made by Luther. Most of the quotations are taken from translations into the English language, but interspersed are some references to his statements as they appear in the

German of the St. Louis edition. All quotes are by Luther unless otherwise indicated. There are also references to some authors either have written a biography or have com-
pended his theology.

This study does not claim to exhaust the conclusions which can be drawn from the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs in which Luther uses the term "conscience." In many cases the term is used very loosely and therefore only alternatives can be suggested as to what Luther actually has in mind.

The method used to arrive at the conclusion is mainly the deducing of facts from statements in which Luther uses the term "conscience." Definitions of terms are given as the various concepts are approached.

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the heart and conscience both pointed upon Christ. If the
presence finds comfort in Christ, the comfort derived from
sins and sorrows that fall, but if it finds comfort in
Christ, then the heart must fall because the heart cannot build
upon itself foundation. The above connection between
the heart and conscience is a portion of his explanation of the
heart's fall. "The heart is the heavy burden of all sin

Source: Luther's Works, American Edition, edited by John
Wendell Kohlenstein, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955,
II, 305.

Source: Luther's Works, American Edition, Philadelphia:
Westminster Press, 1955, II, 305.

CHAPTER II

NATURE OF CONSCIENCE

Conscience Is a Faculty of Man

It is evident from Luther's statements that he does not regard conscience as something apart from man, but rather that which is a part of him. It is a faculty of man. At times he goes so far as to indicate that it is equated with the total man. He makes the statement that man's relationship to God is equal to the relationship of his conscience to God.¹

Conscience as a faculty of man is also indicated by his combination of the concepts of conscience and heart. In some cases he equates them. However, in such instances, he is referring to certain aspects of each. Thus, Luther speaks of the heart and conscience both founded upon Christ. If the conscience finds comfort in Christ, the comfort derived from works and doctrines must fall, but if it finds comfort in works, then Christ must fall because the heart cannot build upon a twofold foundation.² The close connection between the two is also seen in a portion of his explanation of the Fifth Petition: "Remove from us the heavy burden of sin and

¹Martin Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, edited by John George Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1895), III, 202.

²Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia Edition, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1943), II, 443.

conscience, that with light and joyous hearts we may live and die, and suffer, trusting wholly in Thy Mercy."³

Conscience is a faculty of man which makes him aware of feelings in his heart. We see this from the fact that he equates the distress caused by a sinful conscience with a burden upon the heart of man.⁴ This same point is brought out in his statement that people meditate on the passion of Christ aright, who so view Christ that they become terror-stricken in heart at the sight, and their conscience at once sinks in despair.⁵

Further reference to Conscience as a faculty of man can be seen in its relation to the soul. Here soul is used as a term for describing "that something" in man which cannot be harmed by external misfortunes. No harm can come to the soul of the person who is free as a result of a clear conscience.⁶ Godly persons, whose soul is not hurt although misfortunes are present, can be in such a free state due to the condition of their conscience.⁷ Thus, conscience is a faculty of man which affects him very realistically, but it is separate from the soul.

³Ibid., p. 382.

⁴Ibid., p. 13.

⁵Hugh T. Kerr, A Compend of Luther's Theology, edited by H. T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 54.

⁶Works of Martin Luther, II, 313 f.

⁷Ibid., p. 313.

It is a faculty of man because it functions within man. It may act as an advisor, teacher, or doctor. "Erstlich, weil euer Gewissen sich hierin beschwert findet, so koennt ihr keiner bessern Rat, Meister, noch Doctor finden denn eben eurer eigen Gewissen."⁸

Conscience is distinct from the faculty of reason. At times reason may serve a harmful purpose for conscience. He does not insist that there is anything wrong with the process of reasoning per se; however it is corrupt when it operates apart from the will of God. We see this from Luther's advice that when the conscience is disturbed it should not seek aid from reason.⁹ Watson states in his interpretation of Luther's theology: "If 'reason' asserts that the God of almighty majesty could not come down from heaven and be made man it presumes to limit Him, and denies His omnipotence."¹⁰ The relationship and distinction are again seen by the fact when conscience judges according to the conclusion of reason, it affects man in the same manner as reason in that it also can limit God and make Him no better than a self-righteous man.¹¹

⁸Martin Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 196.

⁹Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, translated by Theodore Graebner, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 59.

¹⁰Philip S. Watson, Let God Be God! (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1950), pp. 176 f.

¹¹ibid., p. 176.

Luther indicates the related action of conscience and memory. This gives further evidence that conscience is a faculty within man as well as giving further insight into his concept of the nature of conscience in general. Conscience functions not only on the basis of present actions but also of those of the past. Luther speaks of the action man should take when past sins assail the conscience. He is to practice knowledge and fortify himself against despair, particularly in the last hour when the memory of past sins assails the conscience.¹² The remembrance of sin must be dealt with otherwise man destroys himself by delaying the quieting of conscience. The person who does not put away the remembrance of his sin and instead allows it to torment himself with his own cogitations, thinking to help himself by tarrying the time until his conscience may be quieted, falls into Satan's snares.¹³

Thus, for Luther conscience has a close association with memory because of the guilt brought to mind from past sins. It is evident from this that Luther's concept of conscience does not harmonize with Rousseau, who claims that natural conscience is a mere instinct leading to morality, with no content of guilt or obligation.¹⁴

¹²Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 20.

¹³Kerr, op. cit., p. 60.

¹⁴Samuel Macauley Jackson, Editor-in-chief, The New Schaff Herzog Encyclopedia of Religions Knowledge (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, c.1950), III, 243.

From the foregoing it is also evident that Luther regards the nature of conscience such that it works individually for each person because it is a faculty within each one personally. This view is the accepted one today as can be seen by the definition of conscience in dictionaries. Scripture in Romans 2:15 also affirms its personal operation.

The statements of Luther thus far cited indicate that he believes conscience to be uniform in all men. The conscience of some men is not in a different relationship to their mental faculties than in the case of other men. E. W. A. Koehler agrees with Luther on this point in his statement: "That two men, each obeying his conscience, act differently in a given case is not due to a different functioning of their conscience, but to a difference in their moral conviction."¹⁵

Conscience Is Universal

The view that conscience is universal is taken for granted in Luther's assertions. An indication of his view on this point is given when he says: "And those who wished to appear wise, went in their disputations so far, that, their hearts being darkened, they became fools, and denied or pretended not to know, those things which their poets, and the commonalty, and their own consciences, held to be universally

¹⁵E. W. A. Koehler, Conscience (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), p. 3.

known, most certain, and most true."¹⁶ Watson refers to Luther's belief when he states God is at work everywhere throughout the whole of His creation, actively manifesting Himself as a God of power and law in nature and in the consciences of men.¹⁷ Francis Pieper also deals with conscience as being universal. It is doubtful whether a philosopher such as Spencer would agree with Luther. Conscience for him is a product of education.¹⁹ It is also doubtful that Naturalists would make such a blanket statement since they say that conscience, like all other mental function, is a product of evolution.²⁰

Conscience Is Infallible

Luther alludes to conscience as being infallible in its testimony in his statement that where there is a happy conscience, there is eternal joy.²¹ A more definite reference in this respect is Luther's assertion that conscience testifies so correctly that when God judges man he will examine his conscience. "Nun ist vor Gott kein groeszern Zeuge denn das

¹⁶Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, translated by Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., c.1931), p. 44.

¹⁷Watson, op. cit., pp. 92 f.

¹⁸Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c.1950), I, 373.

¹⁹Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, III, 243.

²⁰Universal Cyclopedia and Atlas (New York: Appleton and Co., c.1905), III, 147.

²¹Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, IV, 1985.

Gewissen; denn Gott richtet nicht nach dem Gesicht wie die Menschen, sondern nach dem Herzen, . . . Darum gilt unsers Gewissens Zeugnis viel mehr vor Gott denn aller Welt Zeugnis. Es wird allein gelten, wie er zu den Roemer kap.2, 15 sagt, ihre Gewissen werden ueber sie zeugen, und die Gedanken sich unter einander verklagen oder entschuldigen, auf den Tag, wenn Gott richten wird die verborgenen Dinge der Herzen."²² In another section he says that man should always judge himself according to his conscience.²³ At first glance Luther seems to contradict himself because he holds the view that conscience may cause fear at times when there is no reason for it to do so.²⁴ An explanation of what Luther means in such a case may be seen in a statement spoken against his adversaries. "For where there is no sin nor matter of conscience, they may sin and a matter of conscience -- just as a scar caused by searing is an unnatural mark on the body."²⁵

Calvin seemingly agrees with Luther. Amidst his comments on Rom. 2:15 he explains: "He could not have more forcibly urged them than by the testimony of their own conscience, which is equal to a thousand witnesses."²⁶ Even if he does

²²Ibid., XII, 70.

²³Ibid., III, 202.

²⁴Ibid., IV, 556.

²⁵Works of Martin Luther, II, 437.

²⁶John Calvin, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, translated and edited by John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., c. 1947), p. 98.

not say that conscience is infallible, at least in a practical way, he believes, it operates as if it were. J. A. Singmaster, in his Handbook of Christian Theology, quite outspokenly says that conscience is fallible.

It is needless to say that conscience is no more infallible than man's judgement in general. Man is not perfect in any particular. He suffers from weakened powers and from lack of knowledge.²⁷

E. W. A. Koehler takes the opposite view. By way of explanation Koehler says that an infallible conscience 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. However, in its proper function, conscience is the urge of the emotions to comply with the law of the mind. And 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.²⁸

Conscience Is Indestructible

The indestructible attribute of conscience was of great concern for Luther. He was therefore insistent that man act according to his conscience. A good conscience was comparable to eternal happiness and an evil conscience was equal to eternal perdition. Luther speaks of the indestructible nature

²⁷Singmaster, A Handbook of Christian Theology, pp. 128.

²⁸Koehler, op. cit., p. 21.

²⁹Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, IV, 1985.

of conscience even though it is evil or bad. "Das ist die recht, hoechste Augst der boesen Gewissen; das wird auch eigentlich die hoellische Pein sein, dasz die Verdammten wollen fliehen und sich verbergen, dasz die Gott nich sehe, und nicht koennen."³⁰ He specifically declares that conscience never dies. Right is a temporal thing which must finally be obedient, but conscience is an eternal thing which never dies.³¹ Luther insists that man should regard it as something eternal in his actions. It is foolish for a man to try to kill or strike out an eternal thing and instead treat a temporal thing as more important than the eternal thing. By way of example, it is better to destroy a sparrow in order to preserve a man's life than to destroy a man in order to preserve the life of a sparrow.³²

A. A. Hodge, in his Outline of Theology, agrees with Luther and even speaks in somewhat the same terminology. He says that conscience being destructible is attested by the fact that the remorse of an accusing conscience constitutes the essential torment of lost souls and devils.³³

Problems in Terminology

Luther uses various adjectives to describe the different

³⁰Ibid., III, 118.

³¹Ibid., X, 806.

³²Ibid., X, 806 f.

³³Archibald Alexander Hodge, Outline of Theology (New York: Robert Charter and Brothers, c.1866), p. 220.

states of conscience. The question is whether he is actually speaking of conscience as being in various conditions or whether the terminology is used to indicate the states of the intellect and other conditions of the mind.

What is a guilty conscience? According to Luther, it is one that assails man with his past sins.³⁴ Guilty conscience is another way of stating that the entire person is guilty. This is alluded to when Luther says in his refutation against Erasmus, "For no proof can be more decisive, than the very confession and testimony of the guilty person against himself."³⁵ That Luther is referring to the condition of the total person when speaking of a condition of conscience is also brought out by his statement that man is in that state in which conscience testifies him to be in the face of God.

Denn ich habe oft gesagt wie sich das Gewissen gegen Gott haelt, also ist er. Haetst du, dasz er gnaedig sei, so ist er gnaedig; fuerchtest du dich vor ihm, also vor einem schrecklichen Richter, so ist er es auch, richte dich immerdar nach deinem Gewissen.³⁶

That the feeling of guilt deals with a condition of the mind is also pointed up by Regin Prenter's interpretation of Luther's theology. He says that unpardonable guilt lays hold of the conscience in inner conflict so that man knows he is under the eternal and irrevocable condemnation of God,

³⁴Works of Martin Luther, II, 13.

³⁵Luther, The Bondage of the Will, p. 121.

³⁶Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, III, 202.

stricken from the book of life forever.³⁷

What is a distressed conscience?³⁸ In using this term, Luther is not necessarily referring to a condition of conscience but is merely using popular language. This can be seen when he equates it with a state of the mind. He speaks of sins distressing the conscience and in conjunction with this says that whoever is in this frame of mind is without doubt ready to grieve and fear for his sins.³⁹ There is also a reference to distressed conscience in a general sense, where a sinful conscience is noted as causing distress which is equated with a burden of the heart.⁴⁰ Distressed conscience is also equated with a consciousness of God's anger. "Das Bloede, verzagte Gewissen meint, Gott stehe mit der keule hinter uns, und Gott sei zornig."⁴¹

What is an offended conscience? Luther indicates that it is the term used to describe the person's emotions who allows suspicion and bitterness to harm his faith. Luther gives the admonition:

There is need that the minister of Christ be far-seeing and faithful; he ought so to govern and teach the people of Christ in all these matters that their conscience and

³⁷Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator, translated by John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1953), p. 15.

³⁸Works of Martin Luther, II, 250.

³⁹Ibid., p. 249.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 13.

⁴¹Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, III, 991.

faith be not offended, and that there spring not up in them a suspicion and a root of bitterness, and many be defiled thereby. . . .⁴²

What is a timid conscience? From Luther's statements it is attributed to the person who needs assurance of the forgiveness of his sins.⁴³ Luther also uses the term to describe the person who lacks boldness in his actions. This is brought out by his statement: "Thus they have made our consciences so timid and shy that it is no longer easy to preach liberty because the common people take such great offence."⁴⁴

What is a bound conscience? For Luther the nature of conscience is such that it is bound at all times. The standard to which it is bound determines the value of its function. In one case it may exasperate the mind to a greater hatred of both God and man. This happens when the Pope puts people under the tyranny of the law.⁴⁵ Conscience may be bound either to human teachings or God's teaching, but God's teaching is the only safe standard. "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other -- my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against

⁴²Works of Martin Luther, II, 346.

⁴³Ibid., p. 424.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 129.

⁴⁵Luther, Bondage of the Will, pp. 52 f.

conscience is neither right nor safe."⁴⁶

What is an evil conscience? From Luther's statements it is evident that he does not use the term to refer to the nature of conscience. He speaks of an evil conscience when it testifies against man. An evil conscience sees everything which has taken place in the light of being done against the person possessing it.⁴⁷ It causes man to fear even when there is nothing to fear. "Ein boeses Gewissen fuerchtet sich vor allen Kreaturen. . . . Wenn es verzagt ist, so erschrickt es vor einer jeglichen Kreatur, auch die gut ist."⁴⁸ According to the terminology it would seem that "evil" belongs to the nature of conscience but according to the context we see that it is ascribed to conscience when it condemns man.

What is a corrected conscience? Some of Luther's statements seemingly contradict his statements on infallibility. For example: "For faith redeems, corrects and preserves our consciences, so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works. . . ." ⁴⁹ A little more light is shed on the issue when he says, "but I instruct men's consciences that

⁴⁶Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), p. 185.

⁴⁷Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, XX, 381.

⁴⁸"Luther ueber das Gewissen," Theologische Quartalschrift, No. 3. (July, 1921), 172.

⁴⁹Works of Martin Luther, II, 344.

they may endure the Roman tyranny, well knowing they have been deprived of their rightful share in the sacrament because of their own sins."⁵⁰ Luther here uses conscience interchangeably with man himself. To instruct man's conscience is to give him a knowledge so he can distinguish. This point is brought out when he says: "It is very necessary here that our hearts and consciences be well instructed, so that you distinguish well between the outward reception and the inner spiritual reception."⁵¹

What is a strengthened conscience? For Luther this is a description of the feeling of a person who has through faith received the assurance of the forgiveness of sins.⁵² Luther is not speaking of the nature of conscience but is merely referring to a heart that is comforted. This is seen also by his words: "For our God is not so miserly that he has left us with only one comfort or strengthening for our conscience. . . ."⁵³ The types of consciences which need strengthening are the sinful and the timid.⁵⁴ We have noted that these also do not describe the nature of conscience.

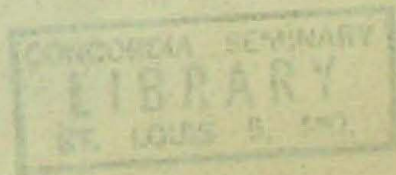
⁵⁰Ibid., p. 188.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 418.

⁵²Ibid., p. 247.

⁵³Ibid., p. 424.

⁵⁴Ibid., I, 378.



What is a trained conscience? Luther states that our conscience must be trained to fall back on the freedom purchased for us by Christ.⁵⁵ Hence, the trained conscience is the same as the corrected conscience. Both are used interchangeably with man himself. On the one hand he says that the trained conscience should fall back upon Christ and on the other he says that our greatest certainty is that we know where our sins are laid.⁵⁶

What is a good conscience? Luther asserts that when man has true faith and the Spirit dwelling in him. "Wo nun Glaube und gut Gewissen ist, da ist gewiszlich der Heilige Geist."⁵⁷ It is the pleasant experience which man has when the blessing of God is upon him and he experiences true happiness. "Dagegen, wo ein groehliches Gewissen ist, das da gewisz ist der Gunst und des Segens Gottes, da ist auch ewige Freude."⁵⁸ This is likewise indicated in Luther's statement, "Freude ueber alle Freude ist ein gut, sicher Gewissen."⁵⁹ Good conscience cannot be founded on erring knowledge even if in such a case there is no testimony against man. This is indicated

⁵⁵Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 195.

⁵⁶Martin Luther, Day by Day We Magnify Thee, translated by Steiner and Scott (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c. 1952), p. 66.

⁵⁷Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 1706.

⁵⁸Ibid., IV, 1985.

⁵⁹Ibid., X, 1706.



in his reference: "Gott will, dasz unser Gewissen getrost und sicher sei, dasz es ihm gefalle; das kann nicht geschehen, wenn es durch sein Gutduenken geleitet wird."⁶⁰ Furthermore, a good conscience is spoken of when conscience does not testify against man due to its being equated with paradise and the kingdom of heaven.⁶¹ Therefore it is opposite evil conscience which "zuhet alles, was geredet wird immer auf sich."⁶² It is also opposite from an uneasy conscience. "For it is typical of the uneasy conscience to feel that the very forces of nature and all the creatures are leagued with a wrathful God against it, so that it can be terrified even at the rustling of a leaf."⁶³ However a good conscience is not the basis for trust. "Und steht dennoch das Vertrauen nicht auf eigen Wuerdigkeit oder guten Gewissen, sondern auf Christo."⁶⁴

Conscience and Sin

According to Luther, conscience makes man conscious of the fruits of his sin in a very real manner. "Denn diese Flueche oder solche, die diesen gleichen, traegt das Gewissen, welches der Suende dient, das in allen Dingen Qual und

⁶⁰Ibid., III, 1470.

⁶¹Ibid., X, 1939.

⁶²Ibid., XX, 381.

⁶³Watson, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶⁴Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 1709.

Schande empfindet, denn die Gottlosen haben nicht Frieden, und kein Ort ist sicher, keine Stunde ruhig, keine Kreatur zuverlaessig."⁶⁵ When man becomes aware of and tormented by his sins, then conscience becomes miserable until the knowledge of gorgiveness is present. Luther states that no one needs forgiveness of sins and God's grace more than those whose poor miserable consciences are driven and tormented by their sins.⁶⁶ Luther indicates that sins distress the conscience especially when there is a knowledge of them and they are brought to man's attention.⁶⁷

Dr. C. F. W. Walther also brings out the point that sin puts terror in the conscience.⁶⁸ The Lutheran confessions in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession likewise bear out that a lack of remission of sins causes conscience to be distressed.⁶⁹ Rousseae, an exponent of many of the Deistic principles, saw no connection between guilt and the action of conscience.⁷⁰ Thus, there would be no semblance of

⁶⁵Ibid., III, 1604.

⁶⁶works of Martin Luther, p. 324.

⁶⁷Ibid., II, 249.

⁶⁸C. F. W. Walther, The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel, reproduced from the German edition of 1897 by W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), p. 27.

⁶⁹"Apology of the Augsburg Confession," Trislot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 249.

⁷⁰Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, III, 243.

agreement between him and Luther on an issue such as sin. Evolutionists, who recognize the gradual growth in the mind of the moral sense only as a function of the brain, also have a view entirely different from Luther.⁷¹

Luther's view concerning the relationship of sin and conscience is further seen in the statements referring to the result of acting against the judgment of conscience. It is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.⁷² Acting against conscience willingly and knowingly is a sin which destroys faith.

Denn so ein Mensch in Suenden ist wider sein Gewissen, das ist, so er wissentlich und willinlich tut wider Gott, als ein Ehebrecher oder Frevler, der jemand wissentlich Unrecht tut derselbe, so lange er solchen Willen wissentlich behaelt ist er ohne Ruhe und ohne Glauben und ist Gott nicht gefaellig.⁷³

This point is precisely stated when Luther says that going against conscience is equal to going against faith and the sin involved is terrible.⁷⁴

E. W. A. Koehler agrees with Luther in his interpretation of Romans 14:23: "whatsoever is not of faith is sin." He says that faith here means conviction, and acting against one's conscience.⁷⁵ Dr. John Theodore Mueller also agrees

⁷¹Universal Cyclopedia and Atlas, III, 147.

⁷²Bainton, op. cit., p. 185.

⁷³Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 1706.

⁷⁴Ibid., XII, 21.

⁷⁵Koehler, op. cit., p. 29.

with Luther that sin may be committed in connection with conscience. He says that a person may sin against a correct conscience, which is in agreement with the divine Law, or against an erring conscience, in which case he sins both when he disregards and when he follows his misguided conscience, which is at variance with the divine word. or against a probable conscience, as in that case he either neglects the duty of ascertaining the right course of action, or acts in doubt; or against a doubting conscience, since in such cases he should not act at all.⁷⁶

Conscience and Satan

Satan continues to accuse man's conscience until the remembrance of sin is put away. "But the man that putteth not away the remembrance of his sin . . . falling into Satan's snares . . . at length is overcome with the continuance of the temptation; for the devil will never cease to accuse his conscience."⁷⁷ Satan uses conscience in his tyranny against man.

Denn du Teufel bedraengt und verfolgt uns mehr durch unser eigenes Herz und unser Gewissen als durch Schwert und Tyrannei. Denn der Tuerke kann keinen groeszeren Schaden tun, als dasz er das Haupt abschlage und eruerge; aber unser Herz kann uns eien solche Disputation anrichten, eine solche Traurigkeit erregen, dasz wir darin in Ewigkeit verloren sein mueszten. . . . Daher ist der Teufel nirgends maechtiger, istiger,

⁷⁶John Theodore Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1934), pp. 229 f.

⁷⁷Kerr, op. cit., p. 60.

staerker, heilliger, gerechter als in unseren Herzen.⁷⁸
Luther relates that Satan's design is to entangle and bind
conscience.⁷⁹

Conscience and the Law of God

According to Luther's statements, it is seen that conscience and the Law of God are in a relationship to each other, although they are separate from each other. The Law accuses the conscience. "When the Law exercises its higher function it accuses and condemns the conscience."⁸⁰ It is possible for conscience to be delivered from the Law's accusation. "Christ relieves the conscience of the Law."⁸¹ The action of the Law toward conscience is difficult to combat in times of trial. "The conscience ought to know only Christ. To say this is easy, but in times of trial, when conscience writhes in the presence of God, it is not easy to do."⁸² Watson says that for Luther the Law is both good and evil in divine respects. When it governs a man's conscience and becomes determinative of his relationship to God, it is a tyrant.⁸³

Closely allied to this subject is the relationship of conscience and the natural knowledge of God. Concerning

⁷⁸Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, V, 104.

⁷⁹Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 59.

⁸⁰Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 15.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 151.

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Watson, op. cit., p. 153.

natural knowledge Luther says: "Even the heathen have this awareness by a natural instinct, that there is some supreme deity . . . as Paul says in Romans 1, that the Gentiles knew God by nature."⁸⁴ The nature of conscience is so constituted that it bears witness to this knowledge. Watson says of Luther: "Poets and common people alike, he says, thus testified to the supreme power of God; and although some, who wished to appear wise, denied it, or pretended not to know it, yet their own conscience bore witness to it."⁸⁵ Thus the natural knowledge or Law written into the heart of man serves a positive value for conscience. Luther says:

If the Natural Law had not been inscribed and placed by God into the heart, one would have to preach a long time before the consciences are touched; to a donkey, horse, ox, cow, one would have to preach 100,000 years before they would accept the Law in spite of the fact that they have ears, eyes, and heart, as man has; they can also hear it, but it does not touch their heart.⁸⁶

Outstanding Lutheran theologians agree with this relationship.

Dr. Francis Pieper quotes Hollaz:

Though the mind of a wicked person may be put to sleep and fall into a stupor, so that it no longer thinks about God, it is impossible to conceive of anyone whose conscience will not finally assert itself and in the hour of death accuse man of having ignored God.⁸⁷

Thus Luther and the Lutheran theologians agree that conscience and Law written in man's heart are not one and the same.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 80.

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 82.

⁸⁶Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, I, 374.

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 373.

The views of Evolutionism and Utilitarianism are not concerned with the position of Natural Law. For Revolutionism, the origination of conscience lies in social experience, registered in customs and changing laws.⁸⁸ For Utilitarianism, the ethical value of an action depends on, and is derived from its utility.⁸⁹

Conscience and Certainty

Conscience must operate with certainty in order to serve the purpose for which God created it. This is indicated in Luther's discourse against Erasmus. "And if this be wanting so that the conscience dare not say, to a certainty, and with confidence, -- this pleases God it is certain that it does not please God."⁹⁰ Luther contends that a lack of certainty torments conscience. "The Roman theologians teach that no man can know for a certainty whether he stands in the favor of God or not. With this teaching they tormented men's consciences. . . ." ⁹¹ Luther implies that this tormented conscience is conscience as it convicts man. Therefore, he says: "Train your conscience to believe that God approves of you. Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the Word of

⁸⁸Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, III, 244.

⁸⁹Singmaster, op. cit., pp. 128 f.

⁹⁰Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 352.

⁹¹Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 157.

God."⁹² In other words, conscience convicts man when there is lack of certainty of action.

The nature of conscience is such that there is no ground for action and has nothing to which it can be attached when doubt prevails.

Man muss durchaus darauf hinwirken, dass die Gewissen in allen Dingen Gewisz und sicher seien. Denn wenn ein Zweifel uebriggelassen wird, kann alles andere nicht befestigt werden.⁹³

E. W. A. Koehler refers to some of the same points in the relationship of conscience and certainty. He says that where there is conviction, conscience acts; and where there is no conviction, conscience does not act. Although conscience does not impel man to acts which are doubtful to him, it will function after he has acted in such cases, because now there is something sure; he has acted, and has done so in doubt. Therefore conscience will accuse and condemn him.⁹⁴ A modern philosopher such as Fichte seemingly takes the same view of the importance of certainty for the action of conscience. He defines conscience as the immediate consciousness of a specific duty, and this involves the unconditional certainty of a consciousness of duty with which a practical judgment, logically deduced from recognized premises, is endowed.⁹⁵

⁹²Ibid., p. 158.

⁹³Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, XXI, 1873.

⁹⁴Koehler, op. cit., pp. 28 f.

⁹⁵Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia, III, 243.

Conscience and Worship

Luther's view is that conscience causes man to worship, but of itself does not lead to a true worship of the true God. Watson quotes Luther: "It concerns conscience alone which seeks help . . . it would gain heaven by force . . . would itself earn reward and do service over and above what is required. What else is this but turn to God into an idol or wooden image, and to set up ourselves as a god?"⁹⁶

According to Luther, conscience is of such a nature that when it functions in unenlightened man, it does not lead him to the true worship of God through Christ. Luther says that man's folly is so prodigious that instead of embracing the message of grace with its guarantee of the forgiveness of sin for Christ's sake, man finds himself more laws to satisfy his conscience.⁹⁷

For Luther it is conscience which makes man aware of God. However, this is not adequate for true worship. Watson again quotes Luther:

God is at work everywhere throughout the whole of His creation, actively manifesting Himself as a God of power and law in nature and in the consciences of men They may confess, rightly that he exists, is powerful and just, and is to be worshipped, yet they place the wrong construction on these facts and adopt a quite false

⁹⁶Watson, op. cit., p. 90.

⁹⁷Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 133.

attitude toward Him. . . ."98

Dr. Francis Pieper comes to the same conclusion in his interpretation of Romans 2:14-15. "The text states that man's conscience is God's tribunal within man and is recognized as such by man. This explains the attempts of the heathen to propitiate God by idol worship, sacrifices, asceticism, etc., and thus to silence their accusing consciences."99

Conscience and Liberty

Luther indicates that there is a close association between true liberty and the action of man's conscience. What does Luther mean when he speaks of this liberty? It is not the same as civil liberty. By way of example he explains what he means by civil liberty. The reference is to a time when the emperor was compelled to grant the bishop of Rome certain immunities and privileges. He explains that this type of liberty also exempts the clergy from certain public charges. But this is not the liberty which exists in man's conscience. Reference is also made to another kind of liberty which is not liberty of conscience. It is carnal liberty wherein people obey neither the laws of God nor the laws of men, but do as they please.100

98Watson, op. cit., pp. 92 f.

99Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, I, 372.

100Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, pp. 194 f.

By true and real liberty Luther means Christian liberty. He contends that only one thing is necessary for Christian life, righteousness and liberty, and that one thing is the most holy Word of God, the Gospel of Christ.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the person who possesses this liberty is at the same time lord over all and subject to none, and servant to all, subject to everyone.¹⁰² Luther emphasizes the uniqueness of this liberty. "This is real liberty, compared with which every other kind is not worth mentioning. As an outgrowth of this liberty, we are at the same time free from the Law, sin, death, the power of the devil, hell, etc."¹⁰³ Luther explicitly asserts that this liberty from the eternal wrath of God exists in the conscience.

Conscience at liberty is not equal to "free will," according to statements by Luther. The only real free will is that which belongs to God. However, man has a free will to the extent of having a right to possess property but he must realize that the free will of God is over ruling him. In things pertaining to salvation or damnation, he has no free will. Rather he is a captive, slave, and servant, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan.¹⁰⁴ Freedom of conscience and free will are two entirely different issues.

¹⁰¹Works of Martin Luther, II, 314.

¹⁰²Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, IX, 161.

¹⁰³Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 194.

¹⁰⁴Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 79.

We have noted the high virtue of the former in Luther's view; but of the latter he says: "If 'Free Will' be ascribed unto men, it is not more properly ascribed than the divinity of God Himself would be ascribed unto them; which would be the greatest sacrilege."¹⁰⁵

It is indicated by Luther that a free conscience leads man to express his liberty. "Solely in behalf of this freedom of conscience, I lift my voice and confidently cry: No laws may by any right be laid upon Christians. . . ."106

The attitude man has toward laws determines his liberty to a great extent. Luther claims that when laws are not observed in liberty, they bind the conscience. "The Prince of this world will not allow the Pope and his high-priest, and their laws to be observed in liberty, but his design is to entangle and bind consciences."¹⁰⁷

Conscience does not harbor true liberty simultaneously with the law. Either Christ must live and the Law perish, or the Law remain and Christ must perish because the Law and Christ cannot dwell side by side in the conscience.¹⁰⁸

What attitude should one take toward any ban or law which is not in accord with man's just freedom? Does conscience force man to rebel against the tyrant? Luther maintains that

¹⁰⁵Ibid., p. 76.

¹⁰⁶Works of Martin Luther, II, 235.

¹⁰⁷Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 59.

¹⁰⁸Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 31.

man can keep a consciousness of his liberty without rebelling.

For we are free from all things, and if any laws are laid upon us, we must bear them in such a way as to preserve the consciousness of our liberty, and know and certainly affirm that the making of such laws is an injustice which we will bear and glory in, giving heed not to justify the tyrant nor yet to rebel against tyranny.¹⁰⁹

Luther obviously holds that liberty is not the right act against conscience. Going against conscience is neither safe nor right.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, whoever does this sins greatly.¹¹¹ Going against conscience is the very opposite of liberty. "And we men bind ourselves so fast and drive ourselves on against our own conscience."¹¹²

Charles Scaer in his Treatise on Conscience points out, as does Luther, that if there is to be real liberty then there must be liberty of conscience.¹¹³

Conscience and Faith

That conscience is strengthened when faith is strengthened is a consistent view held by Luther. Speaking of the words of the Gospel, Luther says the words apply only to sinful, timid, troubled consciences and are intended to strengthen

¹⁰⁹Works of Martin Luther, II, 235.

¹¹⁰Bainton, op. cit., p. 185.

¹¹¹Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, XII, 21.

¹¹²Works of Martin Luther, I, 323.

¹¹³Scar, op. cit., p. 27.

them if they but believe.¹¹⁴ His reference to the Lord's Supper also bear this out, "so that through these words their conscience may be strengthened by faith."¹¹⁵

Furthermore he refers to faith correcting and preserving conscience. "For faith redeems, corrects and preserves our consciences, so that we know that righteousness does not consist in works. . . ." ¹¹⁶

Faith and conscience are affected simultaneously. Luther refers to despair and unrest of conscience as nothing but an infirmity of faith.¹¹⁷ They are so closely related that they must both be taken into consideration when a minister is dealing with his people, because if one is offended, the other is also offended. This is intimated when Luther says that a minister ought so to govern and teach the people of Christ in all these matters that their conscience and faith be not offended. He goes on to allege that in such a case suspicion may arise, causing many to be defiled.¹¹⁸ Thus we see that both offended conscience and faith cause the same result.

Faith alone sets conscience free. Many of Luther's statements indicate that conscience and faith are so closely related that one cannot tell which is dependent upon the

¹¹⁴Works of Martin Luther, I, 378.

¹¹⁵Ibid., II, 247.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 344.

¹¹⁷Ibid., I, 325.

¹¹⁸Ibid., II, 346.

other. However, he does, at times, refer to the condition of conscience as being determined by faith. "Faith alone sets the conscience at peace."¹¹⁹ This is sustained in Watson's quotation of Luther:

This is the reason that our doctrine is most sure and certain, because it carries us out of ourselves, that we should not lean to our own strength, our own conscience, our own feeling, our own person and our own works: but to that which is without us, that is to say, to the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive us.¹²⁰

He also asserts that where there is true faith, there must of necessity be a good conscience. "Denn wo Glaube ist, dadurch wir gerecht werden, da musz auch gut Gewissen sein. . . ."¹²¹

Luther affirms that good conscience and faith are both results of the Holy Spirit's work through the Gospel. They are inseparable from the person of the Holy Spirit. "Wo nun Glaube und gut Gewissen ist, da ist gewiszlich der Heilige Geist. . . ."¹²² Peace of conscience and faith are spiritual gifts and therefore come by means of the Gospel. "The Gospel bestows all good things spiritual: forgiveness of sins, true righteousness, peace of conscience, everlasting life. . . ."¹²³

A troubled conscience, he says, is opposed to faith. A slight wound of conscience may cause harmful effects upon

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 218.

¹²⁰Watson, op. cit., pp. 175 f.

¹²¹Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 1706.

¹²²Ibid.

¹²³Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 27.

man's faith. "Glaube und anrufung Gottes sind zarte Dinge, und mag leicht eine sehr kleine Wunde des Gewissens sein, die stoeszt Glauben und Anrufung weg; wie jeder guebter Christ sehr oft erfahren musz."¹²⁴ This can also be seen by the fact that a troubled conscience is opposed to God. Luther relates that although he was an impeccable monk, he stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and had no confidence that his merit would assuage him. Therefore he did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against Him.¹²⁵

¹²⁴Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, X, 1706.

¹²⁵Bainton, op. cit., p. 65.

CHAPTER III

FUNCTIONS OF CONSCIENCE

Pronounces Negative Judgment

Luther holds that conscience may testify against man.

"Wo du in diesem Vorsatz bleibst, und dein eigenen Gewissen wider dich zeugt, kannst du nicht glauben und sagen, dasz dir Gott gnaedig sei."¹

According to his view, conscience testifies that man must be in a right relationship to God. Luther proposes that when conscience gives such a testimony, man's relationship to God is not in order. Thus, all freedom and comfort is replaced with unrest and fear.²

The testimony of conscience is for Luther the greatest existing witness to man's condition. It is such a great witness to man's condition that God judges according to its testimony.

Nun ist vor Gott kein groeszere zeuge denn das Gewissen; denn Gott richtet nicht nach dem Gesicht wie die Menschen, sondern nach dem Herzen. . . . Darum gilt unsers Gewissens zeugnis viel mehr vor Gott denn aller Welt zeugnis.³

Luther speaks of the convincing nature of the testimony of conscience in his refutation against Erasmus. "Therefore, I have convinced them upon the testimony of their own conscience,

¹Martin Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, edited by John G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1895), III, 202.

²Ibid., X, 439.

³Ibid., XII, 70.

that "Free Will", being without the glory of God, is, with all its powers, its devoted strivings and endeavors, perpetually under guilt of the sin of unbelief."⁴

The same point is advanced in a reference to the judgment of conscience. Luther makes the indictment against Erasmus that although he has brought forth many things which were handed about in public use and in public sermons, he does not account for the amount of their weight and authority they lose when they are brought to the judgment of conscience.⁵ He again asserts the convincing nature of its negative judgment in his statement: "There is no rhetoric of sufficient force to cheat an honest conscience. The voice of conscience is proof against all powers and figures of eloquence."⁶

Luther regarded conscience as that which bothered him when it was not quiet. He says that he assayed many ways to make his conscience quiet, but it would not because concupiscence and lust of his flesh always returned and vexed him.⁷ Conscience also bothered Luther when he neglected his responsibility. "My conscience troubles me because at worms I yielded to the importunity of my friends and did not play the part of Elijah."⁸

⁴Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, translated by Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans' Pub. Co., c.1931), p.486.

⁵Ibid., p. 84.

⁶Ibid., p. 248.

⁷Philip S. Watson, Let God be God! (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1950), pp.-16 f.

⁸Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), p. 194.

Luther makes a definite reference to the accusing action of conscience. This undoubtedly is the same action as takes place when conscience testifies against man. In Luther's explanation of the Fifth Petition of the Lord's prayer he paraphrases it to say: "Judge us not according to the accusation of the devil and of our miserable conscience. . . ."9

Positive Action Considered

The problem is to determine if Luther actually believes conscience approves or whether such positive action is merely the sensation when conscience is not testifying against man. Positive action is hinted at when he says, "so koennt ihr keiner bessern Rat, Meister, noch Doctor finden denn eben euer eigen Gewissen."¹⁰ It is again intimated when he says, "Why then, should we feel bad if the world looks upon us as evaders of religion and insurgents against constituted authority? We confess Christ and our conscience approves of it."¹¹

Luther seemingly attributes the feeling of happiness to the action of conscience. He says that when man becomes a Christian he becomes a victor over sin, death, and hell.

⁹Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia Edition, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1943), II, 382.

¹⁰Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 196.

¹¹Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, translated by Theodore Graebner, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 156.

At that time man's conscience is gladdened. "Thereby thy conscience is gladdened and thou wilt love the gentle Lamb of God."¹² The feeling freedom, on the other hand, seems to be present merely because conscience is not acting. "Our conscience is free and quiet because it no longer has to fear the wrath of God. This is real liberty. . . ."¹³

I do not see a definite conclusion to this problem. From the great emphasis on the negative judgment, it seems as though Luther regards that as its primary function.

Some theologians speak very explicitly of its approving function. For example, Charles Scaer says: "And after the act it commends us for having done what we believed to be right, or condemns us for having done what we believed to be wrong."¹⁴

Conscience Makes Conscious of Feeling of Responsibility

Luther indicates that conscience makes man conscious of his responsibility to a higher being when he says: "For the conscience is awake feeling and knowing that God is hostile to sinners and will condemn them, and they cannot escape nor flee from his wrath."¹⁵

¹²Martin Luther, Day by Day We Magnify Thee, translated by Steiner and Scott (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1952), p. 27.

¹³Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, pp. 194 f.

¹⁴Charles Scaer, A Treatise on Conscience (Boston: The Stratford Co., c.1927), p. 13.

¹⁵Luther, Day by Day We Magnify Thee, p. 102.

In his interpretation of the Biblical account of Cain and Abel Luther relates how conscience continually made the feeling of responsibility or guilt a reality for Cain. His evil conscience would make a thousand worlds too small for him to hide from the eyes of God. It was entirely the fault of his conscience that he had such fear, says Luther. "Es ist alles des Gewissens Schuld, das ist in solcher angst und wollte gern aus der Welt laufen und vor Gottes Angesicht fliehen, wenn es koennte."¹⁶

Responsibility, made aware by conscience, caused Luther to speak up. "I will save my conscience and open my mouth freely, whether it vex pope, bishops or anyone else."¹⁷

Conscience makes aware of the feeling of neglect of responsibility. Luther says that his conscience troubled him when he realized he had yielded to the importunity of his friends.¹⁸

Luther indirectly intimates that in certain cases conscience makes man aware of his responsibility to go to war.

In the first place, if there is to be war against the Turk, it should be fought at the emperor's command, under his banner, and in his name. Then everyone can assure his own conscience that he is obeying the ordinance of God. . . ."¹⁹

¹⁶Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, III, 118.

¹⁷Works of Martin Luther, II, 118.

¹⁸Bainton, op. cit., p. 194.

¹⁹Hugh T. Kerr, A Compend of Luther's Theology, edited by H. T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), pp. 203 f.

Standard for Judgment

What is the role of adiaphora? Regarding things neither commanded nor forbidden by God's word, Luther says that they do not become articles of faith, even though an angel from heaven were to decree otherwise. That which is asserted without Scripture or an approved revelation need not be believed.²⁰

Neither is public opinion a rightful standard. His statement on relieving the burden of conscience emphasizes this point. "It is not enough to say: This man or that has done the same, I followed the example of the crowd, according to the preaching of the provost, or Dr. Carlstadt, or Gabriel, or Michael. . . ." ²¹

According to Luther's view, human doctrines must not be relied upon as a correct standard. They are harmful when consciences are bound to them.

In this our age, the consciences of almost all have been led astray by human doctrines into a false trust in their own righteousness and their own works, and knowledge about faith and trust in God has almost ceased.²²

A right conscience does not allow human traditions to be a standard. "By 'conscience' I mean a right conscience, not a conscience seared and deformed by human traditions. . . ." ²³

²⁰Works of Martin Luther, II, 133.

²¹Ibid., pp. 401 f.

²²Ibid., I, 31.

²³Ibid., p. 90.

Luther also asserts that councils have no right to impose laws which bind man's conscience. A council has not power to impose upon Christians new ceremonies which are to be observed on pain of mortal sin or at peril of conscience. Therefore man has the power to omit them.²⁴

What is the correct standard for judgment? Luther maintains that God's word is the only correct standard. It is a standard which is not influenced by man because it is outside of his sphere of works and feeling. This truth of God cannot deceive man.²⁵ Therefore conscience is to be captive only to the word of God. "I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the word of God."²⁶

Furthermore, God's word is not to be ignored.

Behold, this is the meaning of such words of Christ, that a sad and heavy conscience should care for nothing but that it find Him, and say to Him: Say what Thou wilt, these are Christ's own words, who can ignore them.²⁷

Christian theologians who hold Scripture to be the only source and norm of faith and life agree with Luther on the correct standard for judgment of conscience. For example, John A. W. Haas refers to the Apostle Paul's emphasis on the appeal of divine revelation as saving truth to the conscience

²⁴kerr, op. cit., p. 154.

²⁵watson, op. cit., pp. 175 f.

²⁶Bainton, op. cit., p. 185

²⁷Luther, Day by Day We Magnify Thee, p. 52.

and then adds: "Out of this attitude we must judge all questions of truth, its authority and infallibility. No demand of dogmatic consistency must stand in the way of the moral verification of all spiritual truth before the conscience."²⁸ Likewise Dr. O. Hallesby, speaking of conscience, states: "In what it says, namely, that we ought to do the will of God, it is right and wholly unimpeachable."²⁹ It is evident that all who do not believe in the true God or do not accept the inspired Scriptures, have a different standard of judgment.

Problem of Erring Conscience

It has been shown that Luther regards conscience as infallible in its testimony and therefore it does not err. In other words, it does not urge man to do that which he knows to be wrong. However, he does refer to conscience which renders judgment on faulty knowledge: "so fuerchtet es doch ein Schuld, wo keine Schuld ist."³⁰ If that is what people mean when they speak of an erring conscience, then Luther would agree with them.

²⁸ John Haas, Freedom and Christian Conduct--An Ethic (New York: The Macmillan Company, c.1923), p. 70.

²⁹ O. Hallesby, Conscience, translated by Clarence J. Carlsen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, c.1933), p. 42.

³⁰ Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, IV, 557.

CHAPTER IV

SIGNIFICANCE OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Negatively: Effects of Conscience Which Is Not Good

"Good Conscience" has been explained as the terminology used to describe the pleasant feeling which is present when conscience is not testifying against man. The question now arises as to the importance of a good conscience for Luther. This gives us a further insight into his concept of conscience. First, then, what are the effects of conscience which is not good?

The effects of a gnawing conscience causes confusion. In this respect Luther quotes Deut. 28:67: "In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! and at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning!"¹

At such a time man cannot expect God's grace, says Luther. "Wo du in boesem Vorsatz bleibst, und dein eigens Gewissen wider dich zeugt, kannst du nicht glauben und sagen, dass dir Gott gnaedig sei."²

The effect is that man feels the forces of nature against himself. This is brought out in his statement: "For it is

¹Works of Martin Luther (Philadelphia Edition, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1943), I, 151.

²Martin Luther, *Saemtliche Schriften*, edited by John G. Walch (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1895), XII, 486.

typical of the uneasy conscience to feel the very forces of nature and all creatures are leagued with a wrathful God against it, so that it can be terrified even at the rustling of a leaf."³

If man does not have a good conscience, he is distrustful of all places and creatures. Luther says that when conscience is carrying a curse as the result of sin, man cannot feel safe in any region nor trust any creature.⁴

He also maintains that conscience which is not good drives man to despair. "Ein boeses Gewissen treibt den Menschen zur Verzweiflung, wie die poeten den Orestes abgemalt haben, dasz er von der heallischen Furien getrieben worden sei."⁵

Another effect is that man becomes weak and weary. Luther asserts that when guilty conscience assails man with his sins and the fear of death, then all these afflictions make man weak and weary.⁶ This again is referred to in his statement concerning a trembling conscience which is a weakness that is spiritual. Therefore, it far outweighs every weakness of body, and renders it, in comparison, light as a feather.⁷

If conscience remains in a troubled state, it casts out

³Philip S. Watson, Let God be God! (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1950), p. 80.

⁴Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, II, 1604.

⁵Ibid., p. 1591.

⁶works of Martin Luther, II, 13.

⁷Ibid., I, 131.

Christ. "There is no place in their hearts for Christ, because of the confusion made by the roaring sea of a troubled conscience."⁸ This also is brought out by the fact that evil conscience and faith do not go side by side.⁹

According to Luther, at such a time no real righteousness is permitted to be present. "And if this be wanting so that the conscience dare not say, to a certainty, and with confidence,--this pleases God, it is certain that it does not please God."¹⁰ This point is also implied in Regin Prenter's interpretation of Luther's theology. "In inner conflict it is the law that rules in the conscience."¹¹

A realization of God's wrath, says Luther, is an effect of an evil conscience. "For conscience is awake, feeling and knowing that God is hostile to sinners and will condemn them, and that they cannot escape nor flee from His wrath. Therefore their conscience flinches and troubles and quakes. . . ."¹² Regin Prenter also refers to this effect in his statement: "When Luther speaks in this manner he is thinking of great

⁸Ibid., p. 88.

⁹Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, K, 1706.

¹⁰Martin Luther, The Bondage of the Will, translated by Henry Cole (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans' Pub. Co., c.1931), p. 352.

¹¹Regin Prenter, Spiritus Creator, translated by John M. Jensen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1953), p. 72.

¹²Martin Luther Day by Day We Magnify Thee, translated by Steiner and Scott (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c.1952), p. 102.

spiritual, inner conflicts. In these inner conflicts the sinner experiences the wrath of God in his conscience. . . ."13

Conscience which is troubled causes man to try to hide, but he cannot do so. "Dasz es ein zart schwach Ding waere um ein boeses Gewissen, denn es koenne sich nicht bergen."14

Luther says that when Jonah's conscience became active, not only the ship but the whole world was too small for him.15

Likewise in the case of Cain, troubled conscience impelled him to attempt to flee the accusation which it rendered.16

The effect in the person who does not have peace and a good conscience is that prayer and good works are hindered. Luther complains that the Pope has burdened the conscience with laws concerning meals, prayers, and fasting. In such a condition of feeling compelled by force to do certain things he cannot have a quiet and good conscience. The result is an inability to pray because of a lack of freedom. However, when man does pray, there is so little peace that his prayer cannot be worshipful. Therefore, the conscience is imprisoned and no work can be performed with a clean heart.17

13 Prenter, op. cit., p. 72.

14 Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, XXII, 381.

15 Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d.), p. 356.

16 Luther, Saemtliche Schriften, III, 118.

17 Ibid., IX, 866.

Significance of a Good Conscience--Positively Considered

Luther implies the great significance of a good conscience in his statement that conscience never dies. "Solite man nun ein ewige Ding toeten oder verstricken, auf dasz ein vergaengliches Ding bleibe und frei wuerde, das waere allzu unbillig."¹⁸

Man is to be careful to preserve a good conscience because of its delicate nature. Man may think of his eye as being very delicate, but conscience is much more delicate. Luther claims it is for this reason that the Apostles are so careful not to let certain laws rule in conscience.¹⁹

A good conscience is of greater significance than tranquillity of the flesh. Luther complains about Erasmus making tranquillity of flesh of greater importance.

Wherein you plainly evince that this peace and tranquillity of flesh, are with you, a matter far greater significance than faith, than conscience, than salvation, than the Word of God, than the glory of Christ, than God Himself!²⁰

Luther maintains that if man has to decide between giving up a long held belief and acting against conscience, the former must be done. In his statement of refutation against Erasmus he speaks of taking a different path only because an urging conscience and an evidence of things forced him to do so.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid., X, 806.

¹⁹ Ibid., XI, 1677.

²⁰ Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 54.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 82 f.

The importance of good conscience for Luther can also be seen by the fact that he calls it the greatest gift of God. "Sicherheit, Friede, Ruhe des Gewissens ist das allerlieblichste, naemlich die allergroeszte Gabe Gottes."²²

A clear conscience is hinted by Luther to be more important than being free from public shame. He states the case of many pious priests who have come to shame with a woman while both parties were minded to live in wedded love. He seems to agree that they should do so with a clear conscience, even though they might have to bear public shame.²³

Luther seemingly takes the position that for the sake of conscience, it is advisable for a woman who is married to an impotent man to marry another rather than to burn or commit adultery. He ends his discourse on this case with the words: "This have I set forth to the best of my ability, for the strengthening of anxious consciences. . . ."²⁴

It is more significant for him to have a good conscience than to compromise for the sake of avoiding trouble. "I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right."²⁵

Man should have a good conscience before he goes to war.

²²Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, IV, 1637.

²³Works of Martin Luther, II, 121.

²⁴Ibid., p. 270

²⁵Bainton, op. cit., p. 185.

If his people go to war against the Turk, they should do so under the emperor's command because then everyone can assure his own conscience that he is obeying the ordinance of God.²⁶

It is better to have a good conscience than to do the right thing against conscience. "Und wenn ja eines weichen und raeumen muss, so soll das Recht weich und raeumen, auf dasz das Gewissen los und frei werde."²⁷

Means of Obtaining a Good Conscience

Luther is very clear on the point that there is no comfort for conscience in works of the Law. "When the conscience is disturbed, do not seek advice from reason or from the Law. . . ."²⁸ Various other statements which substantiate this fact are: "The Law terrorizes the conscience."²⁹ "Dem Gewissen kann durch Werke nich geholfen werden dasz er Ruhe und Frieden habe."³⁰ "Nor would my conscience, even if I should live and work to all eternity, ever come to a settled certainty, how much it ought to do in order to satisfy God."³¹

²⁶Hugh T. Kerr, A Compend of Luther's Theology, edited by H. T. Kerr (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, n.d.), p. 203.

²⁷Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, X, 800.

²⁸Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, translated by Theodore Graebner, third edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 59.

²⁹Ibid., p. 41.

³⁰Luther, Saemmtliche Schriften, III, 321.

³¹Luther, Pondage of the Will, pp. 384 f.

One manner of obtaining a good conscience is by partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, says Luther.

Again, when Christ says: "Take, eat; this is my body, which is given for you. Take, drink; this is the chalice in my blood," etc., He calls forth the faith of those who eat, so that through these words their conscience may be strengthened by faith and they may rest assured of receiving the forgiveness of sins, if they have eaten.³²

The Lord's Supper plays a large role in comforting consciences as seen from another of Luther's statements:

If any one be in despair, if he be distressed by his sinful conscience or terrified by death or have any other burden on his heart, and desire to be rid of them all, let him go joyfully to the sacrament of the altar.³³

A reminder of one's baptism is also acknowledged by Luther to be a means of obtaining a good conscience.

"God is not so miserly that He has left us with only one comfort or strengthening for our conscience. . . a third is our baptism, when I reason thus: See, my Lord, I am baptized in Thy name so that I may be assured of Thy grace and mercy."³⁴

Luther points to the words of the Gospel as providing pardon and hope to consciences afflicted with a sense of sin and terrified at the fear of death and judgment.³⁵ This function of the Gospel is again referred to when he advises man to rest his conscience in the grace of God and in His Word.³⁶

³²Works of Martin Luther, II, 247.

³³Ibid., p. 13.

³⁴Ibid., p. 424.

³⁵Luther, Bondage of the Will, p. 168.

³⁶Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 59.

Furthermore, a sad and heavy conscience should care for nothing but that it find Christ and to receive His words.³⁷

Speaking of private confession, Luther says, "it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences."³⁸ The value of private confession for the comforting and strengthening of consciences consists in the sure absolution as if God Himself spoke it.³⁹ Luther sustains this point with the statement: "For the sacrament of confession was instituted for the quieting, not for the disturbing, of the conscience."⁴⁰

The value of prayer is also asserted. Luther exhorts the troubled conscience to pray with the father of the lunatic boy, "Lord increase our faith!"⁴¹ Prayer as an aid for obtaining a good conscience can be seen by his own prayer, "O Father, comfort our conscience now and in our last hour. . . ."⁴²

Having convictions is necessary for a good conscience. With reference to having a good conscience Luther says: "Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the Word of God."⁴³ The same viewpoint is sustained when he contrasts himself with

³⁷Luther, Day by Day We Magnify Thee, p. 52.

³⁸Works of Martin Luther, II, 250.

³⁹Ibid., p. 424.

⁴⁰Ibid., I, 92.

⁴¹Ibid., II, 21.

⁴²Ibid., p. 382.

⁴³Luther, Epistle to the Galatians, p. 158.

Erasmus. "But as for me, who am maintaining a serious cause, and who am inquiring what is, to the greatest certainty, the truth, for the establishing of consciences, I must act very differently."⁴⁴

⁴⁴Luther, Bondage of the Will, pp. 207 f.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Luther uses the term "conscience" in many different ways. Sometimes he uses it merely as a synonym for feeling or emotion. At other times he speaks of it as a separate faculty of man which has its peculiar function. As to its essence or nature, Luther asserts conscience to be an indestructible, universal faculty of man. It is possible to act against the urging of conscience, but is not possible to do so without sinning against God. When a person acts according to knowledge which is not in accord with Scripture's teaching, sin is again committed. Thus, the voice of conscience is to be followed at all times because it never urges a person to do something against his better knowledge. In this respect it is infallible.

With these facts in mind it is not strange for Luther to stress greatly the importance of freedom to act according to the voice of one's conscience.

Luther insists that God intends man's conscience to be bound solely to His word. When man binds it to other laws, he goes above and contrary to God's will. This accounts for correct instruction being a serious matter.

He also indicates that conscience causes man to worship since it makes him aware of his responsibility to a higher being. This, in turn, causes him to find laws with the

intention of satisfying his conscience.

It is evident from his statements that he realizes conscience holds man responsible to act according to his knowledge and will testify against him if he does not take a certain path. In this respect, it guides his behavior.

The function of conscience stressed mostly is its testimony against the actions of man which are not in harmony with his knowledge of the right. The result of this is a feeling of guilt, fear, distress, and despair. Luther equates this conscious feeling with the type of pain in hell.

Thus, Luther's view is that the highest and true liberty of man consists in the riddance of such a conscience, known commonly as "guilty conscience". When this happens, man experiences the true freedom and happiness. Whether or not it is the action of conscience which gives man this pleasant feeling is not as big an issue with Luther as the emphasis on being rid of the guilty conscience which negates faith.

Though a quiet conscience is of very great importance for Luther, it is not satisfactory for man to think that merely because of its presence, he is at peace with God. The certainty of man's relationship to God is still to be determined by the presence of faith in the divine promise of forgiveness through Christ.

A good conscience is obtained in the same manner that faith is received and strengthened; namely, through the Gospel and sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Luther is

very insistent on that point.

Private confession is also a God-given privilege to be used for quieting conscience. It accomplishes its purpose in so far as the Gospel is offered and received. Furthermore, prayer which asks for a greater faith is to be used for the purpose of obtaining a good conscience.

I am convinced that the drastic actions of Luther in no way prove that he was fanatical. His behavior would be duplicated in any sane person, confronting his circumstances, who has correct knowledge, has ability, loves God, loves His Word, loves man, and thus feels conscience bound to do his duty.

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