

CONSCIENCE AND THE BIBLE IN HARMONY

BY Charles Grandison Finney
THE OBERLIN EVANGELIST JUNE 6, 1855

"By manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."--2 Cor. 4:2.

The context shows that these words of Paul refer to his manner of preaching, and to the aim which he had in those labours.

Conscience is a moral function of the reason, or intellect. It is that department of our natural faculties which has to do with moral subjects--with morality and religion. This faculty gives us moral law and obligation; it has the idea of right and wrong, of praise or blame-worthiness; of desert of retribution. It comprehends all the intuitions of the intellect on moral questions. The term is sometimes used to include those states of the sensibility which are occasioned by, and connected with, the action of conscience; yet, strictly speaking, the term is confined to the intellect, and does not embrace the sensibility.

Every man has a conscience. This is implied in our text. How could Paul commend himself in presenting the truth to every man's conscience if every man had not a conscience--that is, if some men had no conscience at all? The existence of a conscience in every man is a fact of consciousness and one of its ultimate facts. Every man knows that he has a conscience, and it is impossible he should know any fact with higher evidence, or with greater certainty than he knows this. If he had no conscience, it would be impossible he should have the ideas of right and wrong, of good or ill desert, of virtue and of vice. No being could convey these ideas to his mind if he had not a conscience. No language could be of any use to convey such ideas if man had no conscience wherewith to apprehend and appreciate them.

These ideas of God, duty, right, and desert of retribution, belong to man--to all men; are found in all men, and cannot be expelled from the human mind.

This faculty distinguishes man from the lower animals. Obviously they have some intellect; but whether they know by direct intuition, or in some other way, it seems impossible for us to determine. For example, we cannot ascertain whether the bee, in constructing his cells on the most perfect mathematical principles, gets his knowledge of this most perfect method, by intuition or in some other process. Be this as it may, neither the bee nor any other of the lower animals has any moral law, or any ideas of moral character, of right and wrong, of good or ill desert, or of retribution. This is the great characteristic difference between these animals and man. Hence, if any man sets up the claim that he has no conscience, he claims to be a brute, for he denies of himself the great distinction between the man and the brute.

Metaphysicians are not agreed whether brutes have sensibility and will, or not; they do agree that brutes have no conscience and no moral responsibility; so that those men who claim this distinction for themselves, put themselves at once by that claim on a level with the lower animals.

The Bible and the human conscience are at one and entirely agree in all their moral decisions and teachings. This fact proves conclusively that they both come from the same author.

Beginning with our text, I ask, what can Paul mean in saying that, by manifestation of the truth, he commends himself to every man's conscience? Obviously this--that by exhibiting to men the great truths of the gospel and of the law, he made his appeal to every man's conscience in a way, and with sentiments that enforced each man's approval. The truth commended itself as truth; the claims of duty, as right. No man who understood this truth could doubt its evidence--none who understood its moral claims could dispute those claims.

But this point is so important that it should be examined in detail. I, therefore, remark, that conscience reveals the same rules of duty and the same measure of obligation as God's revealed law does. Conscience imposes the same law of love as God's law does--love supreme towards God, love equal and impartial towards our neighbour. Conscience never fails to affirm that each man is bound to love his neighbor as himself. There never was a human being of developed and sane powers, whose conscience did not impose this obligation upon him.

Conscience, also, postulates this law as binding on all moral beings, and as extending to all the activities of every moral being. In fact, conscience and reason show that this is the only possible law or rule of duty for moral beings; and the Bible teaches the very same in every particular. Both are entirely at one in all their teachings on this great subject.

Both conscience and the Bible harmonize, also, in this--that man, in his natural state, has entirely fallen from duty. Conscience universally affirms that men do not, apart from grace, love God with all their heart, nor their neighbours as themselves. The human conscience proclaims man in a state of total moral depravity. So does the Bible. Conscience affirms that nothing, short of full obedience to God's law of love, is real virtue; and so does the Bible. Conscience presses the sinner with a sense of guilt, and holds him

condemned;--and so does the Bible. And each decides by the same rule in every respect. You may take each individual precept you find in the law and the gospel; go into the examination ever so minutely; canvass all the teachings of Jesus Christ, all those of the apostles and of the prophets;--you will find that conscience says amen to them all.

What a remarkable fact is this! Here is a book containing myriads of precepts--that is, if you enumerate all the specific applications; yet they are comprised under two great principles--supreme love to God, and equal love to our fellow man. But in all these countless specific applications of these great principles, whatever the Bible affirms, conscience endorses. This is a most remarkable fact. It never has been true of any other book, that all its moral precepts without exception are approved and endorsed by the human conscience. This book, so endorsed, must be inspired of God. It is impossible to suppose that a book so accredited of conscience can be uninspired. It is the greatest absurdity to deny its inspiration. A book so perfectly in harmony with conscience must come from the author of conscience.

Men said of Christ when he taught--"Never man spake like this man"--so wonderfully did the truths taught commend themselves to every man's conscience. He spake "with authority," and "not as the scribes;"--for every word went home to man's conscience, and every precept revealing duty, was recognized and endorsed as right by the hearer's own convictions. This striking feature characterized all his teachings.

Both the Bible and conscience harmonize in respect to the requisition of repentance. Each affirms this to be every man's duty. Each rests this claim on the same ground--to wit: that God is right and the sinner wrong;--and, therefore, that the sinner ought to turn to God in submission, and not God turn to the sinner in a change of his course.

In like manner, both conscience and the Bible harmonize in the requisition of faith and of entire holiness. On all these great gospel precepts, the Bible affirms and conscience responds most fully. As to the demand of entire holiness, it is a clear dictate of our moral sense that we cannot enjoy God without being like him. When our intelligence apprehends the true character of God and of man, it recognizes at once the necessity that man should be like God in moral character in order to enjoy his presence. Beings possessed of a moral nature can never be happy together unless their spirits are congenial.

Conscience affirms man's position as a sinner to be wrong. So does the Bible. It is impossible for a sinner to believe that his sin is right and pleasing to God. This also, is the doctrine of the Bible.

Conscience affirms the necessity of an atonement. Mankind have always felt this necessity, and have manifested this feeling in many ways. Through all ages, they have been devising and practicing some form of sacrifice to render it proper for God to forgive the sinner. The idea has been in their mind that God must demand some sacrifice that would honor his law and sustain its injured majesty. That the law has been dishonored by the sinner, all have fully admitted. And obviously the idea has been in the minds of men that it would be dishonorable, degrading and injurious to God, to forgive sin without some atonement. They seem to have apprehended the great truth that, before God can forgive sin, he must demand some demonstration which shall sustain law and evince his own position and feelings as a lawgiver. How, but from these universal affirmations of conscience, can you account for the fact that all mankind have felt the necessity for some mediator between God and man? So universal is this felt necessary that when men have had their conscience aroused, and have been in doubt or in darkness as to Christ, the Mediator, they have plunged into despair. If conscience sleeps, the sinner may pass along with little concern; but when it arouses itself like a mighty man, and puts forth its emphatic announcements, then no sinner can resist. It is a well-known fact that Unitarians, when thoroughly convicted of sin, can find no rest in their system of religious belief. I am well aware that so long as their conscience is not aroused to its functions, and they are in great darkness, they can say--"Man is pretty good by nature, and I see no need of a vicarious atonement. I accept Christ as a good man, an excellent teacher, and a fine example; but what do I want of an atoning sacrifice?" So he can say--till conscience wakes up its voice of seven thunders;--then he cries out, "I am undone. How can I live if there be not some atoning sacrifice for my sins?"

There never was a sinner, awakened to see his sins truly, who did not go into despair unless he saw the atonement. I could give you many cases of this sort which have fallen under my own observation, in which, persons, long denying the need of any atonement, have at length had conscience fully aroused, and have then invariably felt that God could not forgive unless in some way his insulted majesty were vindicated.

Indeed, God might be perfectly ready to forgive so far as his feelings are concerned, for he is not vindictive, neither is he implacable; but he is a moral governor and has a character, as such, to sustain. The interests of his created universe rest on his administration, and he must take care what impression he makes on the minds of beings who can sin.

In this light we can appreciate the propensity always felt by the human mind to put some Mediator between a holy God and itself. Catholics interpose saints and the Virgin--supposing that these will have a kind of access to God which they, in their guilt, cannot have. Thus, conscience recognizes the universal need of an atonement.

The Bible every where reveals the adequacy of the atonement made by Christ; and it is remarkable that the human conscience also promptly accepts it as sufficient. You may arouse the conscience as deeply as you please--may set it all on fire, and yet as soon as the atonement of Christ is revealed, and the mind understands what it is, and what relations it sustains to law and government, suddenly conscience is quiet; the sense of condemnation is gone; the assurance of an adequate atonement

restores peace to the troubled soul. Conscience fully accepts this atonement as amply sufficient, even as the Bible also does.

But nothing else than this atonement can satisfy conscience. Not good works, ever so many or so costly; not penance, not any amount of self-imposed suffering and sacrifice. Let a sinner attempt to substitute ever so much prayer and fasting, in place of Christ as an atoning sacrifice, it is all of no avail. The more he tries, the more he is dissatisfied. Conscience will not accept it. Neither will the Bible. Most wonderfully, we find it still true, to whatever point we turn, that conscience and the Bible bear the same testimony--take the same positions.

But how does this happen? Whence comes this universal harmony? This is a problem for those to solve who deny the inspiration of God's word. Those who admit its inspiration have only to refer both to the same Author. It is no strange thing on their theory, that God's voice in the Bible, and God's voice in the bosom of man, should utter the same notes, each responsive to the other, and each affirming or denying in perpetual unison.

Both the human conscience and the Bible teach justification by faith. I do not suppose the human conscience could have revealed to us the fact of the death of Christ; but the Bible having revealed it, the conscience can and does appreciate its fitness and adequacy, and, therefore, can and does accept this sacrifice as a ground of justification before God. It recognizes the sinner as brought into a state of acceptance with God on the ground of what Christ has suffered and done. What can be the reason that faith in Christ has such wonderful power to extract the smart of sin, take away the sense of condemnation, and give the consciousness of being accepted of God? The fact we see developed every day. You cannot make the mind afraid of punishment when once it rests in Christ Jesus. You cannot create a sense of condemnation while your heart has an active faith in the blood of Christ. By no methods you can employ, can you force it upon the soul. With faith there will be hope and peace, despite of all your efforts to dislodge them. When the soul really embraces Christ, peace will ensue. The truth is, the provisions of the gospel for the pardon of sin meet the demands of conscience. It affirms that God is just, and therefore is satisfied, while he justifies the penitent believer in Jesus. It is the province of conscience to affirm the propriety or impropriety of God's moral conduct as well as man's; and hence, it moves only within its sphere when it affirms that God can rightly accept such a satisfaction as that made in the atonement of Christ for sin.

Conscience affirms that there can be no other conceivable way of justifying the sinner except by faith in Christ. You may try ever so much to devise some other scheme, yet you cannot. You may try to get peace of mind on any other scheme than this--as some of you have--but all is of no avail. I once said to a Roman Catholic--"When you went to confessional, you hoped to be accepted and to get peace?" "Yes." "But did you find it to your full satisfaction?" "Not certainly. I cannot say that I knew I was accepted."

There never was a Catholic who had been through all their ceremonies, and afterwards, being converted to faith in Christ alone, experienced the deep peace of the gospel, who did not see the wide difference between his experience as a papist and his experience as a gospel believer. His conscience so completely accepts his faith in the latter case, and gives him such deep, assured peace;--while in the former case there could be nothing of this sort.

The Bible and conscience agree in affirming the doctrine of endless punishment. Conscience could teach nothing else. At what period in the lapse of future ages of suffering would conscience say, "He has suffered enough. The law of God is satisfied; his desert of punishment for sin is now exhausted, and he deserves no more"? Those who know anything about the decisions of conscience on this point, know very well that it can conceive of no limitations of ill-desert for sin. It can see no end to the punishment which sin deserves. It can conceive of the man who has once thus sinned, as being nothing else but a sinner before God, since the fact of his having sinned can never cease to be a fact. If you have been a thief, that fact will always be true, and in that sense you must always be a thief in the eye of law. You cannot make it otherwise. Your suffering can make no sort of satisfaction to an offended law. Conscience will see more and more guilt in your course of sin, and your sense of guilt must increase to all eternity. You can never reach the point where conscience will say--"this suffering is enough; this sinner ought to suffer no longer." The Bible teaches the same.

Yet each agree in teaching that God can forgive the penitent through faith in Christ, but can extend forgiveness to no sinner on any other ground.

REMARKS.

1. We see why the Bible is so readily received as from God. Few have ever read any treatise of argument on this subject; but as soon as one reads those parts which relate to morals, conscience at once affirms and endorses all. You need no higher evidence that he who speaks in the Bible is very God. The truth commends itself to every man's conscience, and needs no other endorser of its divine origin. Probably in all this congregation not one in fifty ever sat down to read through a treatise on the evidences of a divine revelation; and you can give perhaps no other reason for your belief in the Bible than the fact that it commends itself to your conscience.

2. You see why one who has seen this harmony between conscience and the Bible, cannot be reasoned out of his belief in the Bible by any amount of subtle sophistry. Perhaps he will say to his opponent--"I cannot meet your sophistries; I have never speculated in that direction; but I know the Bible is true, and the whole gospel is from God; I know it by the affirmations of my own mind. I know it by its

perfect fitness to meet my wants. I know it has told me all I ever felt, or have ever needed, and it has brought a perfect supply for all my need." This he can say in reply to sophistry which he may have no other logic to withstand. But this is amply sufficient.

In my own case, I know it was the beauty and intrinsic evidence of the Bible which kept me from being an infidel. I should have been an infidel if I could, and I should have been a Universalist if I could have been, for I was wicked enough to have been either. But I knew the Bible to be true; and when I set myself to make out an argument against it, I could not divest myself of an ever present conviction that this was the wrong side. Just as a lawyer who sits down to examine a case and finds at every turn that his evidence is weak or irrelevant, and is troubled with a growing conviction that he is on the wrong side; and the more he examines his case and his law books, the more he sees that he must be wrong--so I found it in my investigations into the evidences of revelation, and in my readings of the Bible. In those times I was wicked enough for anything, and used to go out among the plain Christian people and talk to them about the Bible, and puzzle them with my questions and hard points. I could confound, even though I could not convince them, and then I would try to enjoy my sport at their expense. Sometimes afterwards, I would go and tell them I could show them how they settled this question of the divine authority of the Bible, although they could not tell me.

I don't believe there ever was, or ever can be, a candid man who shall candidly examine the Bible, compare its teachings with the affirmations of his own conscience, and then deny its authority.

3. Neither Paul nor Jesus Christ preached sermons on the evidences of a revelation from God;--how was it then that Christ brought out the truth in such a way as to reach the conscience, wake up its energies, and make it speak out in fearful tones? He manifested the truth in such a way as to commend it to every man's conscience.

4. Just in proportion as a man fails to develop his conscience, or blinds, abuses, or silences it, can he become skeptical. It will always be so far only as his conscience becomes seared and blind; while, on the other hand, as his conscience has free scope and speaks out truthfully will his conviction become irresistible that the Bible is true and from God.

5. The Bible is sometimes rejected because misunderstood. I once fell in with an infidel who had read much (not in the Bible) and who, after his much reading, settled down upon infidelity. I inquired of him as to his views of the inspiration of the Bible, when he promptly replied--"I know it is not true, and is not from God, for it teaches things contrary to my conscience." Ah, said I, and pray tell me in what particulars! What are these things, taught in the Bible, that are contrary to your conscience?

He began thus:

(1) "It teaches the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity." But stop, said I, is that Bible, or is it only catechism? He soon found that he had to look in his catechism to find it, for it was not in his Bible.

(2) "It teaches that human nature, as made by God, is itself sinful." I soon showed him that the Bible said no such thing. He declared that this doctrine was contrary to his conscience; I admitted it, but vindicated the Bible from such impiety as ascribing the creation of sin to God.

(3) "But," said he, "the Bible certainly does teach that men are naturally unable to obey God, and, especially, are unable to repent and believe the gospel."

I replied, that is neither taught nor implied in the Bible, in the sense in which you urge it; but, on the contrary, the Bible both teaches and implies that sinners can obey God and are for that very reason responsible, and guilty if they refuse.

(4) There was one other point on which all the books were clear and strong, but which was utterly against his conscience--namely, "that Christ was punished for our sins. This punishing the innocent instead of the guilty," he said, "was one of the most unjust things that could be imagined." Well, said I, that is just what the Bible does not teach. It nowhere holds the doctrine that Christ was punished as a criminal. Punishment implies guilt, and is inflicted as penalty for crime,--neither of which is true in the case of Christ. He only suffered as an innocent being, and of his own free accord. You cannot say that this is wrong. If one man in his benevolence chooses to suffer for another, no principle of justice is violated. This he conceded.

(5) "According to the Bible," said he, "none can be saved without having their natures constitutionally changed. But no man can be held responsible for changing his own constitution."

Here, too, I showed him his misapprehension of the Bible. The change is only that which pertains primarily to the voluntary powers, and of course is just that which man is made capable of doing, and which he must do himself.

(6) He urged, I think, but one point more--namely, "that God has elected some to be saved, and some to be damned, and that none can escape their foreordained destiny."

To this you know I would reply that the Bible did not teach such an election, nor authorize such an inference, but everywhere implied the opposite. Such was our discussion.

You doubtless all know that such mistakes as these have led some men to reject the Bible. It is not strange that they should. I could never have received the Bible as from God if I had believed it to teach these things. I had to learn first that those things were not in the Bible, and then I was prepared to accept it in accordance with my conscience and reason, and from God.

6. Skepticism always evinces either great wickedness, or great ignorance as to what the Bible teaches, and as to the evidence on which its claims rest. Both the nature of the case and the testimony of

observation conspire to prove this.

7. All the truths of natural religion are taught and affirmed both in the conscience and in the Bible. This is a most remarkable fact; yet easily shown in the fullest detail.

8. The conscience recognizes the Bible as its own book--the book of the heart--a sort of supplement to its own imperfect system--readily answering those questions which lie beyond the range of vision, which conscience enjoys. There are questions which conscience must ask, but cannot answer. It must ask whether there is any way in which God can forgive sin, and if so, what is it. Such questions conscience cannot answer without help from revelation. It is striking to observe how conscience grasps these glorious truths when they are presented, and the heart has come to feel its need of God's light and love. Mark how, when the moral nature of man has sent forth its voice abroad over the universe, far as its notes can reach, imploring light, and crying aloud for help, and listening to learn if any response is made;--then when it catches these responsive notes from God's written revelation, it shouts amen! AMEN! that brings me salvation! Let God be praised!

9. The skeptic is obliged to ignore the teachings of his own nature and the voice of his conscience. All those moral affirmations must be kept out of sight or he could not remain an infidel. It will not do for him to commune with his own heart and ask what testimony conscience bears as to duty, truth, and his God. All he can do to smother the spontaneous utterance of his conscience, he must needs do for the sake of peace in his sin and skepticism.

10. But these efforts must be ultimately vain, for, sooner or later, conscience will speak out. Its voice, long smothered, will break forth with redoubled force, as if in retribution for being abused so long. Many may live skeptics; few can die such. To that few you cannot hope to belong;--you already know too much on this subject. You cannot satisfy yourself that the Bible is false, and make yourself disbelieve its divine authority, so that it will stay disbelieved. Such a notion, resting on no valid evidence, but starting up under the stimulus of a corrupt heart, will disappear when moral realities shall begin to press hard on your soul. I am aware that in these latter times some young men make the discovery that they know more and are wiser than all the greatest and best men that have ever lived. They think so, but they may, in divine mercy, live long enough to unlearn this folly, and to lay off this self-conceit. One thing I must tell you,--you cannot die skeptics. You cannot die believing that God can accept you without faith in Christ. Do you ask, Why? Because you have heard too much truth. Even this afternoon you have heard too much to allow you to carry such a delusion to your graves. No! you cannot die in darkness and delusion. I beg you to remember when you come to die, that I told you, you could not die a skeptic. Mark my words then, and prove them false if you can. Write it down for a memorandum, and treasure it for a test in the trying hour--that I told you solemnly, you could not die a skeptic. It will do you no hurt to remember this one thing from me; for if you should in that hour find me mistaken, you can have none the less comfort of your infidelity. It is not improbable that I shall be at the death-bed of some of you this very summer. Not a summer has passed yet since I have been here that I have not stood by the dying bed of some dear young man. And shall I find you happy in the dark discomfort of infidelity? There is no happiness in it;--and if there were, you cannot have it, for not one of you can die an infidel! Dr. Nelson once informed me that he said this same thing to a young infidel. Not long after, this infidel was sick, and thought himself dying, yet his infidelity remained unshaken; and when he saw the Doctor next, he cast into his teeth that prediction, which he thought had been triumphantly disproved. "Dr. N.," said he, "I was dying last month; and, contrary to your strange prediction, my infidelity did not forsake me." Ah! said the Doctor, but you were not dying then! And you never can die an infidel! When that young man came to die, he did not die an infidel. His conscience spake out in awful thunders, and his soul trembled exceedingly as it passed from this to another world.

But such fears may come too late! The door perhaps is shut, and the soul is lost! Alas that you should lose eternal life for a reason so poor--for a compensation so insignificant.