Matters of Conscience

The Place of Conscience in our lives

The conscience is never mentioned in the Old Testament but it is a major feature of the New Testament. The conscience is a faculty that God has placed within us, which decides as to the moral quality of our thoughts, words and actions. It gives a consciousness of the good of our conduct or motives or causes feelings of remorse at evil doing.

Having a clear conscience is one of the qualifications of leadership. ***"They must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience."*** (1 Tim. 3:9) Twice when on trial Paul spoke of his clear conscience, ***"Paul looked straight at the Sanhedrin and said, 'My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day' "***. (Acts 23:1) Later on at his trial in front of Felix in Caesarea Paul said, ***"So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man"***. (Acts 24:16)

Having a clear or good conscience is very important both in our walk with God and in also in our fight against ***"the principalities and powers and forces of wickedness"***. (Eph. 6:12) In matters of conscience we can lose our liberty and a loss of liberty will damage the quality of our worship. Having a bad conscience will disable us in spiritual warfare.

Conscience is not God's voice, but it appears that the mechanism in our spirits by which we listen to the voice of conscience is the same as the mechanism by which we listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. If we refuse to listen and obey the voice of our conscience – i.e. we violate our conscience – we damage the listening mechanism in our spirit. This is extremely dangerous for a believer for now he/she can't perfectly hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. The Bible speaks of continual rejection of the voice of conscience, ***"Whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron"***. (1 Tim. 4:2)

So the rule in life is to always obey your conscience. Do nothing that violates your conscience. If you do you will feel guilty and your ministry will be ruined. 1 Cor. 11:28 says, ***"Let a man examine himself…"***. Paul says failure to do so, ***"Is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep"***. (1 Cor. 11:30)

John Wesley in his typically methodical way taught new believers to ask conscience questions. These are some of the questions they had to ask themselves everyday.

- Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression I am better than I really am? Am I a hypocrite?
- Am I honest in all my acts and words or do I exaggerate?
- Can I be trusted?
- Am I a slave to dress, friends, work or habits?
- Did the Bible live to me today?
- Am I enjoying prayer?
- Am I defeated in any part of my life by jealousy, impurity, a critical spirit, irritability, a distrustful heart?

John Wesley also asked himself questions on a weekly basis. He called it examining himself.

Sunday: He examined himself on his love for God.

Monday: He examined himself on his love for his fellow human beings etc.

Why was John Wesley so emphatic that each believer ought to examine his conscience? It was because he knew how important this was in Christian ministry.

"But the man who has doubts is condemned … everything that does not come from faith is sin." **(**Rom. 14:23)

Should you always obey your conscience? Yes! But you not only need to examine your conscience, you also need to question your conscience. Our consciences were damaged at the Fall and they are not always right. A good conscience is one that has no feeling of reproach against you. It doesn't make accusations of wilful wrong.

Our consciences need to be educated or trained to recognise what God thinks is good and evil in an absolute sense. This is involuntary and is determined largely by the culture we have been brought up in. All cultures have a hierarchy of virtues and vices. These vary tremendously. But these hierarchies of what is right and wrong are inculcated into us at an early age.

Many of us have a conscience that has been educated and trained in a Christian sub-culture. It has been moulded by that culture. This is not necessarily aligned with Scripture. As we mix with other cultures there are different conflicting voices of conscience. Some may feel that a certain course of action is commendable (their consciences affirming them), while others are horrified at this course of action (their consciences condemning them). This was the situation in Rome over whether or not to eat meat that had been offered to idols. (Rom. 14)

Issues may arise in the area of speaking the truth – explaining why we do what we do etc. Are we to be governed by "situational ethics"?

The answer is no! We should always question our conscience and ask if the issue (whatever it is) it is aligned to Scripture or is it aligned to our cultural upbringing? We need to dialogue with our conscience informing it of Scripture.

So always question conscience; educate it so it coincides with revealed truth in Scripture. Never act if it is not clear. Never disobey conscience, for whatever damages the temple of the Holy Spirit is dangerous. In fact it is sin, but not sin in an objective moral sense of a violation of the law of God, but in that the spirit is damaged. There is a lot of false guilt where the conscience has been violated but there has been no transgression of the law of God. False guilt comes from an uneducated conscience.

So don't mechanistically obey conscience. Don't be the conscience of others. But if you can't proceed in faith with a good conscience – don't proceed at all. Enrich your conscience with knowledge.

Educating Our Conscience

So the simple rule "If in doubt – don't" is overly simplistic! Learn to align your conscience to the Word of God.

What should you do when Scripture doesn't speak to a particular issue and as a group of believers you have divergent views? Share the problem honestly with each other. Talk it out. Decide. Don't let others to lay false guilt on you.

What should you do when there is a conflict of absolutes? For example, compassion is driving you to a particular course of action, but honesty says you may not do that action. The answer is cry out to God for wisdom! (James 1:5)

Wait upon Him. Don't be hasty. (See 1 Sam. 13 where Saul, with a conflict of issues, makes the wrong choice through haste.) The Holy Spirit will show the way through. See 2 Kings 5:15-19 where Naaman wanted to be loyal to his new commitment to the one true God and yet he realised that his loyalty may be compromised by his official duties. God made a way through this dilemma.

Ethical Issues

There are so many ethical issues. In most Muslim countries, as in our own home countries, there is a measure of corruption. One of the important parts of our witness is how we manage corruption and this relates to conscience issues. I believe corruption is one of the major principalities and powers we face. We must confront and challenge it. The welfare of any people group and nation is threatened more by corruption than by any other factor including

terrorism! There is an index on levels of corruption. Muslim nations generally do poorly.

The reasons for corruption are many but they include:

- Very low salaries for government workers – it is assumed they will receive bribes!
- Greed in the heart of man.
- An opportunity to succeed (success is largely measured by wealth and wealth brings power and prestige).

Dealing with Corruption

There is a curious verse in Prov. 2:14, ***"A gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath."*** Is this advocating bribery? No, for it contradicts many other verses. (Prov. 11:1, 16:8, 22:16) But it is a reflection of reality in many countries.

We should never pay bribes. But often life is less simple than this. The authorities make you aware that they will not process your papers unless … then comes a series of options:

1. A demand for money and a threat if you don't pay up
2. A demand for money and a promise to help the papers to go through speedily
3. No demand is made but rather a promise to help process the papers speedily is made with a gift of gratitude asked for or expected
4. No demand is made – help is given and a gift is not asked for but hidden cultural pressure is put on you to give

At which level do you say no? Isn't level 4 acceptable? Isn't it a form of cultural adaptation? This is where the conscience comes in. It is important to build relationships with local and governmental leaders, but we need to emphasize that this is "grace" and not "payment" unless it is an honest payment for services rendered.

In a development agency or a business you can't stop fraud but it is essential to put into the organisation systems of fraud-prevention. Only in this way can you be a shining example to the community.

We also need to put in place classes on ethical principles for employees of the development work explaining the Biblical Worldview and the Biblical basis of ethics. These ethical principles then need to be modelled consistently.

Attitudes to Governments

The final issue relating to conscience is our attitude to governments. It is interesting to discuss this subject in a multi-national group where you always get a spectrum of views depending on cultural backgrounds.

The key Scriptures are Rom. 13:1-7, 1 Tim. 2:1-4; Titus 3:1; and 1 Pet. 2:13-17. In his book **Ethics** Bonhoeffer points out the reformation view that government was ordained by God for mankind as a grace to limit the effects of sin. We need protection from the anarchy that unrestrained sin produces and we need an orderly life for culture and the economy to prosper.

The Biblical passages describe what government ought to do. There is no assertion that all governments follow the pattern laid down in Scripture. So the crux of the issue is: how should we respond to a government that is corrupt and intent on doing evil – i.e. a sub-Biblical government?

There are no clear guidelines in Scripture about this. We are clearly commanded in Scripture to pray for governments. (1 Tim. 2:1-4) It is clear that the government of the Roman Empire was not free from corruption. (Pilate, for example, carried out a gross violation of Roman Law in permitting the execution of the Lord Jesus). In spite of this Paul taught us that regardless of the character of a state's leaders, its authority was still to be recognised because that authority proceeds ultimately from God. Note Paul was writing to Romans. Claudius had been poisoned. Caligula was murdered because he was clearly mad, only to be followed by Nero who was

equally mad! And Paul set an example for all believers by submitting to the laws of Rome. Peter required believers to submit to ***"every authority instituted among men"***. Even when the order to worship the emperor was disobeyed – still believers had to honour the authority figure in government. (1 Pet. 2:17)

Is there a case for civil disobedience? The answer is probably, 'yes', but it should only be done rarely. Whatever the intention, anything that disintegrates the state inevitably brings social chaos and this is contrary to the purpose of government instituted by God. There is a case to be made that we should sometimes (i.e. it is our duty) disobey constituted authority. The fundamental principle is stated plainly by Jesus, that we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and we must still more render to God the things that are God's. (Mt. 22:21) This was reaffirmed by Peter, ***"We must obey God rather than men!"*** (Acts 5:29) wherever their orders clash. Yet the clash must be evident, not imaginary or a supposition.

The Scripture gives three examples of disobedience to the state:

- Pharaoh ordered the destruction of all the boy babies of a race of his slaves. According to Egyptian law and custom he was well within his rights as a god-king to order such a thing. But God specially blessed the midwives who disobeyed his inhuman order and He commends for our example the faith of Moses' parents in disobeying him. (Ex 1:17-21; Heb 11:23)

- Herod the king ordered the massacre of all the baby boys of a small town with the intention of including Jesus among the dead. Joseph was divinely instructed to frustrate the intention of the king. Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt. (Mt. 2:13-18)

- Nebuchadnezzar ordered universal state worship of himself. Religion was the adjunct of the state and worship had to be in the proscribed form. This is typical of many states. Religion is to be subservient to the ruler's power. The three Hebrews refused obedience and are set forth in Scripture as examples of faithfulness without compromise. (Daniel 3:1-30)

Paul and Peter who laid down so positively the general duty of obedience to government authorities were themselves often in prison for refusing this obedience in the realm of the freedom to preach the Gospel, but in no other realm.

It seems to me that God has given no authority whatever to rulers and government officials in the sphere of the relationship between God, the Creator, and man His creature. In this sphere the ruler and authorities are trespassers and no trespasser can plead the right of the law for his trespass and the acts connected with it since the trespass itself is contrary to the law. So he can't complain if those he has wronged by his trespass refuse to do as he asks.

So 1 Pet. 2:13 doesn't lay down the duty of unlimited obedience to civil authority, but only asserts a general principle of obedience subject to exceptions. Unlimited obedience would be rendering the things of God to Caesar – i.e. robbing God!

So in summary, if the government commands any of the following:

- What is contrary to the plain command of God
- Immorality
- Injustice
- Trespassing into the realm of spiritual things

Then the believer has no duty of obedience, but in fact he should disobey – yet not actively resisting, but simply enduring the penalties the authorities may inflict, even into death which is what happened to both Paul and Peter.

There is no place in Scripture for lawlessness. The Antichrist is called the lawless one. We must ask God to keep our minds from becoming infected by this invasive spirit of Antichrist that is increasingly powerful in the world today!