

A Word for Sheepdogs

TEACHING PEOPLE TO LIVE THE CHRISTIAN LIFE has never been easy, but in a culture where virtues have devolved into “values,” the challenge is ever more difficult. Increasingly people are governed not by God’s Law and their baptismal identity in Christ, but by standards adopted by their peers.

Bryan Wolfmueller is a father as well as a pastor. From first hand experience in both spheres he knows how important it is to teach what the Christian conscience is and how it is properly formed. Without the conscience each Christian is like a ship without a rudder in stormy seas; he or she will be blown every which way by the prevailing wind. In this paper you will find multiple images and approaches to teach the Biblical doctrine of the conscience and its importance. More precisely you will see how its proper exercise lies at the center of baptismal living: the daily drowning of the old Adam and resurrection of the new man, created in the image of Christ Jesus to live before God in righteousness and purity day by day and to all eternity. Best of all, you will find renewed purpose and joy in the very heart of all the pastoral care you do each and every day, delivering a clean conscience to Christ’s own sheep and lambs.

- *Dr. H. L. Senkbeil*



Teaching the Conscience to the Youth: A Survey

Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1 Tim. 1:5)

My Everything Hurts, an Introduction

I remember a time when one of my boys was getting after his brother. "Don't do that," I said, "You've hurt your brother." I hardly finished saying the words, and he burst into tears, the kind of cry that happens when you slam your fingers in the door. I panicked and thought he was physically injured. "Are you okay? What hurts?" "Everything" was his answer, and I realized what happened. "Come here," I grabbed him and put him in my lap, "that's your conscience that hurts." This was a new conversation for me and my children, and very helpful.

We are all wrestling with that inner voice, but many people don't know what it is called, and most people don't know why it is there.

It was helpful, first, to know what to call that thing inside of us that hurts when we do something wrong. It was further helpful to consider together how it worked, why it mattered, how it is a helpful tool from God to guide and guard us. I began to pay closer attention to the conscience in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions (where they have a central place), and I found that any insight was almost immediately helpful to my children and the youth of the church, and this has also proven true when I've been able to present to youth in small and large groups outside the church. Whenever I've taught about the conscience people's attention is perked, even teenagers, and it seems to me that the Biblical teaching of the conscience is a missing piece they need to answer some of the puzzles of their own lives.

We are all wrestling with that inner voice, but many people don't know what it is called, and most people don't know why it is there. The state of our conscience determines the state of our lives and every part of it. A bad conscience destroys, but a good, clean, and free conscience brings forth life and truth.

In this essay I would like to outline a Biblical understanding of the conscience to help pastors teach the youth of the church. The information should translate without any difficulty into all areas of pastoral ministry and the Christian life.

Part 1: Three Pictures of the Conscience

Pictures and images are great teaching tools. Not only do they involve the imagination in learning, they also provide material for meditation, something for the mind to latch on.

What follows are three pictures of the conscience. They increase in complexity, and each one captures some of the unique aspects of the conscience. The three pictures are: a home-plate umpire, a dirty or clean window, and a courtroom.

The First Picture: A Home Plate Umpire

The home plate umpire's job is to stand behind the catcher and judge the pitches. He doesn't touch the ball or interact with the players. His job is to judge. If the pitch is in the strike-zone he is supposed to call it a strike; if the pitch is out of the zone he calls it a ball.

So our conscience is observing all the things that are happening around us and inside us: our actions, our words, our thoughts, the things other people say and do to us and to each other, and it makes a judgment. "That was good. That was bad. That was mean. That was kind." There is a lightness and joy when our conscience judges something we've done to be good, and there is guilt when our conscience judges us to be in the wrong.

The conscience is one of God's gifts to us. It uses His law written on our hearts to help us know and do His will. The conscience serves as a kind of "moral compass," letting us know if we are facing the right direction. But the important thing about the umpire image is this: the umpire can get it wrong. He will sometimes call a ball a strike or a strike a ball, and this is also true of our conscience. It will sometimes call good evil or evil good. It will be confused, hardened, or just plain wrong. Our conscience is not infallible, but is, in fact, part of our fallen nature, so it must be informed by God's Word.

I remember talking to a couple who wanted to get married. They had been living together for years. "Do you remember when you first moved in together," I asked them, "and you knew it was wrong, and you felt bad about it?" "Yes," they both said. "Do you feel bad about it now?" "No," they responded. "What changed?" I asked. They didn't know, so I told them, "You've broken your consciences." The umpire was blind. The Sixth Commandment still says you shall

not commit adultery, but their conscience had been overturned and now its objections were unheard whispers.

The Scripture text of this picture is Rom. 2:14-15: "For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them." The conscience is in the accusing and excusing business. A broken conscience has stopped accusing and only excuses.

We will consider later how the Lord keeps the conscience up and running, but with this first image it is enough to know that the conscience makes judgments, and that it is possible for the conscience to make wrong judgments.

The Second Picture: A Dirty or Clean Window

This second image of the conscience comes from Dr. John Kleinig, who compares the conscience to a window. When the window is dirty then everything looks dirty, the window itself, everything outside, and even everything inside looks bad because of the bad light. The same is true with an unclean conscience. Everything is a mess. God and all creation are bent toward my destruction. The unclean conscience is often a fearful conscience "put to flight by the sound of a rustling leaf" (Lev. 26:36, one of Martin Luther's favorite pictures of a troubled conscience). Everything in this world is an omen, the bad things are signs of God's judgment, and the good things are tricks. An unclean conscience steals away joy, tempts us with obsessions and distractions, and always clamors for something to calm it down.

On the other hand, a clean window does not result in everything outside and inside looking clean. With a clean win-

dow you see things how they are, the clean things look clean, dirty things look dirty. A clean window means you see a thing how it really is, and this is true of a clean conscience. When we have a clean conscience we see ourselves as we are, our neighbor as they are, and God as He is. We are walking in the light of the truth, and we are free. We call good "good" and evil "evil". We see sin, especially our own, and we recognize it as such. And we see Jesus, the forgiver and Savior of sinners.

The Scripture for this picture of the conscience is Titus 1:15, "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled."

As a window gets dirty it also begins to work like a mirror. You try to look through it but only see a distorted picture of yourself. A dirty conscience will see its own sin and shame everywhere it looks. The accusing voice of the law haunts the dirty conscience like a ghost, whispering behind every corner and scowling in every face.

This picture of the conscience as a window helps us begin to assess our own conscience, and know the difference between a clean and unclean conscience. We will talk extensively about how to come to a clean conscience, but with this picture it is helpful to know that the only thing that can cleanse our conscience is the blood of Jesus. When we try to clean our own conscience with our own works it is like washing the window with mud; it only makes things worse.

The Third Picture: A Courtroom

The third picture of the conscience is the most accurate, the most helpful, and the most complicated. In fact, this is more than a picture. The conscience is a courtroom where legal judgments are handed out.

*The accusing
voice of the law
haunts the dirty
conscience like a
ghost,
whispering
behind every
corner and
scowling in
every face.*

*God has designed
our conscience as
an outpost of the
heavenly court.*

In a court you have a judge, a law, an accused, an accuser, and a defense attorney. If things are working like they should be in your conscience, then God is the judge, the Commandments are the Law, you are the accused, the devil is the accuser, and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are your defense team. That's a good conscience. You enter the court, plead guilty as charged, and Jesus rushes to your side with the evidence of His blood, His death and resurrection, His sacrifice, and you are declared righteous by God.

But there are a thousand ways that this court can be distorted. Instead of God on the throne I put myself there, and bring my friends and enemies in to offer judgment. I can try to change the Law, the rules of the court, replacing God's Law with some sort of new cause or standard of righteousness. Sometimes the law is changed for us, and instead of hearing God's judgment I can try to be my own defense, and offer up my good works as evidence of my righteousness (self-justification) or my sufferings as evidence of sentence served (self-atonement). Self-justification is the distortion of the conscience through pride. Self-atonement is the distortion of the conscience through despair. All of this is based on the fundamental error that "a conscience can be made good by good works." This is utterly false, but it is a profoundly difficult error to resist. If I go into the court and plead innocent then everything changes: Jesus is my accuser, the Devil is my defense, and the verdict is condemnation.

The best text for this picture of the courtroom of the conscience is Revelation 12, the vision of the war in heaven. It just so happens that a courtroom is not only the best way to imagine the conscience, but also the best way to imagine heaven, and this, also, is not a picture. Heaven *is* a courtroom where petitions are heard and judgments are made. The throne of God that is so famous in the Psalms is the throne of judgment, the seat in a court.

Revelation 12 describes the heavenly throne room and events that unfold there after the Ascension of Jesus. We know from other visions of this court (Job 1 and 2, Zechariah 3) that Satan has a place there. The title "Satan" indicates this office, the work of "accusing the brethren day and night." But into this throne room comes Jesus with His blood, the fruit of His sacrifice, the "It is finished" of the cross, and now there is no room for the devil. What is there to accuse? After the death of Jesus there is no work left for the devil. A war breaks out for Satan's chair in heaven, and Michael leads the angels against Satan and his demons, and Michael wins; the devil is removed, they "overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the Word of the testimony" (Rev. 12:11). What joy!

But this is a description of the heavenly court — what does it have to do with our conscience? It so happens that God has designed our conscience as an outpost of the heavenly court. (There is, I'm sure, a better way to describe this, which I am looking for. "Reflection" or "mirror" of the heavenly court doesn't quiet capture the institutedness of the conscience. "Type," understood Biblically, might get closer to the idea.) Our conscience is intended to be a shadow of the heavenly reality.

The word *paraklete* helps us see this. The word is forensic, the defense attorney in the court. Jesus is the *Paraklete* in heaven. "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate [*paraklete*] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Jesus, at the Father's right hand, is interceding, pleading our case. And, Jesus gives this title to the Holy Spirit sent to us (See John 14:16, 26, 15:26, and 16:7). We do not simply have an Advocate in the heavenly court. We have an Advocate in our heart, in the courtroom of our conscience.

The devil has no place in heaven, so he comes to our conscience to accuse us. We will talk more about the devil's

strategy with the conscience in part three, but we consider here how the devil works to overthrow the courtroom of the conscience, yet we have the Holy Spirit, who makes the heavenly verdict of our justification heard in the conscience.

Part 2: Teaching Lists Regarding the Conscience

Second to images, lists are particularly helpful teaching tools. A list helps the mind keep things ordered, and there is especially some sort of strange benefit to knowing that there is an end to something. “There are 12 sons of Jacob” is much easier for the mind to grab onto than “there are a lot of sons of Jacob.”

Here, then, are offered four lists about the conscience that I have found helpful: 1. The four things your conscience knows, 2. The four things that inform the conscience, 3. The four ways the conscience can be bad, and 4. The three walls that protect the conscience. I’ve also appended to the section a short discussion on the distinction between a troubled conscience and a terrified conscience. These lists will build on the pictures of the conscience from part one, and will be referred to in part three.

The Four Things Your Conscience Knows

Our conscience makes judgments, but what does it judge? Here is the list:

1. Your sins
2. Others’ sins against you
3. Others’ sins against others
4. There is something wrong in the world

We know that the conscience is supposed to judge our selves, but it doesn’t stop there. The conscience will judge just about anything, but this is the tricky part. It is often very difficult to sort out the thing being judged; every judgment feels something like guilt. It is helpful,

then, to distinguish between these four things the conscience knows.

Your sins. This is what your conscience is designed to judge, and the resulting pain brought to us by our conscience we call guilt. Now, we are certainly guilty before we feel guilty. A conscience that is functioning as the Lord designed it is bringing our objective guilt to our feeling and knowing (subjective guilt).

This guilt should drive us to repentance and its fruits. We should repent of our sin and believe the promise that our sins are forgiven. The conscience also plays a role in the fruit of repentance, love for God and the neighbor, warning me against sin and pushing me to live uprightly before my neighbor. This is the Christian response to guilt.

The devil, on the other hand, would push us away from repentance, and have us manage our guilt with other mechanisms. Every false religion and ideology can be understood as guilt-management without repentance, and the result is normally a hardened conscience and/or a conscience appeased with false comfort.

Others’ sins against you. We casually call the guilt of being sinned against “shame.” When I am the object of sin my conscience knows it, but shame is often indistinguishable from guilt; they feel the same.

The Bible often speaks of shame in connection with nakedness (remember Adam and Eve in the Garden, Noah after the flood, and the letter of Jesus to the Church in Laodicea, Rev. 3:18, “that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed...” etc.). Shame, then, is *covered* by the Lord’s kindness. When a person is sinned against, they are often feeling guilt as they wrestle with shame. Guilt is the testimony in the conscience that we have done wrong. Shame is the testimony in the conscience that there is something

We are certainly guilty before we feel guilty. A conscience that is functioning as the Lord designed it is bringing our objective guilt to our feeling and knowing.

While we often have a hardened conscience to our own sins, we are particularly sensitive to other people's sins against us.

wrong with us. An essay could be devoted to the topic of pastoral care to the shamed; it is simply noted here that the pastor of Law and Gospel will bring the Gospel to bear, even on the sin committed against a Christian.

While we often have a hardened conscience to our own sins, we are particularly sensitive to other people's sins against us. I might gossip and talk bad about people all day, but if I hear a whisper that someone is thinking poorly of me, I am violently offended. We most often judge ourselves with a much more relaxed standard than we use to judge others. (This is not always the case; some people are much more critical of themselves than others. This is good insofar as their conscience is always hearing the Gospel.) Jesus speaks of this in the Sermon on the Mount when He implores us to take the log out of our own eye so that we might judge with clarity the speck in our neighbors' eyes (Matt. 7:1-5).

The comparative sensitivity of our conscience is especially helpful when teaching about the conscience, and teaching to activate the conscience. The most hardened conscience will remain aware of the sin committed against it. We also note that a healthy conscience will be particularly sensitive to its own sin and guilt, but very slow to anger and quick to forgive the sins that others commit against us.

Others' sins against others. I remember teaching a confirmation class about abortion. The students were appalled. "There are people who kill babies?" "Yes." "In the United States?" "Yes, even in Denver." The students were shocked; they couldn't believe it. "What can we do about it?" The consciences of the students were on fire; they were feeling the pain of abortion, the pain of one neighbor sinning against another. And I realized how hardened my own conscience had become to this sin of neighbor against neighbor.

When Isaiah sees God on the throne, his conscience is troubled both with his own sin as well as the sin of his neighbors. "I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Is. 6:5).

There is something wrong in the world. The last thing the conscience knows is that there is something wrong in the world. Disasters, tragedies, difficulties in the world all register as pain in the conscience.

For most of us, the conscience is not a precise instrument. Like our stomach tells us that we are hungry, but doesn't tell us if we need a potato or a Twinkie, so our conscience tells us that we need comfort, but it doesn't tell us how to get that comfort. This, again, is the origin of all the false religions and ideologies in the world: they all offer false comfort to the conscience.

The Four Things that Inform the Conscience

We normally think of the conscience as a self-contained system, but the opposite is the case. The conscience is extremely sensitive to its surroundings. There are four things that inform the conscience.

1. God's Law (both natural law and God's revealed Law, the Ten Commandments)
2. Man's law
3. Culture (history, tradition, art, popular culture, etc.)
4. Peers (friends, family, every different shape of neighbor)

God's Law should be the highest thing that informs the conscience of all people. Alas, this is not the case.

Man's law also informs our conscience. This is why driving the speed limit and driving three miles an hour over the speed limit are two very different things. You can judge the state of your conscience according to man's law when

you see a police officer. If your heart skips a beat and you quick look to the speedometer, you know your conscience is in a bad place. If you see the police officer and are comforted that someone is there looking out for your safety, then your conscience is in a good place, at least according to the speed limit.

Culture in the form of art, popular culture and the language used in every day conversation informs our conscience. We see this especially as our culture coarsens — our conscience is hardened to sexual sin.

The Bible captures the danger of the culture on our conscience when it calls it “the world.” “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 3:15-17).

Our *peers* are the most profound influence on our conscience. Paul warns us, “Bad company ruins good morals,” (1 Cor. 15:33). Our conscience is so sensitive to the influence of our peers that it can shift from one moment to the next. In fact, the family is almost always the best peer group for the conscience, and the shift of the peer group from the family to friends is the defining difficulty of adolescence. (More on this in section three.)

These four informers of the conscience can either help or hurt your conscience. In a Christian home and culture, with Christian peers and God’s Law, the conscience is acutely aware of God’s Law and our sin. On the other hand, in a godless culture and with pagan friends, our conscience is hardened and calloused to our sin.

We see, as an example, how the cam-

paign to normalize homosexuality has been fought on these four fronts. Regarding God’s Law, the Scriptures regarding homosexuality are dismissed with the clichés like, “Wearing two different types of clothing is also an abomination.” Regarding man’s law, the recent Supreme Court case legalizing homosexual “marriage,” man’s law has been changed to “protect” the bad conscience. Regarding culture, the attempts to normalize homosexual relationships can be easily sketched in the popular culture. Regarding peers, one of the most profound marks of those tempted by homosexuality is the draw of the “homosexual culture” where one’s peers share the same temptation.

The Four Ways the Conscience Can Be Bad (and a Fifth)

1. No guilt over sin (hardened conscience)
2. Guilt over no sin (violation, abuse, shame)
3. False comfort (self-justification)
4. Guilt over sin (functioning but lacking the Gospel; an “unclean conscience”)
5. No functioning conscience at all

Remembering that our conscience can be wrong, this list is a reflection on the different ways a conscience can be bad.

No guilt over sin is a hardened conscience. The Bible calls this a “seared” (1 Tim. 4:2) and “calloused” (Eph. 4:19) conscience. Often times the conscience is hardened through habitual sin and addictions. Anger is an instantaneous hardening of the conscience towards a particular person. Drunkenness and any altered state of consciousness through drug use also hardens the conscience. This, I believe, accounts for the devil’s constant temptation to young people to get drunk: their otherwise youthfully tender conscience is hardened.

Knowing this also helps us teach the

The Bible assumes that the Christian has enemies. It is especially impossible to read the Psalms if we miss this assumption, and Jesus emphasizes this point, especially in the Sermon on the Mount.

youth of the church about the sin of drunkenness. I remember learning that getting drunk was a sin against the Fifth Commandment; it wasn't good for your body. That is terrible. Drunkenness is an instant hardening of the conscience that unleashes the flesh. If your flesh has a tendency towards Fifth Commandment sins and violence, then this will manifest itself when you are drunk. If your flesh has a tendency towards Sixth Commandment sins and lust, then this will come out when you are drunk, and so forth. Drunkenness tears down the walls of the conscience that hold us back from various sins against God and our neighbor.

The response to the conscience that is broken such that it does not feel guilt over their sin is (in most cases) the preaching of the Law.

Remember the couple who had moved in together without the blessing of marriage. I asked them, "Do you remember when you first moved in and you were troubled by it?" "Yes." "Are you troubled with it now?" "No." "Well," I told them, "You've broken your conscience." They were somewhat troubled. "You can't trust it, so you have to trust the Lord's Word, which says, 'You shall not commit adultery.' That is true even when it doesn't feel true." The Law of God remains even when the conscience is unable to feel and judge properly.

Guilt over no sin, which is often the result of violation or abuse, results in shame. We discussed this above under the category of sins committed against us.

We Lutheran pastors very often speak of guilt, the sins that we commit against God and neighbor. We are sinners, died for by Jesus, and this is the Good News of the Gospel. But what about the sins committed against us? What about the shame of being abused? When these things are not taught and preached we leave the door open to the therapeutic victim of popular culture. Our culture

tempts us to be defined as victims of various neuroses. I am how I am because of all the things that have happened to me.

The Bible assumes that the Christian has enemies. It is especially impossible to read the Psalms if we miss this assumption, and Jesus emphasizes this point, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. "When your enemy ... " Jesus says, not "if you have any enemy." My enemy is my neighbor who is set on my destruction, and if I live a life surrounded by enemies, then I certainly live a life of being sinned against.

Our conscience wants to interpret being sinned against as guilt. This is especially true with sexual abuse. One often hears stories of women who have been abused spending hours in the shower trying to wash away the uncleanness, or abused children who stop talking. The sins committed against us are true and painful violations—and they all manifest in the conscience in various different ways—but we notice two distinct paths down which the devil tempts us: as usual, he is pushing us to pride and despair.

The path of pride is the path of anger. When I am angry at someone I have justified a lovelessness toward them; my conscience is hardened toward that person. I am the judge, and I have passed the sentence that they are guilty, and now I will visit them with my wrath. Among us this wrath is often internalized as bitterness, and is most clearly seen when people stop talking to one another. "Leave room for [God's] wrath," is Paul's apostolic command, meditating on the instructions of Moses, "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord" (Rom. 12:19, Deut. 32:35).

The second track of shame is despair. The devil tempts us to retreat into ourselves, to think that we deserved the sin committed against us, and that we are worthless and unlovable, "damaged

goods.” This despair is a distortion of good and evil, and is a clouding of the conscience.

Both paths result in a bad conscience, and both stop our ears from hearing the Gospel. Anger wants justice and vengeance, not forgiveness, and despair can’t believe that anyone could love me, especially God. A bad conscience is always a conscience bent away from the Gospel, and this is especially seen with the conscience distorted through shame.

There is plenty of Biblical instruction for the sinned-against, most especially the four-fold command of Jesus to “love, bless, do good, and pray.” “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:44-45, NKJV). This text deserves a much fuller treatment, but even more important than these instructions are the Lord’s promises, and in this case, the promise that even the sins committed against us are forgiven. John says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

This is often a difficult word to speak, that the sin that has hurt us and wounded us so profoundly is died for by Jesus, but this is the truth that sets us free. Vengeance is the Lord’s business that He keeps to Himself. Mercy is His business that He shares with us (“Be merciful as your Father is merciful” (Luke 18:39)).

For the sinned-against tempted with despair, the Gospel rings clear with texts about the Lord’s affection, the great news that not only does God love us, He even likes us. The benediction, which gives us the blessing of God’s shining and smiling face, is a warm and comfort-

ing text. The promises of the robe of Christ’s righteousness that covers our sin is a delight. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, God’s gracious receiving of us into His righteousness and holiness, are a beautiful comfort for those tempted by the devil to think that they are “far off” and alienated from God and His people.

False Comfort is a conscience that has managed to find some comfort apart from the Gospel. This is the deceived conscience practicing self-justification, normally through some good-work-doing.

The fundamental doctrine of our sinful flesh is this lie: if God is mad at me because of my sin, then He will be happy with me because of my good works. The old theologians named this doctrine the *opinio legis*, and it can be seen by asking the standard unbeliever if they think they will go to heaven. “Of course,” they say, “I’m a good person.” This is a deceived conscience abiding in the false comfort of our good works.

The falsely comforted conscience is at the root of every idolatry and ideology, every false religion, false god and false Gospel. It is the “peace” that the world gives, a false peace that ends with destruction. It is the “peace” which Jesus talks about in the parable of the stronger man, “When a strong man, fully armed, guards his own palace, his goods are in peace” (Luke 11:21, NKJV). The “strong man” that Jesus is talking about is the devil, and his “goods” are the unbelievers. They are at “peace,” that is, they abide in the false comfort of their goodness. This “peace” and false comfort is broken by the preaching of the Law. The pride of the falsely comforted conscience is the target of the hammer of God’s Law (Jer. 23:29).

“Have you ever told a lie? Have you ever taken something that did not belong to you? Have you ever looked at another person with lust? Have you ever talked behind someone’s back? Have you ever been angry with someone and called

For the sinned-against tempted with despair, the Gospel rings clear with texts about the Lord’s affection, the great news that not only does God love us, He even likes us. The benediction, which gives us the blessing of God’s shining and smiling face, is a warm and comforting text.

Contrition is not only the first part of repentance; it is the first work of a functioning conscience.

them a fool? Have you ever used the Lord's name in vain? Have you ever loved something more than God? Have you ever disobeyed your parents?" The Law is the mirror that shatters the delusion of our self-righteousness and shows us to be the lying, thieving, adulterous, murdering, back-biting, blasphemous, idolatrous rebels that we are. Sinners deserving of God's wrath.

Contrition is not only the first part of repentance; it is the first work of a functioning conscience. (In fact, the conscience is where the Lord works repentance, contrition and faith.)

Guilt over sin is the fourth way a conscience can be bad, but this needs explanation. The first three things on this list describe a broken conscience, a conscience that is not functioning as it should. A conscience that is guilty because of our sin is a working and functioning conscience.

I used to have a van with a broken speedometer. I loved it. Most of the time it didn't work at all; it told me I wasn't moving even when I was speeding down the highway. This is like a calloused conscience that does not register our guilt. Sometimes this speedometer would work, but it would tell me I was going 5 or 10 miles per hour under my actual speed. This is like the conscience with a false comfort, I was speeding, but I didn't know it. Sometimes the speedometer would tell me my true speed, and often that would indicate that I was speeding. If the speedometer tells me I'm speeding along at 20 miles per hour over the speed limit, it's a "bad speedometer" not because it is not working, but precisely because it is working. The same is true with the conscience that knows our guilt because of our sins. It is working, and it is warning us, troubling us.

The guilty conscience is the conscience in need of the Gospel, the promise of God's kindness in Christ. While the

devil would tempt the guilty conscience in every different direction, the one thing needed is the blood of Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, the absolution. "The Lord has put away your sins." "Neither do I condemn you." "Christ died for sinners." The Gospel is the only true comfort for terrified consciences, and it is a comfort indeed.

The Three Walls that Protect the Conscience (and Why Going Off to College is so Difficult)

A last list will be mentioned briefly here. The three estates can be understood as three walls that (should) protect the conscience:

1. The Family
2. The State
3. The Church

While it is especially helpful for the youth to understand the three estates on their way to understanding this world as an orderly place and the doctrine of vocation, it is also helpful to reflect on the three estates as a help or hindrance to the conscience.

The family is intended by the Lord to be the most immediate context of our lives, and thus it exercises the most influence on our conscience. In most cases the family is the best context for a healthy conscience, and moving out of the home brings an enormous amount of pressure on the conscience because the protection of the family is removed. (More on this in the next section.)

Some families are not helpful for the conscience, and the more disorder and sin rule in a home, the less help the family provides to the conscience.

The State is also intended by God as a help and aid to the conscience. The Law is an external and objective standard that informs the conscience. It curbs the flesh and helps us see our sin. When, on the other hand, the State's law conflicts

with God's Law, then what is intended by God to protect the conscience begins, in fact, to assault it. When the State calls evil good then this false "good" is brought to the conscience as evidence of our own righteousness. We especially see this in the discussions of abortion and homosexual marriage and the new morality these distorted laws define.

The Church is also intended by God as a wall to protect the conscience, both by the preaching of the Law (which instructs and calibrates the conscience) and the preaching of the Gospel (which comforts the conscience). When the Lutheran reformers set out to restore the preaching of the Gospel in the church, they especially had this in mind, the comfort of terrified consciences.

When talking to the youth about being mindful of their conscience, it is helpful to teach them that the Lord has established the three estates of the Family, the State, and the Church to protect (among other things) the conscience, and that among the devil's first temptations will be to remove them from the protection of the Family and the Church. This also helps account for the difficulty of leaving the home to go to college or serve in the military. The conscience is exposed like never before, and the devil sets on to bend it away from the protection of the Law and the comfort of the Gospel.

Like a city protected by three walls, the conscience is protected in an ordered state, a devout family, and an orthodox church. When one of the walls crumbles, the conscience is at a greater risk. If all three walls are fallen, then the conscience is exposed, fighting for its life in the wilderness.

Troubled vs. Terrified Conscience, An Aside for a Helpful Distinction

Before we move away from our lists, I've found it helpful to distinguish between a troubled conscience and a terrified con-

science.¹ Here are the definitions:

A troubled conscience knows that it has done something wrong.

A terrified conscience knows that it has offended God's holiness.

The chief distinction is that the terrified conscience sees the wrong thing that it has done in the context of God's holiness. An unbeliever can have a troubled conscience. Almost everyone has a sense that they are not perfect and have made mistakes. The Christian knows that his "mistakes" are sins, and that his sins are offensive to God. The cry of the troubled conscience is "oops." The cry of the terrified conscience is "Alas!" "Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight—That You may be found just when You speak, And blameless when You judge" (Ps. 51:4).

The troubled conscience thinks its trouble is its mistakes. The terrified conscience knows that its trouble is God Himself. The troubled conscience, therefore, thinks that there is something it can do to make things right. The terrified conscience has come to the end of itself, the end of its pride, and knows that its only hope is in God's free and undeserved mercy.

Regarding the distinction between Law and Gospel, the troubled conscience is not yet crushed, the terrified conscience is.

Part 3: The Conscience as Teaching Tool

A Biblical understanding of the conscience is foundational to teaching other Biblical doctrines. Repentance, for example, is impossible to grasp without an understanding of the conscience. The comfort of the Gospel is rightly understood only when we know about the conscience. Justification, sanctification, vocation, and many other Biblical teachings relate to the conscience.

Like a city protected by three walls, the conscience is protected in an ordered state, a devout family, and an orthodox church. When one of the walls crumbles, the conscience is at a greater risk. If all three walls are fallen, then the conscience is exposed, fighting for its life in the wilderness.

¹ Dr. John Kleinig likes to add a third category, the disturbed conscience. While the troubled conscience knows that it has done something wrong, the disturbed conscience feels some of the pain and guilt of sin. I think of it this way. A troubled conscience worries about getting caught. A disturbed conscience is already tasting guilt before they are caught.

We can have a good conscience without knowing what the conscience is, much like we eat food long before we understand digestion. But an understanding of the conscience is crucial to teach and care for the youth of the church.

This does not mean that we cannot have the Gospel or the Lord's comfort without understanding the conscience. We can have a good conscience without knowing what the conscience is, much like we eat food long before we understand digestion. But an understanding of the conscience is crucial to teach and care for the youth of the church.

In this section we will build on the teaching of the conscience articulated above and apply it in ways helpful to the youth. Specifically, we will consider both adolescence and temptation in the context of the conscience.

Understanding adolescence in the language of the conscience

Remembering the four things that inform the conscience—God's Law, man's law, culture, and peers—and remembering especially that most often our peers are the strongest influence on our conscience, we can understand the difficulties of adolescence as the difficulty of the conscience adjusting to the expanding group of peers. In other words, our conscience is unsettled when we begin having friends outside our home.

I think the easiest way to demonstrate the influence of our peers on our conscience is to consider our language. Ask the youth this question, "Do you talk the same way around your parents as you do around your friends?" They will laugh. The way the youth talk and the words they use with their friends is very different from the way they talk with parents and teachers. And the switch is almost instantaneous. If a parent walks into the group of friends, you can hear and see the change in the conversation in a breath. This is stunning, and shows the sensitivity of our conscience. Parents and teachers sensitize the conscience to the language that is appropriate to use. Friends (generally) harden the conscience to the language they use.

(Pastors will often experience this phe-

nomenon when meeting strangers. Their language will change, along with the jokes they are telling, as soon as they learn you are a pastor. Or, if a pastor is wearing his clerical uniform, confessions will pour out of strangers completely unprovoked. "I know I should go to church." "I need to pray more." The person in an office has an instantaneous effect on the conscience.)

The example of language can be expanded to all behavior. We are all on our best behavior when we are with our parents or our children. The family is almost always the best environment for the conscience.

In adolescence our peers expand from our family to include our friends, and this normally means that while our family helps soften our conscience, our friends are helping harden our conscience. This, I believe, is the main difficulty of adolescence.

There is also the added challenge of the youth's body changing from the body of a child to the body of an adult. This transition brings with it a whole new commandment to break. Sexual temptation rushes on a person like a tsunami, and it is here that the breach is made into the conscience. St. Paul warns us of the profound danger of sexual immorality with these words, "Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (1 Cor. 6:18). Sexual immorality directly, immediately, and intensely impacts the conscience, and the damage done there is profound.

Our culture is no help. Man's law, the culture, and often our peers all exhort the *virtue* of sexual immorality. It is expected that the youth are sexually active, that couples live together before marriage. Virginity is despised. The Christian virtue of chastity is ridiculed, making an already difficult temptation all the more difficult to resist.

The link between sexual sin and leaving the Church has often been discussed and seems to be more and more established. That the Lord's prophets so often link idolatry and adultery should tell us that a lack of chastity and a lack of faith go together. And even when young people do not leave the Church, they are burdened with guilt and shame that distorts and confuses the conscience.

Understanding these difficulties in the context of the conscience is very helpful.

First, when teaching the youth, the pastor can teach about the conscience and the influence our peers have over it. Simply recognizing this and knowing how to talk about it is helpful.

Second, having an awareness of our conscience will help in the fight against temptation. The youth love to ask the dangerous question, "What is God's will for my life?" We can replace this question with the helpful question, "What will give me a good conscience?"

Third, the pastor will be aware, and will help the youth and the families of the congregation be aware, of the importance of peer groups. It is important to have Christian friends; friends that are good for your conscience. And, related, it is important to teach the youth about the vocation of friend, and how we should be a help to our neighbor's conscience. There is a godly peer pressure that we should seek after.

There is a danger that parents react to adolescence by trying to draw their children in tighter. They become bitter that their children have friends, and a battle breaks out between family and friends. Parents have the vocation of teaching their children to be good friends, and to love their neighbors that the Lord has given them. This is an important part of bringing up the children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Paul has these words of instruction in his Ephesian table of duties: "Children, obey your parents in

the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise), 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.' Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph. 6:1-4). We also remember how Paul follows up the instruction to the children ("Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord" Col. 3:20) with this instruction to the fathers, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col. 3:21).

Fourth, regarding the temptations to sexual immorality, we should be very clear about the dangers, but we should also present the positive side of the Sixth Commandment as well, that the Christian lives a life of chastity (both before and in marriage).

Finally, the pastor is paying attention to the conscience of the youth of the congregation, even asking the question, "How is your conscience?" "What troubles you?" He is ready with the Gospel, with the absolution, with the kindness of God. The youth of the church are, like the adults, real sinners, and the only hope for sinners is the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Understanding temptation in the language of the conscience

The devil tempts us in our heart, that is, in our conscience, and every temptation is away from the Gospel. But the devil uses Law and Gospel, twisted, to fit his purposes.

Before we sin the devil preaches a kind of Gospel, "Don't worry about it, Jesus won't be mad." This absolution before the sin is always the devil's voice. He turns the Gospel from the forgiveness of sins to an excuse to sin, and this is no Gospel at all.

Then, after we sin, the devil changes

The devil tempts us in our heart, that is, in our conscience, and every temptation is away from the Gospel. But the devil uses Law and Gospel, twisted, to fit his purposes.

his strategy. "Look what you did! You call yourself a Christian? God hates you." He preaches a distorted law of God's wrath after sin. Either that, or he sends us back to the same sin. "Look, no one was hurt. Do it again." The devil loves it when we get into a habit of sin; this speeds up the hardening of our conscience and stores up our guilt.

The devil is always pursuing the hardening of our conscience. This can take (at least) three distinct forms: a general hardening of the conscience, a sin-specific hardening of the conscience, and a person-specific hardening of the conscience.

A general hardening of the conscience occurs through a life of indifference to sin. This process is sped up through drunkenness and the use of drugs. In fact, drunkenness achieves the state of an instant hardening of the conscience, and is often a cover for a deeper pain in the conscience.

The devil loves drunkenness because the calloused conscience opens the heart for attack. The youth, whose consciences have not been around enough to become calloused and hardened, are calcified through drunkenness and drug use.

Sin-specific hardening of the conscience occurs when the devil brings a constant temptation to break a certain commandment. For an example, let's imagine the Fifth Commandment. There are various degrees of breaking this commandment, from neglect, anger, bitterness, and mockery, all the way to violence, assault, and murder. All of these are sins against the commandment, but the latter are much more extreme than the former. Our conscience is calloused to some degree according to the Fifth Commandment. I would feel incredibly guilty if I went and murdered someone, but I wouldn't feel bad at all if I called someone a fool. It would trouble my conscience to get in a fist fight with a

guy, but it doesn't trouble me so much if I get angry. Somewhere along the line my conscience is calloused. If I sin below that callousness it doesn't trouble me; if I sin above that callousness it does.

The devil tempts us on the callouses. He loves to put the sin in front of us that troubles us just a bit, and the committing of this sin hardens our heart a bit more.

This is easy to see with the Third Commandment. If we are in the habit of going to church, the first Sunday we miss troubles our conscience, but then we get used to it, and next we miss two Sundays, then a month, and we are not troubled at all.

Remember the couple that moved in together? They felt bad at first, but then their conscience grew calloused, and they could no longer feel the pain of their adultery. This pattern is especially obvious according to the Sixth Commandment. One often hears stories of the escalating nature of sexual sin, which begins with pornography and escalates to more debase immorality, fornication, adultery, and even criminal activity. This is a gradual hardening of the conscience.

The devil, then, does not tempt us to commit the most horrendous of sins. He tempts us to commit those sins that are right on the edge of the callouses of our conscience.

Person-specific hardening of the conscience occurs through anger. Anger is like a shot of novocaine to the conscience. If a person sins against me or offends me, and I am angry, then my conscience almost shuts down. I can sin against them and treat them in horrible ways, and not only do I not feel guilt, but I feel good about it. "They don't deserve my love."

We know that Jesus has commanded us to love our neighbor, but this person has sinned against me; they are off the neighbor list. The devil brings havoc

Anger is like a shot of novocaine to the conscience.

through this person-specific hardening of the heart, and uses it to tear apart families, marriages and churches. When the devil has us angry he has an opening to tempt us to sin where we don't feel the pain in our conscience, and he has us doing his work for him when we justify the sins we commit against the people who have hurt us. Scripture speaks the most severe condemnation against hatred. "Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him" (1 John 3:15).

The devil knows this, and is constantly working to harden our conscience, but the Holy Spirit is constantly working to tenderize our conscience. It is good for us to know, and especially good for the youth of the Church to know, that a tender conscience is a good thing, a thing to be pursued and cultivated.

I fear that this has been lost in the Lutheran church today, and that a tender conscience is seen as a mark of "pietism." This is wrong and dangerous. The Holy Spirit is constantly working to tenderize and sensitize our conscience to our own sin. This chiefly occurs through our meditation on the Ten Commandments. In fact, I'm convinced that this is the reason Luther sends us to work singing a hymn of the Ten Commandments, that through this meditation the Holy Spirit would soften and strengthen our conscience, that we would be trained in repentance, that we would know more and more the depth of our sin, and therefore rejoice all the more in the height of the Lord's love.

This "conscience training" is a life-long process, and it begins with the youth, with having the Ten Commandments carved into our hearts, and knowing their use in repentance, in meditation, and in our vocation.

Just as the devil tempts us toward a hardened conscience, he also tempts us toward false comforts. The oddities and

dangers of youth culture can all be understood in the context of the conscience.

The various and extreme sub-cultures that define youth society form a kind of anti-church and anti-reconciliation, where the family and the church are replaced with the culture of rebellion.

Luther once observed that a lawyer considers a man as a property owner, a doctor considers a man as healthy or sick, and a theologian treats man as a sinner. Our culture treats man as consumer, and this is amplified with the youth. Every message they get from the culture is specially designed to bind up their identity with what they purchase. This is a frenzy of self-actualizing materialism, and it is the worship of the two most popular and dangerous idols: money and self. It turns out that you *can* serve these two masters, and the result in the conscience is that we come into the world not to serve but to be served.

All of this is the devil's temptation to a bad conscience. All of it is to bend our hearts away from the Gospel. All of it is pressed particularly hard on the youth of the church. And none of it should make us afraid. Jesus is still the Lord seated at God's right hand, and even though we do not yet see it, He still rules the universe for the sake of His Church.

The Goal: A Good, Clean, Comforted, and Free Conscience, A Conclusion

Luther once preached that the conscience is "a small room, there's only room for one." Most people have the devil in their conscience. The best have Moses living in their conscience. But a good conscience is the conscience filled with the Holy Spirit, the conscience where Jesus takes up residence with His grace and truth. The good conscience echoes with the voice of Jesus, "I forgive you all your sin." The clean conscience is washed with the blood of the Lamb. The comforted conscience knows its sin is

This "conscience training" is a life-long process, and it begins with the youth, with having the Ten Commandments carved into our hearts, and knowing their use in repentance, in meditation, and in our vocation.

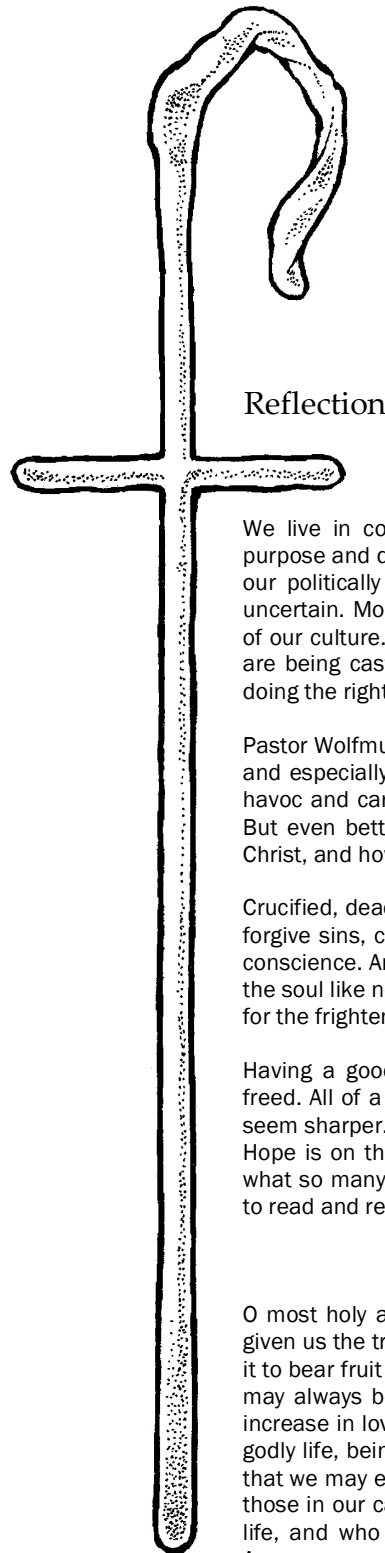
forgiven sin, died-for, atoned, covered, removed, carried away and forgotten sin.

We are sinners. If we know it or not, if we feel it or not, if our sin registers in our conscience or not. Our sin, our rebellion against God, our death, and our guilt are all very real, and so is our Jesus. His blood, His cross, His empty grave, His promise of forgiveness that gives us a good, holy, clean, and free conscience.

This is the goal of all pastoral work, including our tending to the youth of the church. It is not enough to teach about the conscience. The Lord would deliver to His people a good conscience, and this comes by the preaching of the Gospel. The Lord Jesus would still have the children come to Him, and find in Him their life and salvation, their hope and their peace, because in Jesus our conscience is at peace.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. (Heb. 10:19-22) ■■

*The Rev. C. Bryan Wolfmueller
is Senior Pastor of
Hope Lutheran Church in
Aurora, CO
wolfmueller@hotmail.com
www.doxology.us*



Reflection

We live in confusing times. For many these are also hopeless times. People long for purpose and direction, to know what's right and wrong, especially the youth of today. But in our politically correct society, good is often called evil and evil is called good. Truth is uncertain. Morals are redefined. Confusion abounds. Tolerance is now the supreme value of our culture. Ironically, if you aren't tolerant you aren't to be tolerated. Traditional virtues are being cast aside. People are more worried about saying the wrong thing rather than doing the right thing. Hearts are heavy. The world seems dark. Consciences are burdened.

Pastor Wolfmueller has done a masterful job of showing us how to address the conscience, and especially its importance for the youth of our time. He helps us navigate through the havoc and carnage of what the devil, the world and our sinful flesh do to the conscience. But even better, he shows how to deliver a good conscience through the shed blood of Christ, and how our conscience is at full throttle when it's governed by faith in God's Word.

Crucified, dead and buried for the sins of the world, Jesus Christ walked out of the tomb to forgive sins, cleanse impurity, defeat the devil, bring order to chaos, and give you a good conscience. And as Pastor Wolfmueller so deftly demonstrates, a good conscience enlivens the soul like nothing else can. It brings light amid darkness, hope to the hurting, confidence for the frightened and security for the anxious.

Having a good conscience is utterly freeing. Your emotions are unbound. Your mind is freed. All of a sudden the world doesn't seem so dark. It's easier to breathe. Your senses seem sharper. Your thoughts become clearer. Your feelings become fuller. Joy is real again. Hope is on the horizon. Life can be lived. That's the power of a good conscience. That's what so many desperately desire. And that is why this essay will be a treasure for pastors to read and reread, and regularly make use of in their ministry.



O most holy and merciful God, You have taught us the way of Your commandments and given us the truth of Your Gospel. We ask You to pour out Your grace into our hearts. Cause it to bear fruit in us that, being ever mindful of Your mercies and Your laws, our conscience may always be directed by Your will and comforted by Your love, so that we might daily increase in love toward You and one another. So also enable us to resist all evil and live a godly life, being confident of the truth of Your Word and the goodness of Your promises so that we may ever live with a good conscience, therefore delivering a good conscience to all those in our care through the shed blood of Jesus Christ who is the way, the truth and the life, and who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

- *Pastor Lucas V. Woodford*