

A walk with Mr O (22)

In all good conscience

Mr O, I very much need to talk to you about my conscience.

Well, that's a pretty big subject. What do you know so far? And what is driving this sense of urgency?

I know that there is something inside me that tells me what is right and wrong, and urges me to do right. I know that when I disobey it I feel guilty, and when I obey it I get a sense of relief. I get what we call 'a clear conscience'.

All that sounds healthy. So where's your problem?

I know from the Bible that my conscience can't be a perfect judge. Sin has affected it, just as it has affected every other part of human nature. Seeing that it is obviously imperfect, how do I know when I should obey it and when I shouldn't?

Let me be blunt. You must never disobey your conscience. Not ever. Not even once. In his great defence at the Diet of Worms Martin Luther rightly said, 'To act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.' He knew, for example, that the apostle Paul had told Timothy that by failing to keep a good conscience we run the risk of abandoning the Christian faith altogether. That is because a constantly rejected conscience dies, and all hope of godliness dies with it.

That's strong stuff, Mr O. But I still don't understand. My conscience is not the Word of God. It is not infallible. So how can it be so very wrong to sometimes disobey it?

It's true that our conscience is not the Word of God. But it is the gift of God, and in His Word He requires us to inform it and teach it, so that what it says is entirely in line with that Word. That is why Luther,

in the same speech, says that his conscience is 'taken captive by God's word'.

I think I am beginning to get it. My conscience needs to be programmed. If it is not programmed correctly, it will malfunction and mislead me.

Yes, exactly. That is why in the New Testament we meet Christians who are 'weak'. Their consciences forbid them to do all sorts of things which are perfectly wholesome and godly – things which they are entirely free to enjoy. They can't understand their fellow-Christians who pursue those liberties. They know that if they themselves did those things they would violate their consciences, and therefore sin.

So if my conscience works overtime, I am 'weak'?

That's the word the Bible uses. It also talks about those who are 'strong'. They are believers whose consciences are better programmed and therefore more in line with God's Word. As they study the Bible these Christians see that God's way is to give us a minimum of law and a maximum of liberty. We are free to do anything as long as we are doing it prayerfully and with a view to giving the Lord pleasure.

And, of course, it is the Word of God which reveals what brings the Lord pleasure. But does anyone ever get it exactly right?

No, and that is something we must always bear in mind. It's possible to have a clear conscience and, at the same time, to be doing the wrong thing. That is why we must submissively expose our minds to Scripture throughout our lives.

And doesn't the Bible say something about restricting my liberty out of love for others? For example, if my Christian friend would violate his conscience by drinking any form of alcohol, aren't I expected to steer clear of beer and wine?

Thank you for reminding me about that. The New Testament says a lot about this, although the issue there was about eating meat which

had previously been offered to idols. It tells me that I don't have to restrict my liberty just because somebody else's conscience is limiting theirs. The only person I have to please is Christ. However, Christ is not pleased when my example actually results in a brother or sister acting against their conscience and ruining themselves. Nothing that I do should ever lead astray someone for whom Christ died.

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