

THE HER S A L C O N V E R S A T A L L O G I C O N S

Seeking a Correctable Conscience

“Here I stand, . . . but d’you mind checking my exegesis?”

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HAD THINGS GONE DIFFERENTLY for Luther at the Diet of Worms—where he was on trial before representatives of Pope Leo X and Emperor Charles V—these might have been his famous last words:

“I cannot do otherwise; here I stand. May God help me. Amen.”

Last words, because Luther’s life depended on the promise of a safe-conduct to the Diet and back again. The troublesome Luther already had made many enemies, and on the way home his friends were shrewd enough to kidnap him and take him into hiding.

That story is well-known, and this year, 2017—the 500th anniversary of Luther’s 95 Theses and the purported beginning of the Protestant Reformation—Luther’s famous words and deeds will surely be recounted over and over again, if we go by the previous Luther jubilees in 1917 and 1817. But at least three things about Luther’s dramatic declamation are less well known. First, Luther may never have said the “Here I stand, I can do no other” bit. Perhaps he should have done so, but the best sources leave these words out.¹ Second, his declaration is often wrenched from its context as a warrant for any defiance of authority or twisted into a strangely modern defense of the autonomous freedom of the individual.² Such readings are all too common, and they miss Luther’s careful crafting of the two sentences that came before:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I

1. The textual problem of “Here I stand, I can do no other” is treated in passing by the editors in “Luther at the Diet of Worms,” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 112–13; this edition is hereafter cited as LW. See also Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, trans. James L. Schaaf, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985–93), 1:460.
2. Tendentious uses of Luther to support modernized agendas abound, but here are two examples recently noted in Zachary Purvis, “Martin Luther in 19th-Century Theology,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion* (DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.314). The first is from Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), writing against J. M. Goeze (1717–1786): “The true Lutheran does not take refuge in Luther’s writings but in Luther’s spirit; and Luther’s spirit absolutely requires that no man may be prevented from advancing in knowledge of the truth according to his own judgment.” The second is from Emmanuel Greenwald (1811–1885), a Lutheran pastor in Lancaster, Pennsylvania: “If there had been no Luther in Germany, there would have been no [George] Washington in America. For the invaluable blessing of our civil liberty and free institutions, we thank God for Luther.”

will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.
. . . May God help me. Amen.³

Luther's declaration was not intended, therefore, as a defense of his conscience per se, much less a bold claim on behalf of worldly freedom or individualism. On the contrary, Luther was defending the utter priority of the Word of God not only as a guide for what Luther taught and wrote, but also—first and foremost—as the only possible way to know that he, Luther, still confessedly a sinner, was loved and saved by God. Luther's plea to his examiners was not to dispute about his conscience, but simply to recognize the preeminent authority of the clear Word of God, to which Luther's now peaceful conscience was merely a witness.

Of course, Luther's plea stands or falls on whether the Word of God is, in fact, clear—a point not lost on those present at Worms who feared that every Christian would become his or her own interpreter. Medieval Catholicism knew how to avoid such chaos. Competing interpretations of Scripture were to be resolved by the teaching authority of the Church, the so-called *magisterium*. And this brings us to a third little-known fact about the Diet of Worms: Luther did not get the last word.

As the interrogation was ending, it was reported that the presiding secretary called after him in some frustration, “Lay aside your conscience, Martin! You must lay it aside because it is in error, and it will be safe and proper for you to recant.”⁴ In other words, Luther's pangs of conscience were irrelevant, because they were based on the wrong authority, on Luther's notion of what God's Word says, instead of the surer authority of the church. This was a perfectly appropriate exhortation. Indeed, in its context, it was pastoral, and even compassionate, because the presiding secretary cared about the safety of Luther's soul—and the secretary was well aware that consciences can make serious mistakes.

A BRIEF GLANCE at our recent Presbyterian history or our own *Book of Order* (F-3.0101) will quickly demonstrate that we think conscience is very important: “God alone is Lord of the conscience” is one of our foundational principles going back to 1788. It's a great slogan. It gets invoked on a regular basis. But what does it mean? For the balance of this essay, we'll try to look more closely at our God-given consciences and see, perhaps, what they're supposed to do.

A good deal of traditional Christian thinking about conscience derives from what Paul says in a handful of important passages. But Romans 2:14–16 may be the archetype:

When Gentiles who [do not have] the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when . . . God judges [everyone's] secrets by Christ Jesus.⁵

It can hardly be missed that whatever the written law asked of the people of God in the Old Testament, somehow those commands were also found among the Gentiles—within them by nature, imprinted on their hearts, and attested by conflicting thoughts, all of which are ingredients in a Pauline definition of conscience. Romans 2 plays a huge role in Christian doctrines of natural

3. LW 32:112–113.

4. See the translated original text in “Luther at the Diet of Worms,” LW 32:130 (with revised punctuation).

5. Revised Standard Version (RSV) with my more contemporary translations in brackets.

law—the notion that what God reveals and commands in the Bible can also be read in the so-called “book of nature.” Both Luther and Calvin embraced a traditional point of Christian theology, that each of the commandments that God revealed in the Decalogue is also attested to every human conscience by the law of nature. Thus, everyone knows that theft and adultery and lying are wrong. Everyone knows parents are to be honored. Indeed, in their heart of hearts, all people know there is a divine Maker who deserves thanks and loyalty. But, as we have all experienced, knowing those commands does not mean obeying them.

Medieval theologians added some helpful precision to the Pauline case for conscience as the channel for natural law. They distinguished two parts of the conscience. The higher part they called the *synderesis*, a word that designates our inborn knowledge of the general or theoretical principles of right and wrong. (This is why Paul can say God’s law is written on the hearts of all: because everyone knows in at least a general way that good is to be pursued and evil is to be shunned.)

The conscience proper, on the other hand, is a practical faculty. Conscience takes its impulse from the *synderesis*, this general orientation to do what is right and avoid what is wrong. Conscience translates those principles into concrete moral judgments and actions. At the same time, the conscience is also tied to our emotions and our perceptions of guilt and shame. For although we are hardwired to love the good, the true, and the beautiful, sometimes we find ourselves loving lesser goods, half-truths, and beautiful things that aren’t meant for us. A well-ordered conscience will call attention to our errors and make us feel uneasy.

Medievals had a stock phrase here: they said it was the job of the conscience “to murmur back in reply to sin.” We might say it like this: a well-ordered conscience is a voice that warns us when sin seems near and thereby helps us resist it.

Possibly the most interesting part of the medieval discussion of conscience addressed the distinction between the *synderesis* and the conscience. The *synderesis*—our inborn disposition toward the good—always urges us toward doing good. But the *synderesis* is also highly general in what it knows. The conscience, on the other hand, translates those good impulses into action. Conscience is concerned with details, circumstances, and practical applications.

But conscience can fail in a number of ways: it can be tripped up (1) by faulty reasoning, (2) by a will that is impulsive or weak, or (3) by other competing affections or desires. Of these three, it is the first—the case of the misinformed or mistaken conscience—that is easily the most interesting.⁶ What happens when the conscience is sincere in its judgments, but just as surely sincerely mistaken?

Suppose a person mistakenly believes that a particular action is morally binding because it has been commanded by God. Would it then be a sin if the person were to fail to carry out that action, that act of wrongheaded and misdirected obedience? Actually, yes. Medieval theologians typically argued that even a mistaken conscience binds the actions of the mistaken individual. It is wrong to do wrong. But it is also wrong to violate one’s conscience, even if that conscience is itself wrong, because one’s intention is evil even if the substance of the deed is not itself evil.

It was no quirk of late medieval theology, then, if Luther was exhorted to set his conscience aside during the Diet of Worms—it was rather a sound instinct. Consciences are an amazing gift from God, and they generally should not be ignored. But consciences can err. As medievals and

6. The case of the mistaken conscience is discussed with special reference to Bonaventure and Aquinas, including original texts, by Timothy C. Potts, *Conscience in Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 118–120 and 128–130.

Reformers knew, they can be misled by faulty reasoning, by the warping influence of peer pressure, or by out-of-control desires or even addictions. They can, in the words of Paul from 1 Timothy 4:1–2 (NRSV), become “seared”—traumatized so badly by being repeatedly skewed or silenced that they are utterly defunct.

Consciences can also have scruples—a nifty old word that ancient Latin writers used to refer to a pebble, presumably in one’s sandal or shoe, that causes discomfort. As a result, we limp along, yet in the case of a literal pebble, we would surely work to take it out of our shoe. In other words, scruples refer to concerns on which a conscience is weak, but (ideally) only temporarily weak. But whether the conscience is healthy, sedated, timid, or weak, conscience is at best a secondary authority. We often say (okay, at least my mother used to say), “Let your conscience be your guide.” But that only works if the conscience has a guide.

I spent many summers with the National Park Service as a backcountry ranger, back in the pre-GPS era. A map and compass were my constant companions. I had a great compass—not only was it liquid-filled, with a sighting mirror, it also had a declination screw, which lets you adjust your compass to match true north wherever you are, often correcting the magnetic reading by ten or twenty degrees. (Someday on the trail, the battery on your smart phone will die, and you’ll be glad to know this.) If the map shows true north, but your compass—your conscience—is leading you to magnetic north, well, you may make some wrong choices and even lose your way. The lesson: if a conscience is misguided or misaligned, it’s no longer reliable. It needs to be corrected, or set aside—if we have somehow managed to realize our mistake!

We don’t do this well. We don’t manage or calibrate our consciences well, if indeed we pay them any attention at all. More often, we confuse conscience with our feelings, our tastes or our opinions. We may even work at rationalizing our private agendas or desires in an attempt to make our conscience think something is really okay when we know from the start that it’s not.

Calvin also saw this tendency. As a pastor, he was remarkably insightful about human behavior; he knew very well how people try to manipulate their own consciences, though it still appalled him:

Most people, having learned that a thing is displeasing to God, nevertheless give themselves leave to go seeking its defense. . . . People who are fairly convinced in their consciences that it is wrong to bow down before idols [will still] inquire and query about what they should do, not to subdue their affections to God by submitting to his word, but so that they may have free rein and, having an answer to their liking, may flatter themselves enough to remain in their evil-doing. In short, as Ezekiel says, they are looking for cushions to put their consciences to sleep.⁷

Calvin knew only one antidote: a skewed conscience and a weak conscience alike had to be exposed to the clear teachings of the Word of God.

For Calvin, that meant not just the happy blessings and promises of the gospel, but also the precepts of God’s law. One of Calvin’s earliest controversies in Geneva arose in 1537 when residents were required to swear allegiance to the Genevan Confession, which also entailed an

7. John Calvin, “A Short Treatise Setting Forth What the Faithful Man Must Do When He Is among Papists and He Knows the Truth of the Gospel” (1543), in *Come Out From Among Them: “Anti-Nicodemite” Writings of John Calvin*, trans. Seth Skolnitsky (Dallas: Protestant Heritage, 2001), 47–48 (slightly modified).

affirmation of the Decalogue. Despite the fact that the Confession clearly states that observing the divine law is impossible, that the law drives us to seek the righteousness of Christ, many balked. One dissenter professed readiness to swear to the “articles of reformation” but not to the Ten Commandments, “because,” he apologized, “they’re hard to keep.”⁸

When Calvin returned to Geneva in 1541 (after having been dismissed in 1538), the demand for an oath was dropped. What took its place was the consistory—a panel of pastors who constituted a “compulsory counseling service” and who were the first responders to reports of superstitious religious practices (often the residue of someone’s Roman Catholic past) or misbehavior of any kind, including marital strife.⁹

Among observers today, the actions of the Geneva consistory generate strong opinions: some see the consistory as intrusive, oppressive, and theocratic; others credit it as often a gentle and insightful intervention that worked toward reconciliation and restoration among neighbors and sought to protect marriages, spouses, and children.¹⁰

But Calvin’s larger point is that the gospel was meant to effect not merely a bare confession of faith, but also transformation of life. Pursuing the lofty goal of general edification meant cultivating “sober fear of God, sincere piety, and unfeigned holiness of morals”—and to that end, the conscience needed not only to be freed from false beliefs about achieving righteousness by works, but also to be guided in its growth by the Word of God.¹¹

Once again, we don’t do this well. When sinners act like sinners (as we often do), how often do we deal with the resulting conflict by avoiding it? Even though Hebrews 10:23–34 urges us not only to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering,” but also “to provoke one another to love and good deeds,” we are slow to challenge and exhort one another, lest we be seen as legalistic.

There is a sad irony here, that the heirs of Calvin should regard any invocation of God’s law as tantamount to legalism, when we all know that we are constantly yearning for better secular laws to restrict all kinds of human evil, whether corporate greed or human trafficking! Indeed, the Reformed tradition was known for extolling the law as an immense blessing in the life of the Christian, particularly in what came to be called its “third use,” whereby God’s character is revealed.

One of the “opening sentences” for morning worship in our *Book of Common Worship* states that God is “the source, guide, and goal of all that is” (drawing on Romans 11:36). Calvin believed that insofar as the law reveals God’s wisdom, goodness, and justice, the law also points to the character and virtue that God wants us to embody and live out in community. When we meditate on God’s law as part of God’s Word, then, many things happen by way of our spiritual formation, but one of those things is this: we correct and calibrate our conscience according to the one, true standard who rules over it.

8. The anecdote is reported by Amadée Roget, *Histoire du peuple du Genève*, 7 vols. (Geneva, 1870–87), 1:43n.

9. “Compulsory counseling service” seems to be the coinage of Robert M. Kingdon; see, e.g., his *Adultery and Divorce in Calvin’s Geneva* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 4; and possibly earlier as “Calvin and the Family: The Work of the Consistory of Geneva,” *Pacific Theological Review* 17 (1984):5–18.

10. Jeffrey R. Watt, “Reconciliation and the Confession of Sins: The Evidence from the Consistory in Calvin’s Geneva,” in *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, ed. R. Ward Holder (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 105–120.

11. See “John Calvin: Catechism 1538,” trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in I. John Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 7. Original text at COR 3/2:119.12–15.

Calvin had other strategies for forming and reforming the conscience. One such means was catechism, which was offered as a separate service in Geneva every Sunday, and not just for children. Sometimes the consistory would instruct adults to attend, believing that a better grasp of Christian beliefs and principles would help an erring parishioner to see the bigger picture of how and why to love God and neighbor with greater self-awareness.

In my opinion, one of the best opportunities to reset and recalibrate my conscience comes in the corporate confession on the Lord's Day—that moment each Sunday when we stand together in prayer and tell the truth about two cosmic verities that frame our lives. First, we tell the truth about who God is as our maker, judge, and redeemer. Then, we tell the truth about who we are, including who we've failed to be—again. Our consciences need this grace and correction, every week if not every day.

Still, I worry that such lessons will be lost if we do not engage one another in greater depth on the topic of conscience. We need to cultivate the practice of listening to our conscience and probing whether it is well-tuned or not—whether it is overly sensitive, or just plain dull. Most people, I expect, know something of the voice of conscience, whether they identify it as such or not. Fewer, I expect, have noticed or even considered that consciences can need correction. I've been fortunate to experience such correction in my marriage. Sometimes my "conscience" has been all too self-indulgent or self-congratulatory, which has sometimes meant that I was far quicker to justify my anger than were those who stood by watching. "Be angry, but do not sin"—good words for recalibrating the conscience. At other times, I've agonized over whether I had offended someone by something I said, unable to let it go. My wife has been invaluable as a spiritual director at such moments, helping me to follow some ecclesiastical wisdom by setting my conscience aside in submission to God's Word and to sound reasoning based on God's Word. Together, we also tried to pass on an awareness of the important but penultimate significance of conscience with our children, sometimes using the bedtime story hour or bedtime prayers as a forum for reflection on the importance of a clear (and calibrated) conscience. But still, I worry that we adult Presbyterians may think we've grown out of these elementary lessons.

"CONSCIENCE" IS NOT AN ORGAN that an MRI scan can locate. Rather, conscience identifies an element that is essential to the human person, yet also one that is subject to formation, deformation, and reformation. It's easy to confuse conscience with all kinds of strong feelings, preferences, hopes, and private agendas. The conscience is a guide, but it also needs a guide. Luther's interrogator at the Diet of Worms was right, in principle, to exhort him to consider setting his conscience aside in favor of a higher authority. Where Luther differed, crucially, was over the question of just what or who that higher authority was.

All the same, 2017 is not 1517. Where Luther was sure that the Word of God was clear with respect to the nature of justification and the prior authority of Scripture over church, council, or pope, we often struggle to see God's Word as clear on issues that beset us today. Some of our most painful recent divisions have come over whether Scripture is clear or not on certain issues. This short essay cannot resolve those issues of biblical interpretation. But it certainly can be said here that it is wrong to extrapolate from any one unclear text or issue in order to discount the authority of Scripture altogether.

Sometimes our perplexity over the Bible arises for very good reasons, but sometimes not. We are just as capable of seeking "cushions for our consciences" as Christians were in Calvin's day—and this we need to resist above all. To that end, I constantly ask myself as I read the Scriptures,

“Can the Bible tell me anything I don’t want to know?” For if the answer is no, chances are good that we’re being guided by neither God nor God’s Word nor even by a decently functioning conscience—and we’re desperately in need of correction. Perhaps by now it is obvious that I have my own strong opinions about what the Word of God teaches, as well as about what nature and conscience confirm. But I also know this: I’m not the Word of God.

However much I may worry that our denomination has departed at points from the “clear teaching of the Bible,” there is still room for common cause at the heart of our church. The state of our discourse and the spiritual state of our congregations suggest to me that we share this task in common: we need to promote and demote the conscience.

We need to demote the conscience when it is acting under false pretenses, with our feelings or self-interested agendas pretending to speak as conscience when in fact we’ve bypassed our conscience in order to use it in name only—as a bargaining chip, as our personal supreme court, as a refusal to engage.

On the other hand, we need to promote the calibrated conscience wherever we can—by catechism, by sincere confession, by genuine engagement with one another in mission, by proclamation, and by ecclesiology—speaking the truth in love. As Luther exclaimed, “It is never safe nor right to go against conscience,” but only if our consciences are truly “captive to the Word of God.”¹² So, by all means, take your stand! But first check your exegesis, and see if your conscience is itself in need of correction: because if popes and councils have erred, so too have presbyteries and Presbyterians. May God help us. Amen.

12. LW 32:112–113.

Seeking a Correctable Conscience

Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. In the first section, Thompson raises the issue of what is the surest authority for conscience. Luther thought it was the Word of God. The church leaders thought it was the church itself. What about your conscience? Is the Word of God the authority for your conscience? Is it what the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) says? Is it your family culture, or your political party, or your part of town? What is the *actual* authority of your conscience, and what do you think should be—or what do you want to be—the authority of your conscience?
2. We read in this piece that the conscience “can be tripped up (1) by faulty reasoning, (2) by a will that is impulsive or weak, or (3) by other competing affections or desires.” Can you create a story about an incident—say, someone walking a half block ahead of you drops their wallet stuffed with cash, but doesn’t notice—that illustrates each of these three pitfalls for the conscience? After you think about that story, what might you offer as a Presbyterian Christian to correct that struggling conscience?
3. Thompson suggests that we cultivate the practice of listening to our conscience and probing it. What does the “voice” of your conscience sound like? If you were to develop a Christian spiritual practice that gave you time to spend with your conscience, what would that practice look like?
4. What are ways to develop the practice of listening to the voice of conscience that sounds like the good news of God’s grace in Jesus Christ?
5. “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship.” This is one of our fundamental principles of church government according to our *Book of Order* (F-3.0101). Starting with the suggestions of this piece, what are the concrete ways we can open ourselves to God’s Lordship when it comes to conscience? Consider ways we might do this in individual practice and worship, as well as in our life together as worshipping communities.