

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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INDIVIDUAL CONSCIENCE IN A PLURALISTIC CULTURE

The Health-Care law of the Obama administration has caused no small controversy. Most recently, the provision that all employers must provide contraceptive products to their employees as a health care benefit regardless of the religious convictions of that institution (e.g., Roman Catholic Church hospitals or clinics) is one of the most egregious. This provision and the subsequent discussion and debate within our culture gets to the heart of conscience, a precious biblical concept and a precious concept central to religious liberty in the American culture. With the subsequent Susan B. Komen controversy and the absurd and inane stupidity of Rush Limbaugh's remarks about a Georgetown University law student, one would conclude that American women are up in arms about the perceived anti-women bias of those who oppose this health-care provision. The facts show otherwise. Indeed, as columnist Michael Gerson has shown, by a plurality of 46% to 44%, women believe that employers should be able to "opt out" of providing birth-control coverage for religious reasons. But when it comes to the question of whether "religiously affiliated employers, such as a hospital and university" should be able to opt out of offering coverage, women support this proposition by 53% to 38%. Americans do overwhelmingly endorse contraception but that is not the issue in this debate. What Americans, including quite strongly American women, do not endorse is the state forcing a social consensus on all private institutions. For centuries in America, religious liberty has meant a freedom of conscience that is protected and advanced by the autonomy of religious institutions. Therefore, the state has honored institutional pluralism—"the ability of people to associate, live and act in accordance with their religious beliefs, limited only by the clear requirements of public order."

The opposing view of religious liberty defines freedom of conscience in purely personal terms—the absolute autonomy of the individual person. The state, therefore, has the clear power to intervene to protect the individual from the oppression of illiberal social institutions, especially religious ones, such as the Roman Catholic Church or evangelical Protestant ones. This is the resiliently articulated position of the American Civil Liberties Union and, apparently, now of the Obama administration. Thus, the current view of our president and his administration is that "Catholics are free to worship. Catholic institutions must be forced to reflect liberal ideas and values." I believe very strongly that the autonomy of religious institutions in the United States is essential to the expression of individual conscience and important to the common good. The president of the United States apparently does not agree with that. Instead, he believes, as Gerson comments, that "contraceptives must not only be legal and generally available; they must be provided (directly or indirectly) by Catholic institutions to their employees." The president's position and that of the ACLU are reprehensible and terribly threatening to religious liberty in the United States!!

For that reason, I believe it is important to review the biblical concept of conscience. A few years ago, I wrote an article on this very topic. Here is the substance of that article:

Introductory Thoughts: The term “conscience” is not found in the Old Testament. Perhaps the closest OT term to conscience is “heart” (e.g., 1 Samuel 24:5). In the New Testament, “conscience” is used 31 times, mostly by Paul. The key passage is Romans 2:14-15. Scripture teaches that humans, made in the image of God, have an innate sense of right and wrong, a moral monitor that either “approves or accuses” (see Romans 2:14-15). Conscience serves as an umpire, which disposes the human to view life situations in a moral/ethical light, thus judging/determining that some actions are “right” and some are “wrong.” The Fall has drastically affected conscience but has clearly not destroyed it. Evidence of this innate sense of right and wrong is a general agreement in all cultures about certain basic ethical issues (e.g., murder, incest, pedophilia, lying, stealing, etc.).

How Conscience is developed in the NT: A human being may actually be sincerely following a wrong moral standard that deepens convictions about the “rightness” of certain actions. Consider Paul before his conversion: Saul (as he was then known) persecuted Christians with a “**good conscience**” (Acts 23:1). His deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) told him “do right” and his ethical standard was “it is right to persecute Christians.” Thus he followed his conscience but what he did was wrong, because his deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) was ill-informed. God needed to change his convictions, which He did--beginning at the Damascus Road with his salvation.

1. When a person becomes a Christian, his/her conscience is heightened, as it were, by being informed both by Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is in many ways a lifelong process. When we then violate personal, societal or biblical standards, we experience guilt. This is one of the blessings of the conscience for the believer. This “thermostat” keeps us from doing what might prove injurious to ourselves and to others and ultimately to our relationship with God. When we willfully sin, conscience in conjunction with the Holy Spirit causes us to experience guilt. We are then prompted to confess our sins (1 John 1:9) and experience the love and forgiveness of God. This is now the ongoing process of how we deal with guilt in our lives—via confession (i.e., agreeing with God about our sin).
2. For you as a believer, conscience may accuse you of something [or you may have convictions about something] when in actuality the action you are contemplating may either be morally neutral or even right. This is essentially what Paul is discussing in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14. Here the believer’s conscience is “**weak**,” (i.e., his/her convictions are not in conformity with the truth—the correct theological “knowledge” about idolatry and food). So, at that point the mature believer must decide to either press his/her freedom or, because of the undeveloped conscience of the weaker brother/sister, choose not to exercise that freedom. This “weaker” believer then must be open to the liberating teaching of the Holy Spirit who uses God’s Word to teach the truth about all things, including how to look at cultural standards, traditions and practices.

3. For the believer, there is such a thing as a “**seared conscience**” (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:2). If conscience is disobeyed repeatedly or if a believer refuses to develop the deep-seated convictions about issues of life and the maturing process is then halted, one’s sensitivity to moral issues soon becomes dulled. If this continues, then the result is a seared conscience: Convictions about a particular issue are developed that the believer knows are wrong **or** those convictions have not been fully informed by God’s Word. In this case, conscience is then “seared.” This is what I believe occurs with some genuine believers when it comes to homosexuality, for example. Convictions are developed that to practice homosexuality is not wrong ethically. Continued sin then desensitizes the conscience and the conscience has been seared—either by conscious disobedience to the clarity of God’s Word, or by convictions developed without the clear teaching of God’s Word. Moreover, Scripture teaches that unconfessed sin and ongoing unbelief can also lead to a desensitized conscience (see Hebrews 3:12-13). As Postmodernism is intersecting with evangelical Christianity, this is occurring with greater frequency.
4. Conscience can also “**malfunction**” in the sense that it becomes overly sensitive or hypersensitive. Here the conscience “over-functions,” condemning and accusing the Christian for small errors, forgiven actions and normal human failures. This constant self-criticism and self-reproach rob the Christian of joy and any sense of progress in growth toward Christ-likeness. The result is often a performance-based Christianity that focuses on actions, not God’s grace, as the basis for acceptance. Performance-based Christianity is what produces legalism and so much defeat in the Christian life. [“If I am not performing the way I think I should, the way my pastor thinks I should, or the way my friends think I should” can produce the over-sensitive conscience, and thereby false guilt.] False guilt is one of the lethal results of performance-based spirituality.

The goal of the Christian believer, then, is to develop a **mature conscience**. The Holy Spirit teaches the believer most clearly what is right and wrong from the objective Word of God. That Word informs us of the truth; the Spirit then enables us to “welcome, embrace” that truth (see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16), so that it transforms us from the inside out; and then we begin to develop those deep-seated convictions in the non-moral areas of life that can guide and direct us. The Bible teaches that it is wrong to go against “conscience” but it also clearly teaches that we must be careful to have our conscience informed by God’s Word.