

CONSCIENCE: THE MORAL TRUMP CARD?

In the fable “Pinocchio” Jimminy Cricket sings: “and always let your conscience be your guide. “Conscience is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a specific act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.”¹

In the sixteenth century St. Thomas More (d. 1535) and Martin Luther (d. 1546) took opposite positions based on the principle of conscience. St. Thomas More was beheaded on July 6 because he refused to support Henry VIII’s divorce of Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn. His final words on the scaffold were: “The King's good servant, but God's First.” Luther used his principle of the “Bible alone” (*sola scriptura* in Latin) to rupture Christianity.

The Protestant scholar Keith Mathison judges that Luther’s most famous statement regarding the authority of Scripture was made at the Diet of Worms in 1521, which is cited below:²

“Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope or of councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by *manifest reasoning* I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my *conscience* is taken captive by God’s word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against one’s conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”³

Luther added two sources to the authority of Scripture, his *manifest reasoning* and his *conscience*. Both were highly subjective. Only Luther, of course, could decide the extent to which *manifest reasoning* was persuasive. Only Luther could determine the manner in which his *conscience* “is taken captive by God’s word.” In 1522 Luther wrote: “I do not admit that my doctrine can be judged by anyone, even the angels. He who does not receive my doctrine cannot be saved”⁴ To say the least, these are amazing claims.

Under the high sounding claim of elevating the Bible to the lofty position of the supreme, ultimate authority in matters of faith and morals, Luther’s principle of individual interpretation subjected God’s revelation to the whims of the individual. Thus the *World Christian Encyclopedia* reported in 2001 that there were 33,820 Christian denominations.

For Luther and many contemporary Christians, including many Catholics, conscience is a murky idea adrift in a sea of subjective feelings cut off from objective truth. The purpose of conscience is to recognize good and evil, but it does not determine what *is* good and evil. Someone may feel that a very large animal with tusks, a trunk and big ears is a

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* # 1778.

² Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, p. 95.

³ Henry Bettenson editor, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd edition, p. 199 – emphasis mine.

⁴ Grisar, *Martin Luther: His Life and Work*, pp. 420-422.

canary, but it still won't fly. Until 1930 *all* Christian churches taught that contraception was seriously sinful. Protestant churches abandoned this clear consistent teaching in 1930 and 1931. Many Catholics abandoned the teaching of the Catholic Church in the rebellion against *Humanae Vitae* in 1968. However redefining sin does not change its underlining reality just as renaming an elephant doesn't make it a canary.

What is often missed in the consideration of conscience is the serious obligation each person has to properly form his conscience. Training ones conscience does not mean that we can do whatever we "feel" like doing. Many have the incorrect idea that "their conscience" is a kind of trump card that overrides truth. It is said humorously that according to Murphy's Law the following is the Golden Rule: "He who has the gold makes the rule!" In the case of our eternal goal, God has the gold. He is truth. Therefore he is the standard to which all consciences should be formed.

Some one might say that sounds well and good, but in this confusing world with so many conflicting voices how is it possible to know the truth, even about God? That is an important question. For the past two thousand years God has given us a sure guide. When writing to his spiritual son Timothy, St. Paul was inspired to say:

"If I am delayed, you may know who one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the *church, the pillar and bulwark of the truth*" (1 Tim 3:15).

God gave the Church to the world as a sure guide in forming consciences.

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