

Bound Conscience or No Conscience?

Conscience is what separates man from beast.

Saint Thomas Aquinas taught that conscience is “reason making right decisions.” Aquinas held that reason was a gift from God and that it leads to an innate and clear awareness of good and evil, right and wrong. Conscience is the process of judgment that acts on this knowledge of good and evil and is mitigated by the virtue of prudence. Prudence is a virtue that informs reasoning and balances our own needs and selves with the needs of others. It is the bridge between the knowledge of right and wrong and making right decisions, and people who lack prudence will have a mistaken conscience.

Martin Luther expanded on these themes when he said, “My conscience is bound by the Word of God.” For Luther, the understanding of the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, was both an innate and clear awareness but also informed by an objective and reasoned understanding of scripture. For Luther it is scripture that serves as a check against mistaken or wrong conscience. For both Luther and Aquinas, there is a clear right and wrong. A conscience that does not distinguish or understand the two correctly is broken and simply is not dependable. Christians know that a conscience is broken or missing when one’s actions and decisions are in contradiction to scripture and violate common prudence as it is reflected throughout the ages and across Christendom.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America justifies their new sexuality policy by appealing to a new ethical and theological construct their theologians call “Bound Conscience.” The theory of bound conscience is the center-piece of their homosexuality stance and maintains that the passages of scripture that inform a Christian ethic of sexuality are so inconclusive that individual members and churches should be free to do whatever they like when it comes to gay marriage and practicing homosexual pastors. People representing each opposing viewpoint are bound to their conscience and convictions about the matter, says the ELCA, and the denomination should engage ongoing dialogue to honor each other’s personal convictions- since the Bible is just so unclear on the matter of sexual ethics, they insist.

The problem is, the ELCA position expresses no sense of conscience at all. Central to the theological discussions throughout Christian history about conscience is the understanding that there are right and wrong answers to all the great human questions- like sexuality. A clear and healthy conscience is capable of choosing, through reason, the right decision. Sometimes this choice is wrong, or conscience is mistaken, but it can never be divided.

The serpent was the first theologian we see in scripture. He presented the model for how today’s theologians could take the Word of God and make it into something it is not and was never intended to be. He asked again and again, “Did God really say...?”, suggesting that we can’t be sure what God really said or means in the first place. On the surface, all of Satan’s arguments in the garden appeared to be true, but in reality everything he said was a lie.

That is why he is known as the great deceiver.

The heart of the serpent’s arguments were really to convince Adam and Eve that they could eat of the forbidden fruit while at the same time keep the nature of their relationship with God unchanged. The bound conscience paradigm of the ELCA is a trick as old as the serpent. It begins with Satan’s question, “Did God really say...?” and ends with Satan’s conclusion, “No, that’s not what God really meant.” This perverted “bound conscience” is the idea that you can have your cake and eat it too- and finally maintains in the end that there is no such thing as a right conscience, or a right and wrong decision, because “we can’t be sure what God really said in the first place.” It fosters the serpent’s moral and ethical ambiguity that led Adam and Eve to rebel against God in their own “bound conscience.” They didn’t realize that a conscience in contradiction to God’s Word and command was no longer bound to God, but to Satan. A conscience bound to Satan is no conscience at all.

Psychologists have a designation for people who have a missing or broken conscience. A sociopath is somebody who lacks that innate ability to definitively know right from wrong, and could do anything at any time to anybody with no restraint. True conscience chooses between one thing or another, good over evil. Conscience cannot say that to affirm gay marriage and practicing gay clergy or to reject them are morally equivalent choices any more than we can say that eating of the forbidden fruit or not are morally equivalent choices.

In the ELCA's refusal to acknowledge or accept the reality of the Christian conscience, the organization has institutionalized sociopathy into its very identity. Both polar opposite positions on sexuality cannot possibly be bound to God. One of them, and we all know which one, is bound to Satan. The ELCA's failure to clearly distinguish right from wrong represents the rejection of conscience that is at the root of human rebellion against God.

A denomination without a conscience- a clear sense of right and wrong- is not a servant of God, but a self-absorbed rival of the Creator in the "theological" tradition of the serpent in the garden.

Lutherans who accept the "bound conscience" theory actually affirm fully the theological suppositions of the serpent in the garden: that there is no right or wrong, that there is no such thing as Godly Conscience, that the Word of God is no greater than the word of man, and that Satan's question "Did God Really Say...?" is the model for how you relate to your Creator, God Almighty.

Bishop Mark Hanson continues to beckon and beguile churches considering leaving the ELCA to stay in "dialogue" with him. The supporters of the new sexuality statements are trying to convince faithful Christians that what happened in those votes this summer really has no consequence on the life of the local church or the life of the faithful Christian "however your conscience is bound."

Given the experience that Adam and Eve had in their dialogue with the serpent, one with a healthy conscience would have to ask, "Is a continuing dialogue wise?" and "Will our relationship with God really remain unchanged if we accept this new teaching of bound conscience?" If your conscience is bound to God and His Word, and you have not yet lost the ability to know the difference between right and wrong while in the spiritual care of the ELCA, God's gift of prudent reason will tell you that the answer is "no" to both of those questions. Because of Christ's Saving Grace, Lutherans are certainly not bound to the ELCA and its false teachings. We should all join Martin Luther in faithfully proclaiming, "My conscience is bound to the Word of God," as part of our celebration of the Protestant Reformation this week.

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