

## **"It Is Neither Safe nor Right to Go against Conscience"**

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You have probably noticed that this was part of Martin Luther's reply at the Diet of Worms when he was asked whether he would recant what he had written. Some scholars have been so enthused with Luther's reference to his conscience that they talked about a religion of conscience. They claimed that Martin Luther's decision was determined alone by what he felt he could advocate without going against his conscience. Yet when we look more closely at what conscience really means, we see at once that this is quite a slippery slope.

### *1. The slippery slope of our conscience*

The term "conscience" is derived from the Latin *conscire* and means "being a witness to" or "knowing with" someone. In other words, conscience was originally understood as a kind of moral self-reflection that scrutinizes one's activities. When we remember, however, how many crimes have been committed in nationalistic and fascist countries in the name of conscience, we wonder what kind of normative and autonomous voice this conscience is. We quickly realize that our conscience itself is not a moral norm; rather it attests to those norms it attempts to enforce. Yet the extent to which these norms are perceived and enforced differs greatly. For some, moral norms seem to be hardly existent, while for others they are torturous, as they were, for instance, for the young Martin Luther in his monastery cell.

When we think of young Martin we notice that his is not the conscience of a self-assured person. For him conscience is that center of the human person in which one encounters God's wrath over human sinfulness. This was the reason why he was searching for a gracious God. The judging and punishing law of God meets us in our conscience as Luther confessed: "Because the arrows of God and the wrathful statements make present our sins in our heart. And from there, internally, unrest and terror of the conscience and of all the powers of the soul is experienced."<sup>1</sup> We experience in our conscience our sinfulness and our guilt and therefore conscience can become synonymous with heart or soul. Since God meets us in our conscience, the function of the conscience can either be accusing or liberating. Very different from the Enlightenment perspective and also from that of modernity, conscience is not that little voice implanted in us by nature or by God which gives us an unwavering feeling of justice, goodness, and truth. Martin Luther is much less optimistic and yet much more realistic.

For Luther a good conscience does not ensue from the congruence of the human and the divine wills, but from the experience of God's saving activity. This is the reason why Luther can talk about a pacified and a freed conscience. "Therefore the Christian or evangelical freedom is the freedom of the conscience through which the conscience is freed from works, not that they will not be done, but that one does not trust in them."<sup>2</sup> According to Luther the freedom of the conscience has its origin in the freeing power of the Gospel which takes away human anxiety that we must get right with God on our own. Freedom of the conscience is for Luther nothing but the recognizing and trusting relationship of faith in God through which God's freeing word encounters us in the Gospel. The autonomy of human conscience which quite often is associated with the statement of Martin Luther, "I cannot otherwise, here I stand,"<sup>3</sup> portrays the opposite of what Luther stood for. He did not stand for

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Die sieben Bußpsalmen* (1517), in WA 1:176.22-25.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, *De votis Monasticis*, WA 8:606.30.32.

<sup>3</sup> "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in LW 32:112f.

himself, but God stood for him. This holds especially true when we consider the whole summary response he gave at the Diet of Worms. There he stated: “My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

## 2. *“My conscience is captive to the Word of God”*

Yet what does this Word of God entail? When we look at the recent decisions that the ELCA has made concerning human sexuality, then, as its proponents claim, the decisions were not simply made from convenience or from following certain trends in society. They claim that it was Scripture, meaning the Word of God that led them to these decisions. Not just the WordAlone group, but many others in the ELCA, however, claim that these decisions are not sanctioned by Scripture. Whom should we believe in this instance? It is interesting that throughout history the Church has never been a homogeneous community agreeing on everything. There were dissensions between Peter and Paul, there were strong disputes at the so-called Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, and Paul had his special problems with the way Christians in Corinth understood what it meant to be a Christian. So being of different opinions and fighting about who is right is nothing new. It is not one of the marks of the Church but one of the marks of us being human. Yet perhaps we can learn something of these dissensions.

Let us look here at the situation in Corinth. The issue between the so-called weak and the so-called strong was whether Christians can eat as food something that had been offered to an idol. One section of the Christians in Corinth claimed that “their conscience, being weak, is defiled” if they eat this kind of food (1 Cor 8:7). The strong, however, possessing “knowledge” that idols do not really exist in this world, had no problem eating food that was offered to an idol. What does Paul now suggest? Since the strong have knowledge, should they simply convince the weak of their knowledge? Or should the weak simply dictate to the strong what should be done by appealing to their conscience? First of all, Paul counsels the strong how they should deal with the weak: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor 8:1). This means the measure of their action should not be knowledge but love, because love builds up while knowledge does not.

Then comes the important caveat: “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him” (1 Cor 8:2f.). Knowledge itself is not sufficient for action, but knowledge grounded in God’s self-disclosure. We cannot love God on our own. Our love of God presupposes God’s love of us. The same is true about our knowledge of God. We cannot know God on our own. Our knowledge of God presupposes that God disclosed himself in Jesus Christ. Paul moves here from “knowing” to “loving,” because in his understanding once we know God, we do not know God as we know other items. Our faith is then totally dedicated to the service of God. For us knowledge is quite often theoretical knowledge. Yet in the Old Testament tradition in which Paul was raised, knowledge involves the whole human being as a husband knows his wife and vice versa. Knowledge is always paired with love. Out of the love of God then grows the power to love the neighbors. We love them as he loves us.

Therefore Paul can then counsel the strong: “But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause of them to fall” (1 Cor 8:12f.). Even if in my conscience eating this meat offered to an idol poses no problem, we should consider the other person, the weak one, and in this case simply

refrain from eating meat altogether. In bringing the discussion of the meat offered to idols to a conclusion, Paul corrects the Corinthian slogan: “All things are lawful” by adding “but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful,’ but not all things build up” (1 Cor 10:23). Paul here puts himself on the side of the strong and concedes that one certainly could eat meat offered to an idol. But he then injects: at what cost?

Paul suggests here that we should not seek our own advantage but that of the other. But he also does not think that the weak should simply set the agenda. He counsels that if something is set before us in the meal, then we could participate in the meal “without raising any question on the ground of conscience” (1 Cor 10:27). Then he continues: “But if someone says to you, ‘this has been offered in sacrifice,’ then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience” (1 Cor 10:28). This means, if we are explicitly alerted that the meat which had been left over from pagan sacrificial rites is consumed in a meal, then we should refrain from eating it. Paul goes here beyond the point made earlier that both the freedom of the strong and the problems of the conscience of the weak must be considered. He states that if we are alerted to something that we know is divisive in the Christian community then we should refrain from participating in it. Now for the Christian a situation has occurred in which his confession to Christ (*status confessionis*) is clearly indicated by not eating this kind of meat. The informer, most likely the pagan host, must get to know that Christians do not intentionally participate in that which is contrary to their faith. This kind of stance helps to distinguish the pagans from the Christian community and also helps in building-up of the whole Christian community. If there is no difference between the standards of the pagans from that of the Christians there is not reason why one should become a Christian and there is also no Christian distinctiveness. Paul advocates here neither the legalism of libertinism that love must rule supreme nor the legalism of law and order out of anxiety that we abandon our Christian standards. Rather he insists on a use of Christian freedom guided by love. If one voluntarily refrains from eating meat offered to an idol out of respect for the conscience of another person be it a pagan or a “weak” Christian, one does not renounce one’s freedom but uses this freedom in the service of love.

What does this have to do now with the recent ELCA decisions on human sexuality? We cannot, of course, transpose the issue of meat sacrificed to an idol word for word onto those issues regarding human sexuality. But we should be able to learn from Paul. Let us simply for the sake of comparison assume that those who are the strong are those who advocated the changes. Those who are the weak are those who oppose them. Sexual inclination does not imply an advantage or a disadvantage in relationship to God, since this is part of our disposition. Yet out of love for the weak brothers and sisters there should be a certain self-restraint, otherwise the building-up of the community is endangered. In the societal context both the weak and the strong can be together with persons of different sexual orientation. This means that we should welcome everybody into the Christian community and into our congregations and not first pose the question as to their sexual orientation. Yet if we are openly confronted with a sexual orientation that is contrary to the Christian tradition, then we should not hide our own Christian tradition simply for the sake of society. To maintain their “saltiness” and being “the light of the world” (Mt 5:13f.), Christians cannot adopt the standards of society without abandoning themselves. Moreover, while Lutherans are not bound to tradition but to Scripture alone, a new interpretation of Scripture which claims ambiguity where there was once clear insight is not a sufficient reason to abandon its ecumenically respected stance.

As Martin Luther struggled with many ideas that surfaced during the Reformation period, his principle was that innovations are not wrong just because they are innovations. But the proof must be on the one who presses for changes and not the one who holds on to tradition. The reason for this is not that there should be no changes. Indeed if the church does not want to become antiquated it must continually opt for changes. It must go with the times in its hymnody, its sermons, and its counseling, to name just a few items. But the decisive point is that of what motivates us to change. Here for Lutherans it cannot be anything but fidelity to the Word of God. If we compromise the Word of God and take our cues from the world, we betray our Lord Jesus Christ. Both Christians from other denominations and also many non-Christians know that Lutherans uphold the authority of Scripture, not to bow to a paper pope but to adhere to the living voice of the gospel. This witness we cannot abandon without ceasing to be Lutherans.

Moreover, we wonder whether those who pressed for changes with regard to our ecumenically honored standards of sexuality are really the strong, to refer again to Paul's controversy with the Christians in Corinth. It is telling that the Conference of Bishops of the ELCA in their October meeting requested another serious look at the changes which would have to be enacted. For instance, they were concerned whether the church would affirm those who for confessional or biblical reasons could not agree with the changes and whether a bishop's own conscience would also be taken into account. The presiding bishop even mentioned that for the ELCA it is a "rocky time." Therefore it seems up to the weak to show their Christian love by not giving up on church unity but at the same time not forfeiting their own stand. This would also mean that one could not support, financially or otherwise, actions and institutions which do not act in accordance with Scripture as it has been traditionally interpreted. If the so-called strong immediately point out that this would curb planting new congregations and would force them to withdraw mission personnel, one should carefully look at the proportion of the national budget that really goes into these endeavors. Furthermore one should also ask whether these new congregations and these missionaries would give an unmitigated witness to the gospel or would be as compromising as the recent ELCA decisions on human sexuality. Lutherans here have a responsibility not just to their own constituency but to their mission partners as well.

Being Christians we also have a responsibility to Christ. In Christ we are one body as Paul gets never tired of reminding us (1 Cor 10:17 and 1 Cor 12:12ff.). The weak and the strong are members of the same congregation and of the same *ecclesia*. Though Paul himself had his problems with Peter he would have never thought of severing his ties with Peter. They were one in Christ. As Paul, however cautioned, the strong cannot simply run over the weak or vice versa. To avoid such "democratic bullying" as occurred at the recent Assembly and also give an appropriate evangelical witness to the so-called strong, it would be advisable to follow many members of Lutheran CORE who advocate an independent non-geographic synod within the ELCA. This would provide an avenue of giving a decided evangelical witness without jeopardizing the unity of the church. I am reminded here of a colleague from the Lutheran Church of Bavaria who said: "We are not giving them the satisfaction of us leaving as long as they do not throw us out." Needless to say, this was also the stance of Martin Luther.

Let us not be like "a reed shaken by the wind" (Mt 11:7) and follow the trends of society instead of listening to the voice of our Lord. While the majority of the ELCA has fallen prey to the siren songs of society, we should follow the precedent of Martin Luther. He did not abandon his church as long as the church allowed him to work in it toward its reform.

Yet we should also not feel bound by decisions that tell us where our loyalties are. The unacceptable betrayal of Scripture alone forces us to a “state of confession,” not about so-called *adiaphora* which are introduced in the church for good order and for the church’s well-being, but about the validity of God’s word. Our loyalty belongs to our Lord alone, and therefore we can only support programs and actions which are in congruence with Holy Scripture and its honored and widely accepted interpretation. Since the Church exists wherever the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to the institution,<sup>4</sup> we have a mission within the ELCA that these constituent elements of the church are preserved and carried forth for the benefit of both church and society.

### 3. *Our conscience as the red flag not to trespass the law of life*

Especially with regard to the recent ELCA decisions concerning human sexuality, we must become conscientious objectors, because with these decisions the law of life has been trespassed. While it is indeed true that one should not act contrary to one’s own conscience, as Christians we are never just individual beings, but are part of the body of Christ. As Christians we do not just have a responsibility towards ourselves as individuals, but towards our brothers and sisters in Christ and beyond them to the whole global community.

Augustine had told us that a human being is self-centered, *homo incurvatus in se ipsum*. Therefore the human conscience of sinful humanity has its origin and goal in the autonomy of the own ego. Conscience in this sense mainly serves as a pious self-justification. The momentous change occurs once we realize that human existence is not to be taken for granted and that it is not autonomous. Just as life itself, human existence is a gift. Since the origin and goal of our human existence is God, only the unity with God can give our conscience a foundation and a direction which is beyond itself in the originator of life. Yet God is not only the originator, meaning the creator; God is also the sustainer and the redeemer. Since we encounter God in no other wise than in Jesus Christ, God in Christ becomes the origin and goal of our conscience. Thereby our conscience is freed from self-justification, and I realize that through Christ I am coordinated with all other Christians.

In the world-wide web of Christian unity, the twofold law of loving God and the neighbor as exemplified in the Ten Commandments, in the Sermon of the Mount, and in the admonitions of the Apostles, sensitizes us to the law of life. In his *Ethics* Dietrich Bonhoeffer even noted that with regard to the content of its inscribed law, the natural conscience shows surprising congruence with the conscience freed by Christ.<sup>5</sup> According to him this is due to the fact that in our conscience we are confronted with the survival of life itself. Therefore it contains the basic law of life even if that law is distorted by human sinfulness. Since for Christians Jesus Christ is now the master of our conscience and not we ourselves, we are summoned to follow Christ, not serving ourselves but serving others.

In the present situation of the ELCA, this would mean that we have a duty to preserve the autonomy which we have achieved by following Christ instead of abandoning ourselves to a heteronomy of the *Zeitgeist* and the winds of our time. Yet why would we say that following Christ and his precepts would yield autonomy, while following the world and its law would lead us into heteronomy? The answer is very simple: Jesus Christ is the only one who endows our finite life with life everlasting. This world and its laws, however, capitulate in front of death, at the most extending our time frame by a few years. Since with Christ there

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Augsburg Confession*, Article 7.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1966), 263.

is abundance, he will lead us to freedom, while with this world there is finitude, which leads to new strictures. This is also the deepest reason why Paul can affirm that Christians are already new creatures. They are supposed to listen to a different tune and order their lives accordingly. Yet the people of the old creation listen to the perishable siren songs of this world. Therefore it is indeed neither safe nor right to go against conscience, as long as this conscience is captive to the Word of God.