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Keep Faith and a Good Conscience

"This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck."

— 1 Tim. 1:18, 19

The title for this introduction, "Keep Faith and a Good Conscience," is derived from the above words of the Apostle Paul to his co-worker Timothy. With his words Paul identifies a connection between faith and conscience and, in particular, the state of the conscience. Paul says, and God's children have experienced, that this connection is significant, touching the matters of salvation and eternal life. He also speaks of action, which he calls "holding," that affects faith and conscience. I have tried to examine these issues in the light of God's Word, so that by His Word we would be enlightened and helped in our struggle to preserve faith and good conscience. With that in mind I have also given special attention to several concerns and erroneous understandings that have surfaced in recent years. I have divided the introduction into three main parts: the function and operation of the conscience, avoiding temptation and wounds to the conscience, and caring for a wounded conscience.

I. The Function and Operation of the Conscience

The Conscience—An Internal Guide and Judge

God has given every man a conscience (Rom. 2:14, 15). As a result, even though it is an abstract concept and difficult to describe, we all recognize its existence and are familiar with its operation. We can describe conscience as the faculty by which we distinguish between moral right and wrong. It functions as both a guide and a judge. It serves as a guide before we act by urging us to do what is right and forbidding us to do what is wrong. It acts as a judge both while and after we act by evaluating the rightness or wrongness of our actions and then by rebuking us for the actions it judges to be wrong.

While conscience is a God-given gift and not the product of environment, training, habit, or education, it is nonetheless influenced by them. This is proven by the acceptance of differing standards of conduct in our world. Nowadays, in fact, it is popular to claim that there is no real moral truth, no true right or wrong, but rather that moral truth, right and wrong are merely relative concepts. Concepts that change with time and place and culture. This claim is wrong. God's Word is true, and it reveals true right and wrong. It is pure, unchanging, and everlasting (Ps. 12:6, 33:4, 119:140; Prov. 30:5; Heb. 13:8; Isa. 40:8).

A Christian Conscience Is Bound to the Word of God

The proper operation of conscience depends upon the knowledge of good and evil that God gives in His Holy Word. The psalmist writes, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (Ps. 119:105). When man departs the light of God's Word he gropes along in darkness, uncertain of where he is headed. Solomon writes, "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 16:25). Paul tells the Romans that when men reject God their hearts grow dark, they become fools, and God finally turns them over to their own lusts (Rom. 1:18–32).

While conscience is a personal knowledge of right and wrong, it is also a broader concept. The word "conscience," which comes from Latin, as well as the original Greek word (syneideesis), mean "knowledge together with." A Christian has the same understanding as the congregation of God, which Paul calls the "pillar and ground of truth" (1Tim. 3:15). God's congregation is taught and led by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26), and Jesus says, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches" (Rev. 2:29). A child of God can feel secure when he travels with a conscience that is guided by God's Word and in harmony with God's congregation where the Holy Spirit speaks and enlightens God's Word.

Occasionally, some defend a position of right or wrong that conflicts with the understanding of God's kingdom by erroneously characterizing its positions as the personal and old-fashioned opinions of speakers and board members. Speakers and board members, like everyone else, are subject to God's Word. All teachers and preachers are judged, not by their position or gifts, but solely by the light of God's Word (Formula of Concord, Part I:Epitome). At the same time, we remember that God has called and set watchmen on the walls of His Zion and in doing so He has given them responsibility for the souls of its inhabitants (Ezek. 33:7, 8). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb 13:17).

The Answer of a Good Conscience

If man heeds the reminders of his conscience and strives in "daily sorrow and repentance" to put sin away, washing his conscience with the purifying water of the gospel, he experiences what Paul calls a "good conscience." Then his conscience no longer accuses him and he knows the peace of God that "passeth all understanding." It has been said that a good conscience is heaven on earth.

If man continually ignores the prompting of his conscience and allows it to become a reservoir for sin, his conscience will harden. It will cease to function properly. His understanding of right and wrong soon becomes clouded, then finally it is lost. His sense of shame and sorrow begin to disappear. Paul tells Timothy that this disdain or neglect for the care of the conscience causes spiritual shipwreck, in other words spiritual death. It is for this reason that Paul urges Timothy to keep "faith and a good conscience." How do we keep faith and a good conscience? We will consider this in the next two sections.

II. Avoiding Temptation

When we have something that we value greatly, for example, family, a friend, our health, or even a prized possession, we do not intentionally subject it to danger or harm. Instead, we do everything we can to shield and protect it. We ought to do likewise in the case of our greatest gift and treasure, namely, our salvation in Jesus Christ. God's Word in numerous places teaches us to shield and protect our faith and to avoid and resist danger, in other words, temptation and the devil (Heb. 10:22–25; Eph. 4:27, Rom. 13:14, James 4:7).

Paul writes to the Galatians, "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting" (Gal. 6:7, 8). What we read, what we listen to, and what we see affect our thoughts and actions. Our two parts, the flesh and the spirit, are like two fires. When we throw fuel on the one, we starve the other. The one that we fuel grows in strength while the one we starve diminishes in strength. If we feed our flesh and starve the Spirit, our flesh will eventually consume us.

Put on the Armor of God

God has given us weapons to be used for our protection in our struggle against sin and temptation. Paul writes to the Ephesians, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Eph. 6: 10, 11). He then identifies the components of this armor: truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, hope, and the Word of God. It would be foolish and dangerous for a soldier to go into battle without all his armour and weapons. Likewise it would be foolish of us to leave these weapons behind and unused in our spiritual battle. I hope that in the ensuing discussion, you will consider and then share your thoughts about how we, in practice, can use and sustain these weapons and armor in our endeavor.

Prayer

After listing the components of this armor, Paul tells the Ephesians to pray. Prayer is a part of Christian life. It, too, can help us to avoid and resist temptation. Our Lord Jesus said, "Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation" (Mark 14:38). In our hurried, modern, and prosperous world, we may easily forget to ask God for His help in our struggle. I would like to encourage you dear brothers and sisters to approach the Heavenly Father for help in your battle against temptation and sin. It pays to pray, for He hears our prayers, and, as Peter says, "the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations" (2 Pet. 2:9).

Flee Temptation

As I mentioned earlier, the Scripture also teaches us to avoid temptation and thus starve the fires of our flesh. The Bible includes some specific instructions about what we should avoid. It, for example, touches where we go and what we do and with whom we spend our time. Solomon writes, "Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away" (Prov. 4:14, 15). Paul likewise instructs us to not

be “unequally yoked” with the unbelieving (2 Cor. 6:14). He also writes to the Thessalonians about how we ought to relate to disobedient brethren: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother” (2 Thess. 3:14, 15). Again, I hope that in the discussion that follows some of you will consider what this means in practice and share your thoughts with the rest of us.

III. Caring for a Wounded Conscience

In spite of our intentions and even our best efforts, we do not always heed the warnings of our conscience. We fail to resist temptation and consequently fall into sin. This is the shared experience of all mankind. All have fallen short (Ps. 14:3) Solomon laments, “Who can say, I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin” (Prov. 20:9). Once we have committed sin, our conscience—if it is operating properly—accuses us of sin and rebukes us and urges us to repent. The devil, on the other hand, tells us to keep it to ourselves. He bombards us with his familiar litany: it’s not really a sin, it’s just a small inconsequential matter, no one will ever know, or, it’s a horrible sin, no one will understand, it won’t be forgiven. His message, on the one hand, appeals to our reason to justify our deeds, and on the other, threatens our pride and frightens us. If we believe him, we are apt, like Adam and Eve, to flee from God’s presence and the light of His Word. The devil is, however, a liar. All that he says is contrary to God’s Word. Sometimes he even distorts God’s Word for his lies. He would have us flee from our only source of help and hope. We ought not to flee from our Heavenly Father, but rather approach Him. James writes, “Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (James 4: 8, 10).

Confession—A Help for Our Conscience

God has granted us a special privilege and gift, a means by which we are able to cleanse and comfort our conscience, namely, confession. In the Large Catechism and other Confessional Writings, we find two types of confession, mutual public confession, and individual confession. In addition, individual confession has four forms: public confession, confession which springs from faith, confession which springs from love, and private confession. Because confession is not the subject of this introduction, I will only touch on the last three mentioned forms and focus primarily on private confession.

Private confession

Private confession is the form of confession that we study in the Small Catechism at Sunday school. When we speak about confession, we usually mean private confession. Private confession has been given for the care of individual consciences.

In the Small Catechism, Luther teaches that private confession has two parts: our confession and the absolution proclaimed by the confessor. Of these two, the second is by far the most important. Thus we should not focus our attention on what we say, but on what the confessor says, namely, the words of absolution.

Luther then continues in the Small Catechism by teaching what sins we ought to confess. His answer has two parts, first, what we are to confess to God, and, second, what we are to confess to the confessor. "Before God," he says, "we should acknowledge ourselves guilty of all manner of sins, even of those which we do not ourselves perceive; as we do in the Lord's Prayer." This confession made to God alone is what is meant by confession that springs from faith. In the Large Catechism, Luther says, "This kind of confession should and must take place incessantly a long as we live. For this is the essence of a genuinely Christian life, to acknowledge that we are sinners and to pray for grace." God answers this prayer for His forgiveness in His congregation with the preaching of the gospel. To the confessor, Luther says, "we should confess those sins alone of which we have knowledge, and which we feel in our hearts and which trouble our conscience." These sins of which we have knowledge, which we feel in our hearts, and which trouble our conscience are so-called "name sins." They are sins that will not grant our conscience peace until it has been assured that the absolution pertains to them also, although we may have heard the unconditional gospel many times.

Private confession is not a work required for salvation. In the first place, we are not saved by confession, but by faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:17). He has completed the work of redemption on our behalf. Our confession can neither add to it nor subtract from it. In the second place, it is not possible for us to confess all our sins, for as the psalmist says, "Who can understand [that is know or discern] his errors?" (Ps. 19:12). But in confession we are able to speak of particular sins and receive the assurance that they also are forgiven and thus our faith is strengthened and our conscience stilled.

While neither Luther or the Augsburg Confession hold private confession to be required by Scripture (Augsburg Confession, Article XXV), they do accept and recommend it. Luther, in fact, speaks very highly of private confession, saying, "I will let no man take private confession away from me, and I would not give it up for all the treasures in the world, since I know what comfort and strength it has given me. No one knows what it can do for him except one who has struggled much with the devil. Yea, the devil would have slain me long ago, if the confession had not sustained me." (Luther's Eighth Lenten Sermon in Wittenberg, 1522). Luther's words point to the proper use and benefit of confession, that is, the care and comfort of the conscience. If confession becomes a required work it does not serve and comfort the conscience, but rather enslaves it.

Special Concerns

In recent years a number of special concerns that are related to confession and the care of the conscience have arisen. Before concluding, I would like to briefly touch on these issues: the first, confession without penitence, the second, the use of grace as a cloak for sin, the third, caring for offenses between brethren.

The conscience of an individual may become so hardened that he will acknowledge and confess his sins only when he has been caught in the act and faced with his deeds. Achan was such an individual (Josh. 7:1–26). We hope that such a person would experience remorse and have a true desire to repent. If however this is not the case and repentance merely becomes a convenient means to escape an unpleasant situation, it will not benefit him. It is the act of repentance without the grace of repentance. It would be better left undone.

Others may use the grace of God as liberty to sin. This occurs, for instance, if one consents to sin on the basis of the possibility of future repentance. Still others who are living in

the permissiveness of sin on occasion defend themselves by claiming that they have no need to take care of the matters. It suffices their consciences to hear the general preaching of the gospel. This is, of course, possible, but it requires, as Luther says, a "strong and firm faith." Luther then asks, "But how many have such a strong faith?" When the fruits of the flesh prevail in the lives of those that make these claims, their claims seem especially empty. A tree is known by its fruits. Their works indicate that the question is not of a strong and firm faith but of a hardened conscience.

Some have also wrongly claimed that it is not necessary to care for offenses between brethren if one simply believes the general gospel. It is this caring for offenses between brethren that Luther calls the confession that springs from love. This kind of confession, unlike private confession, is required by God's Word. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matthew 5:23, 24).

In the so-called "church law of Christ," Jesus gives similar instruction. This time, however, He speaks to the offended party rather than the offending party, saying, "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (Matt. 18:15). Thus, even if it has been cared for with the gospel elsewhere, the offense still needs to be corrected with the party that has been offended. This is a fruit of faith.

Conclusion

Finally, dear brothers and sisters, I would like to encourage you to take the words of the Apostle Paul to heart. Strive to preserve the mystery of faith in a good conscience. When sin has wounded your conscience, remember its wounds can be healed. Jeremiah said, "Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved" (Jer. 17:14). The blood of Jesus Christ, our Advocate with the Father, still flows from the altar of grace in God's kingdom and cleanses and heals the wounds of sin.