

CRITERIA OF A PROPER OBJECT OF FAITH

“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22).

In a previous article on introspectionism, we stressed the danger of looking inwardly in order to determine if we qualified for the grace of God. Irrespective of personal perception of the degree of our repentance or unworthiness, our faith should always be objectively fixed outside ourselves on Jesus Christ. Now the question may be reasonably asked, “How may we know that we have a proper object of faith?” By what criteria may we affirm the object of faith for the Jew, the Moslem, the Hindu or a score of other world religions is futile, and that ours is effectual? Do not these believe as devoutly, as steadfastly and unshakably as we do? Do they not have their writings, their prophets, saints and martyrs as well as Christians? It is also equally as important to know that we have indeed truly believed, that our faith is not fraudulent self-deception. The answer to that question is laid out in the text, and may be absolutely confirmed in the experience of every man.

Briefly stated, the criterion of a proper object of faith is a subjective one, a **liberated conscience**. I must *feel* that I am saved if I am to have enough assurance for there to be any peace in my life, any victory over sin, any power in my witness. General doctrine, theology, is not enough. We have the written revelation of God in our Bibles. We may, by it, determine the way of salvation. We may learn all about soteriology, have correct views of the Atonement, believe that Christ died for the elect. But what I need to know is if Christ died for me! The Bible cannot tell me that. No man can tell me that. Only God can persuade and assure me that my sins are gone, and He does indeed do that by removing guilt and condemnation from my *conscience*. Hebrews 9:9 tells us that the gifts and sacrifices offered under the Old Covenant could not make him who offered them perfect in regard to the *conscience*. Chapter 10 verses 1-3 tells us that if these works had truly purged our sins then, having once been done, sin would be no more brought to mind. The very fact that they had to be offered again and again tells us they were not effectual. Verse eleven gives the dismal picture of priests standing daily repeatedly offering the same sacrifices which can never take away sins. Then we are told in 9:11-14 that Christ entered the Most Holy Place once for all with His own blood and, with one sacrifice, purged our *conscience* from dead works to serve the living God.

The whole of man’s duty toward God hangs on the two great commandments, supreme love to God and equal love to fellow men (Matt. 22:36-40). That sublime love is to rise from a *good conscience* and **unfeigned** faith. (I Tim. 1:5) Think about that a moment, if you will. The whole of God’s revelation, the sum total of Christ’s Incarnation, Humiliation, Obedience, Suffering, Death, Resurrection and Exaltation is the eradication of guilt from man’s conscience, making his soul a wellspring of love and glory to God!

THE CONSCIENCE

Notwithstanding the first point in the acrostic “Tulip”, every person is born into this world with something good in him: A conscience. It is a divinely bestowed faculty, which immediately, for every person, bears witness of right and wrong according to God’s law. (Rom. 2:13-15) It functions by rewarding men with pleasant and peaceful feelings when they do well, and punishment for their evil acts by disquiet, unrest, and guilt. It is God’s common grace given to govern the societies of men who have no prophet and no Bible. It also renders every person responsible before God for his deeds, for he **knows** right and wrong.

Although the conscience is innately good, it is not infallible. It is vulnerable to abuse and becoming unreliable. The Bible speaks of Christians who have *weak* consciences; that is, their consciences have been abused by bad teaching, bad doctrine. The commandments and traditions of men have been used to unlawfully bind their consciences so that they feel guilty and condemned about matters that ought to be indifferent. Jesus speaks of Pharisees who bind men with unlawful burdens, grievous to be borne. Christendom, as well as other religions, abounds with these false teachers who distort and program men’s consciences in order to use them to their own ends.

The conscience does not have the power to compel men to conformity. Indeed, it is the normal pattern of sinners to regularly, day in and day out, suppress and ignore their consciences. This is no small part of men’s wicked activity in “suppressing the truth in unrighteousness”, bringing down the wrath of God from heaven (Rom. 1:18). In the case of final reprobation, the conscience often becomes seared, callused, so the sinner no longer is made uncomfortable with his wickedness, or concerned about his soul (I Tim. 4:2, Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). God will not always strive with man! He will then, happily and contentedly, go on with his wickedness until he suddenly drops into an eternal hell.

Because the conscience is vulnerable to distortion, and subsequently, impaired function, it must be ordered, grounded and kept by truth and reality. It is truth that sets us free; lies, fables, illusions and fantasies that put us into bondage (John 8:32). The gospel is not intended to merely inform men’s intelligence, but to be pressed upon their conscience in a practical and applied manner. It should be a matter of encouragement for us to know that when we preach the word of God, we are not trying to persuade men to believe something they do not know. We are awakening them to, and reminding them of, what they already know in their consciences (II Peter 1:12-15)! That is why unbelievers often become angry and enraged by the gospel. They *know* it to be the truth. That is also why the regenerate saint *immediately* receives truth the first time he hears it. It is as if he were hearing something altogether fitting, which he has known all his life. He is delighted to know that it is not only truth, but also truth he is now delighted to live with. Life suddenly makes sense!

This is also why saints are not bored by hearing the same gospel truths preached over and over again. As we walk in this world, lies, fables and fantasies are constantly assailing our consciences. The more of this we hear, the more our peace and joy is curtailed. A cloud of gloom, doubt and unbelief envelopes us, and we become worldly, carnal, and spiritually insensitive. Then when we are reminded again of the truth, all those vanities evaporate, and our joy and peace are restored. In some cases where true believers have been under a false ministry for some time, the conscience must be delivered from a false religious binding, liberated and restored. Some may have been under worldly, compromising, flesh-indulgent influence, and the conscience needs be awakened and keened. All must be kept and guarded with truth.

WHAT A CONSCIENCE MUST BE PURGED FROM

Guilt

The sinner's conscience must be purged from condemnation, from his consciousness of sin, from his perception of himself as evil, wicked, an enemy of God. He feels guilty and sinful because he *is*. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world. That was not necessary, because all men were already under condemnation, were born that way (John 3:17-18). The moment Adam sinned, he felt guilty, condemned. For the first time in his life, he was afraid, and ashamed to be in God's presence. He first tried to cover himself with fig leaves. They sufficed until he heard the voice of God, and then he knew that he would still be naked before Him, so he ran and hid. He is still trying to cover himself with his own works, running and hiding from God, making all sorts of excuses and passing the blame to others, but none of it does any good. He still feels guilty.

Even the elect sinner, for whom Christ died, feels guilty, and senses himself "by nature a child of wrath even as others" (Eph. 2:3). God has revealed His wrath from heaven (Rom.1: 18) and intends us to feel that way until we come to put our trust and confidence in Jesus Christ, fix the eye of our faith steadfastly upon Him and nothing else.

Dead Works

The conscience must be purged from dead works (Heb. 9:14). Dead works are moral and religious activities that produce no life. There are good works to which we have been created, in which we should walk (Eph. 2:10). These are not properly our works, but God's. We are His workmanship. We were created by Him in Christ Jesus for the purpose of walking in these works, which He had already prepared. The moralist and the religionist are feverishly busy with good, upright and devoutly religious activities trying to purge their consciences from guilt. But it does no good. One feels good for a bit after doing these things, but then the guilt returns. We can never rest in them. Nor can we cease to do them, because our conscience accuses us for their neglect. Ultimately, the conscience must be purged of them because they are false objects of hope. They can do no more than instill fear and slavery. For the Jew, these dead works would be the meticulous keeping of the ceremonial laws of the Old

Covenant, the rituals of washings and sacrifices, the observance of feasts and holy days, sabbaths, careful observance of legally prescribed food and clothing. In many religions today, not excluding a hefty segment of Christendom, people are loaded with their own brand of legalisms in which they vainly hope. Christian corruptions of gospel salvation include such dead works as free will notional faith, empty of repentance. The "soul winner" leads his prospect down a path of scriptures, which have been assembled to bring the sinner to logically arrive at a point of faith. Then he tells the sinner to believe. The sinner obligingly obeys, but he does not sense himself justified. His conscience has not been cleansed because his "faith" was only dead works: The "soul winner's" work and his work. It does not breathe with the life of God. Gospel faith is a gift of God, which arises out of the work of the Spirit in regeneration accompanied by repentance. At the opposite extreme we find men idolatrously hoping in their repentance, their sense of unworthiness, their grief and sorrow. This is also more dead works, fabricated religious exercises which will never purify the conscience. Other dead works include church membership, regular church attendance, Baptism, Communion or other "sacraments". For still others this may be nothing more or less than "living a good life", being honest, truthful and upright, working hard, paying debts, helping needy people, and generally working to improve the world. Commendable as all this may be in the sight of man, it does nothing to alleviate the sin-burden. The religionist as well as the moralist knows it, but he is bound by a guilty conscience to keep doing it. Only the mighty power of God can bring one to cast away his hope in all of that, count it worthless, and place his faith in Christ as a naked sinner with absolutely *nothing* other than Christ's merit to justify Him before God.

What Dead Works Can and Cannot Do

"For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh..." (Heb. 9:13). The Spirit, arguing for the real efficacy of the blood of Christ in purifying the conscience, grants some real efficacy to dead works. The Old Covenant sacrifices and rituals could sanctify (set apart) outwardly. They could clean up the outward, purify the fleshy, the temporal, the mundane. But these were absolutely useless to take away sin, (Heb. 10:4) or to clear the conscience (Heb. 9:9).

Likewise, today's contemporary counterparts to those dead works can actually accomplish some things. They can "sanctify" us outwardly, separate us from the godless immoral majority. They can make us devoutly religious. They can render us morally clean and upright, save us much grief that lawless and careless people suffer. They can make for a more orderly home-life, produce well-behaved children, create a better community, promote the peace, orderliness, and material prosperity of a nation, and secure a more just government. Peter, in his second epistle, chapter 2:20-22 in describing the dog and the sow returning to their innate uncleanness, says that these apostates had actually escaped the pollutions of the world *through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!* These correspond to the man described

in Matthew 12: 43-45 who has made a “free-will decision” to clean up his life. The demon, willing to cooperate for a season, obligingly leaves. Later when the demon returns, and the man reverts to his old self, people are dumbfounded, baffled by the whole episode. The man had such a radical change in his life. He had put away all his vices and wickedness, and appeared to give unmistakable proof of genuine conversion. What has happened here? It was nothing but dead works, the works of the man and his demon. The man made a free-will decision to do better. The demon made a free-will decision to leave, so he could make a free-will decision to return. Neither was compelled by the power of God. The man has not been shut up to faith in Christ. The demon has not been cast out by the finger of God, so he is free to return. Everything has been done by the sinner and the demon, nothing by God. There is no transference of faith to Christ. The blood has not been applied. The conscience is still defiled.

Aversion to God

The conscience must also be purged from its aversion to God. The scenario of Adam feverishly trying to hide his nakedness from God, his terror at God’s presence, running into a forest of activity and commotion to shut out of his conscience the awful reality of an offended Almighty, is reincarnated in every one of his fallen sons. That craven fear is mightily dealt with in justification by faith. The bondage of fear is abolished and replaced with a “Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out ‘Abba, Father’”(Rom. 8:15). This is but another aspect describing the marvelous subjective experience of having the conscience cleansed and liberated. Not only is that lawful fear, instilled by the Almighty Himself, but all the demonic lies and accusations about God whispered to us by demons, preached to us by false prophets, and dreamed up in our own fleshy lusts, are dispelled and evaporated. The God of the Bible becomes to us indeed the “Blessed God” (Eph. 1:3). He is to us, infinitely good, merciful, kind, gracious, longsuffering, tender and loving. We may, without the slightest fear or hesitation come to him boldly, knowing we shall be received as Christ Himself, and our cause heard.

WHY THE CONSCIENCE OF THE CHRISTIAN, AND ONLY THE CHRISTIAN IS TRULY CLEANSED, FREED, AND CAN NEVER BE BOUND

Forgiveness is God’s, and God’s alone. *“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases”* (Psalm 103:2-3). Forgiveness must rest in God alone because all sin is against Him. (Psalm 51: 4) *“Against you only have I sinned, and done this evil in your sight”*. It would seem that David’s sin was against Bathsheba, Uriah, and the people of Israel who suffered for it. Likewise we often imagine our transgressions to be against persons, humanity, God’s creation; and we do indeed offend, corrupt and destroy them. But all of this is primarily against God, our Creator, King, Lawgiver, and Benefactor. Therefore all the forgiveness we may receive from men, from society, from human government will not touch our guilt. We feel, sense, *know*, ourselves to be yet guilty. That is also why the pagan, the legalist, and moralist alike have to keep on doing their rituals, their works over and

over continuously. They can never rest, for their guilt remains. Only the Christian has found rest in Christ. His conscience is clear. There is nothing left to be done. It has all been completely finished in Christ.

We have a perfect sacrifice (Heb. 9:14). That perfect sacrifice has effectually purified our conscience to bold, confident and devout servitude to the living God.

We have a perfect High Priest, Advocate, and Substitute. *“My little children, these things I write to you, that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.”*(I John 2:1) Our Lord’s law has not been mitigated. God still demands perfection, sinlessness. The regenerated believer desires that righteousness with a godly desire. However, because he dwells in a sinful body, he will sin. But his sin brings him *no condemnation in his conscience* because Christ the Righteous forever represents him in God’s Presence. Is that not astounding?

We have been perfected, made complete, lacking nothing (Heb. 10:14). We wait and groan for our glorified body, but that will merely be a change of garments. The new creation in Christ Jesus has already been accomplished. We do not yet *appear* to be (I John 3:1-2), but we already *are* the sons of God! And when He appears, what we are now will be seen. We shall be revealed to be just like Him!

There are no charges lodged against us in the court of God (Romans 8:33-34). Accusations against us aplenty may abound in the mouths of our accusers and in the courts of men. Some of these may be just, for we do indeed still sin in the mortal flesh. But God refuses to hear these charges or admit them to court. *“Blessed is the man to whom God will not impute sin”* (Rom. 4:8). It seems too good to be true, but that is what the gospel is. We have sinned. It is common knowledge. God knows it, but He refuses to lay it to our account. And since it is never laid to our account, our conscience is never under condemnation.

And finally, lest we leave the impression of antinomian licentiousness, we must assert that we have been given a pure heart that cannot abide sin. That is what is declared of the Gentiles in Acts. 15:9. “purifying their hearts by faith”. The purification of our conscience is never separated from the purification of the heart, soul, and mind. It is that *“law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”* that has made our souls free from the tyranny of the law of sin and death in the members (Romans 8:2). This is that blessed rest found only in Christ. It is this, His abiding peace, which He bequeathed to His own as He made His way to the Cross. Nothing in heaven and earth that is, or ever shall be, can avail to take it away.

- C. M.