

A Pastor's Conscience—Reflections on I Timothy 1:19

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Two major considerations prompted the preparation of this article. One of them was the desire to bring reassurance to the pastor who feels burdened in his conscience because he does not feel capable of doing all that is expected of him either by others or by himself, and because his performance does not in quality measure up to what he considers the ideal. That there are such pastors frequent occasions on which the writer during the course of years has been called upon to serve as a pastor's pastor have abundantly revealed. The other consideration which prompted the preparation of this article is concern for the preservation of the doctrinal and confessional heritage of our church which is jeopardized if pastors lose sensitivity of conscience in their personal sanctification.

Conscience itself, implanted in every human being in creation, is the arbiter which evaluates a man's thoughts, words, and actions in the light of God's law and renders either a favorable or an unfavorable verdict (Rom. 2:15). A good conscience is one which renders a favorable verdict. It may also become good when, even though it initially renders an unfavorable verdict, it is brought to realize that the guilt which it points out has been removed by God and therefore need no longer be pointed out. In another sense a good conscience is one which functions and has not allowed itself to become insensitive and callous because its voice has been repeatedly ignored (I Tim. 4:2).

The Burdened Conscience

Essentially a pastor's conscience is no different from that of any other Christian. It makes him painfully aware of the fact that in his past there have been thoughts, desires, words, and acts which violated God's holy law so that he too must plead with the Psalmist: "Remember not the sins of my youth, nor my transgressions" (25:7). It makes him realize that in each of his yesterdays, no matter how long he may have been in the ministry, there have been new sins so that he must include in his daily prayers the petition: "Forgive us our trespasses." A pastor can have a good conscience only because he believes that his prayer for forgiveness has been answered for Jesus' sake, that "the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (I John 1:7). With such a good conscience he ought always to be able to share the prophet's joy: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10).

Still one meets with pastors who seem to reflect less of the joy of salvation than one would wish them to show because their conscience is burdened and who to that extent do not seem to have a good conscience. What are some of the reasons for this phenomenon?

Some are plagued with a general sense of inadequacy. They feel that their sermons fall short of the homiletical ideal and they feel more a sense of drudgery than of power when they preach. When they teach their classes they sense that they are not instilling enthusiasm in all of those who sit before them. They cannot feel at ease with all whom they serve in their ministry of comfort. They are baffled because in some of their counseling sessions they cannot bring about the results for which they are aiming. In their outreach to the unchurched they meet with many disappointments.

What is the solution? Certainly we always want to do our best for the Lord. But doing our best means doing our best with the talents which He has entrusted to us, not doing what we might have been able to do if He had given us a greater measure of talents. The servant who with the two talents which had been entrusted to him gained two more received exactly the same approbation from his lord as the one who with the five talents which had been entrusted to him gained five more (Matt. 25:21,23). Furthermore we need to remember that the Lord does not hold us responsible for producing results, but only for sowing the seed and watering the plants: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase" (I Cor. 3:6). The solution is not to waste time and

energy in brooding, but to trust in the power of the Word even though it is dispensed from “earthen vessels” (II Cor. 4:7) and to keep at one’s assigned tasks prayerfully and diligently.

A pastor may be going his way quite happy because of the underlying joy of salvation and because he is busy at the tasks which the Lord has set before him. But then he hears a brother pastor preach a sermon beside which his own efforts seem to be woefully amateurish. Or he hears of another’s success in stimulating his congregation to greater efforts or in gaining new members. And of a sudden he feels oppressed by a sense of guilt because he is not accomplishing what others are. His conscience is burdened. But it is with what Staupitz would have called “painted sins.” What has been said above about being expected to operate only with the talents with which one has been entrusted applies here also. Paul labored more abundantly than all of the other apostles (I Cor. 15:10). But when he wrote that, he did not mean to imply that the others were guilty. He ascribed what he had been made able to do entirely to the grace of God. But that grace insofar as it supplies ability and capacity measures out what it bestows in varying degrees. “Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:7). It behooves each pastor to do what the measure of gifts which he has received enables him to do, not to measure his performance against that of another. Doing that he will avoid having an unnecessarily burdened conscience.

At times pastors feel guilty because they have so much unfinished work or neglected work. There are delinquent members who should be visited, prospects who should be followed up, there is private studying to do, but where to find the time? They know that they must devote time to their families, they feel the need for some recreation and for a vacation, but when they devote time to these purposes they feel all the more guilty because of their unfinished work.

There is no denying that a pastor needs to evaluate his priorities periodically and to scrutinize the efficiency of his work habits. But he must realize that his Lord doesn’t demand more than he is able to do, nor ought he. When our Lord Jesus said: “The night cometh, when no man can work” (John 9:4), He was taking it for granted that His Father has given men a time for rest. There is no guilt involved in using that time. Sometimes pastors assume too much responsibility. Without minimizing the importance of going after the straying sheep, it needs to be remembered that delinquent members have been instructed in the truths of the Word and acquainted with its warnings before being received into communicant membership. Furthermore if they were to attend services, they would hear the admonition and correction which they need. For a pastor to blame himself for their continuing delinquency because he has not found time to call on them is assuming too much. Granted that there appear to be more things to do than there is time for in a day and the pastor is hard-pressed to determine his priorities, he needs to remember that he does not walk alone. The resources of prayer are at His disposal and there is a special promise that a prayer for wisdom will be answered: “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jas. 1:5). The Lord has His way of getting us where He wants us to be and pressing upon our attention the tasks which He has for us to do. If He has given us a family, both the Fourth and the Sixth Commandment involve the duty of devoting time to one’s family. The example of Jesus hallows the time set apart for relaxation and vacationing: “He said unto them, Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while” (Mark 4:31).

Pastors are fallible. And they are sinful. So there will be sins also in their professional lives. Luther, indeed, is credited with saying that after a person preaches he need not pray the Fifth Petition. Once he has made sure that what he preaches is in accord with the Word of God, he need not apologize for anything that he has said. But otherwise “who can understand his errors?” (Ps. 19:12). A promise is made to a patient to come back soon and is forgotten in the rush of things until the pastor is notified that the patient has died. A counseling session is broken off because the pastor has lost his temper. Looking back over a given day the pastor realizes that he did waste time. Now his conscience bothers him, as it should. Satan comes with his attempt to blow up the sin into the unpardonable sin. What is to be done? “I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the Lord; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:5). “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Rom. 5:20). Thus the accusing voice of conscience is silenced and it again becomes a good science. The forgiven sinner may even dare to rejoice in the knowledge that the grace of God is so great that even though He

did not will the sin, He is able to use even it to promote growth (Rom. 8:28). Many a pastor is indeed a sadder, but also a wiser man because of a sin which he once committed in his professional life.

The Need for a Sensitive Conscience

Conscience has a direct function in preserving the purity of one's doctrinal position. Luther at Worms refused to recant because he was convinced that what he had written conformed to the Word of God. His conscience would not permit him to deviate from the standard of the Word by rejecting as error anything that agreed with the Word. So too we justify firm adherence to scriptural doctrine or practice by saying that our conscience is bound by the Word of God.

Our present interest, however, is the relation between keeping a good conscience in the area of sanctification, and doctrinal and confessional soundness. Keeping a good conscience, or as our translation has it "holding a good conscience," means remaining sensitive to the voice of conscience so that if it calls thoughts which occupy our minds sinful, they be put out of the mind; or if it renders a like verdict upon intended remarks or actions, the remarks are not made or the act performed. Keeping a good conscience also implies that if conscience does condemn thoughts, words, or acts which have occurred, repentance follows, including the determination not to repeat the offense. Keeping a good conscience means not carrying out an intention that admittedly is sinful. It means not seeking to minimize, excuse, or justify sins that have been committed, with the implication that there will be no hesitancy about doing the same thing again.

We should like to point out some of the specific dangers against which a pastor needs to be on his guard. There is drunkenness, the excessive use of alcohol. Alcohol and relaxation seem to go together. In itself there is nothing sinful if a pastor in social contacts with his people or with his brethren has a few drinks. But it is a different matter if he goes beyond a few, if not to the extent of becoming stone drunk, then at least to becoming uncontrolled in his speech or his conduct. It has happened. Even Isaiah in his day says of those whom the Lord had made watchmen over His people: "Come ye, say they, I will fetch wine, and we will fill ourselves with strong drink" (56:12). But the danger will increase as the end of the world draws near. Our Lord warns: "Be on guard, that your hearts may not be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness" (Luke 21:34, NASB). The pastor who practices and condones the abuse of alcohol is not keeping a good conscience.

Relaxation may be used as a justification for sins of the tongue. Profanity on the golf course or matching off-color stories are examples. So too reporting information which reflects unfavorably upon an absent brother. For a pastor to take a light view of such offenses on his part is not keeping a good conscience.

A pastor's conscience is in constant danger of losing its sensitivity to covetousness. It is a tragedy when he is forced to be burdened with financial problems because he is not provided with a salary which is adequate to meet his needs. On the other hand, however, he needs to watch that he does not remain unhappy even when his needs are met because he wants more than mere necessities. The Lord says: "Having food and raiment let us be therewith content" (I Tim. 6:8). When he begins to desire luxuries and is unhappy when he cannot afford them, or on the other hand finds inordinate joy in the luxuries which he can afford, he has begun to succumb to covetousness. This is also the case when he has been able to accumulate savings or investments, begins to look upon them as his security, and still wants more and more. This is the root meaning of *πλεονεξία*. Covetousness can be stimulated when pastors begin to compare salaries, perquisites, or fringe benefits. Covetousness is subtle, a single stirring of it may be hard to detect, but it becomes all the more necessary not to ignore the initial reactions of conscience lest by being ignored it no longer reacts to even an attitude which has crystallized.

The hardness, ruthlessness, and restlessness which are associated with full-blown covetousness are easy to observe in the manner of the devotees of gambling. The symptoms are not so marked in the case of those who gamble only occasionally. So it can happen that a pastor may be invited to gamble "for fun," "only for low stakes." But here too "sin lieth at the door" and keeping a good conscience involves keeping the door shut.

It is typical of sinful human nature to go to either one extreme or the other. We referred earlier to the fact that a pastor's conscience might be burdened with "painted sins" as he feels guilty about what he considers the inadequacy of his qualifications or performance. The opposite extreme is pride. There is real danger that a

pastor might fall into this sin. Well-meant words of appreciation for a sermon or a devotion with a patient might have the effect of inflating his ego so that he begins to consider himself a master. Outward results reflected in statistics or a successfully completed project may have the same effect. Boasting about his abilities and accomplishments may easily follow. Scripture warns against pride. A novice is not to be entrusted with the ministry “lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil” (I Tim. 3:6). There is the general warning following hard upon Peter’s admonition to elders: “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Pet. 5:5). As the pastor keeps such warnings in mind his conscience will be kept sensitive to note and condemn the first stirrings of pride.

Closely related to pride is the desire to dominate. The pastor’s position does require that he exercise leadership. When he speaks God’s Word for God, he has the right to expect that what he presents be accepted unequivocally. But it is easy for him to slip into considering himself the executive who issues orders to his subordinates instead of the servant of his people. It is easy for him to slip into looking upon his expertise as something which ought to be admired and catered to rather than as a gift to be used in the service of others. Our Lord Jesus pointed out the danger to His disciples: “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant” (Matt. 20:25–27). Words like these will help to keep a pastor’s conscience sensitive in recognizing and bridling any tendency in attitude or act to abuse the position of leadership which the Lord has entrusted to him.

We shall close our list of examples of sins concerning which a pastor will endeavor to keep a good conscience by mentioning worry. Worrying is by no means a sin upon which pastors have a monopoly, but it is a sin into which they too can easily fall. When contributions fall short of meeting budgetary requirements, when church councils or committees are slow in carrying out their assignments, when he sees widespread evidence of indifference, a pastor may easily begin to worry about the future of his congregation. The line of demarcation between justifiable concern and sinful worrying is fine. All the more reason is there for a pastor’s conscience to make itself heard when the line is crossed and for the pastor not to attempt to still the voice of his conscience by seeking to excuse or justify worrying on his part.

In the foregoing we have moved from referring to sins which are more evident to those which are more subtle. A pastor’s conscience ought to be quick to react to the more evident sins if it is a good conscience. If, however, even in these cases conscience is ignored with the result that a good conscience is no longer kept, the prospect is even more remote that it will remain good in the case of what we have called the more subtle sins. In the New Testament we learn to know Timothy as a sensitive soul whom Paul treated as an understanding father would treat a conscientious son. Still Paul admonishes even Timothy to keep a good conscience. This observation is enough to indicate that every pastor needs the same admonition lest he begin to excuse, defend, or justify any sin and by rendering his conscience callous in that way prevent it from performing the function which the Lord intended it to perform and cease to be a good conscience.

As indicated at the outset, we have a practical reason for presenting an article which discusses the need for pastors to keep a good conscience. While we in no wise wish to ignore the implications of the universal priesthood of all believers, we shall have to recognize that pastors do have a peculiar responsibility in preserving the doctrinal heritage of the church. The context in which Paul speaks about keeping a good conscience shows that there is but one step from losing a good conscience to losing doctrinal purity. For he refers to some who having put away a good conscience “concerning faith have made shipwreck.” Here the original has the definite article with the word “faith.” We agree that there can be no rigid demarcation between “the faith” as being the truth to which faith holds, and “the faith” as personal trust in that truth and the Savior about whom it centers. Nevertheless in some contexts the one or the other facet is more prominent. In this context “the faith” seems first of all to mean the teaching, the truth, to which faith clings. So once men stop having a good conscience, it won’t be long before they lose the truth. Without this objective foundation faith in their hearts will not long survive but in their inner life go down with the ship of the truth.

The interrelation between the two processes is not hard to trace. What happens, for example, when I find satisfaction in telling or listening to dirty stories? The Lord's will in this matter is quite clear: "Let...not be once named among you, as becometh saints...filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting" (Eph. 5:3,4). But I justify my practice by saying that for me dirty stories are just a form of humor, and humor is good relaxation. My conscience may object, but I ignore it. To that extent it is no longer good, no longer holding me back from sin. But when I by silencing the voice of my conscience ignore and cheapen the authority of the Word in one area, the old principle operates: "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (I Cor. 5:6). I may still do lip service to the truth, but my motives are no longer right. If what the Lord says about One matter is not precious to me, why should what He says about others? If I can ignore the Word in one area because I argue that it is to my advantage to do so, I shall be equally ready to surrender other truths if I in any way consider it to be to my advantage to do so. Love for the Lord has been replaced by love for self, and Satan will be quick to capitalize upon the breach in my defenses.

In our generation we have seen an avalanching of doctrinal deterioration even in Lutheran circles. More than one anxious soul has asked how long it will be before our synod is sucked into the maelstrom. As indicated at the outset one of the concerns which led to the preparation of this article was to point out one of the areas in which we need go take heed unto ourselves. Certainly we shall want to watch our every doctrinal pronouncement to make sure that it lines up squarely with God's Word, neither adding to nor subtracting from it. But we shall also have to guard our rear. By this we mean that we need pastors who will hold faith and a good conscience. A pastor who does not keep a good conscience cannot wholeheartedly contend for all of the truths of God's Word, for in his own heart he has already surrendered one or more parts of it. When more pastors are in the same condemnation and have found kindred spirits in one another, they will not be able with the right motivation to contend for a firm position on the Word and in the Word on the part of their synod. Sooner or later, if it becomes expedient to surrender something of the truth, they will do so, justifying their course by the same type of argumentation with which they have justified their own previous deviation from the Word and stopped keeping a good conscience.

Lange in his commentary on I Timothy 1:19 makes this comment: "As unbelief nearly always leads either to grosser or more refined immorality, so not rarely it begins from an immoral ground, at least when faith existed before."

May the Lord grant unto us from generation to generation pastors who will experience the joy and demonstrate the power of keeping a good conscience.