

Faith and Good Conscience

Service guests at the Minneapolis New Year's services on Saturday evening January 2 discussed preserving faith. Visiting speaker Don Lahti presented *Keep Faith and a Good Conscience*, an introduction written and presented by Jon Bloomquist at the 1998 Phoenix Winter Services.

The discussion was based on the words of Apostle Paul to his coworker: "This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightiest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." (1 Tim. 1:18,19)

Faith and Conscience

The introduction brought out that the significant connection between faith and conscience touches salvation and eternal life. Every person has a conscience with which to distinguish right and wrong. It guides and judges. It urges us to do what is right and forbids us to do wrong. It also rebukes for what it judges as wrong. Conscience is a gift from God, but it is influenced by environment, training, habits, and education. This influence explains the differing standards of conduct in our world.

A Christian conscience is bound to the Word of God. While conscience is a personal knowledge of right and wrong, it is also the broader concept that a Christian has the same understanding as God's congregation. When traveling with a conscience guided by God's Word in harmony with His congregation, one is secure.

When one heeds his conscience and puts sin away, he enjoys what Apostle Paul calls a "good conscience." A good conscience does not accuse, and its bearer knows heaven on earth. But a conscience hardens if it is ignored and is allowed to become a reservoir for sin—understanding is clouded and eventually lost. Paul says, disdain for or neglect of the care of the conscience causes spiritual death.

Armor against Sin

Apostle Paul also identifies the "armor" for the fight against sin and temptation: truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, hope, and the Word of God. In his letter to the Ephesians, he also tells them to pray. Prayer is a part of our life and it helps us avoid temptation. Paul also instructs us not to be "unequally yoked" with the unbelieving.

The presentation went on to say, that once we have committed sin, our conscience---if it is operating properly---accuses us of sin and rebukes us, urges us to repent. God has granted us a special privilege and gift, a means by which we are able to cleanse and comfort our conscience, namely, confession. Private confession has been given for the care of individual consciences and has two parts: our confession and the absolution proclaimed by the confessor. Absolution is the most important part; we should not focus on our words, but on the words of absolution.

We are not saved by confession, but by faith in Jesus Christ. It is not even possible for us to confess all our sins since we don't even know them all. Confession strengthens our faith by assuring us that particular sins are forgiven. Luther says of confession "the devil would have slain me long ago, if confession had not sustained me." The proper use of confession is the care and comfort of our conscience. If it becomes a required work it does not comfort but rather enslaves the conscience.

A person's conscience may become so hardened that he will confess sins only when caught in the act. If repentance becomes a means to escape an unpleasant situation, it will not have any benefit. It is the act of repentance without the grace of repentance.

Some people have wrongly claimed that it is not necessary to care for offenses between brethren if one simply believes the general gospel. God's Word, however, requires this kind of caring. Jesus said, "Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt. 5:23,24)

Several Points Discussed

During the discussion, several points were considered. We were reminded that the Holy Spirit warns us not to commit sin and that the wages of sin is death. We travel on the narrow way of life and our goal is one day to reach heaven's home. We often find ourselves so sinful that we doubt whether we can get there. Our faith is like a flickering candle.

One young brother likened travel with a troubled conscience to a hiker with a backpack. If that backpack gets overloaded, the hiker's legs become rubbery, he starts stumbling and eventually falls so hard that he cannot get up anymore. Believing the gospel is like taking off that heavy backpack.

We do not need to compose a perfect confession but just to utter the words that come to us and believe the absolution. The cleansing of the gospel is a grace privilege, not a merit.

It is good to study God's Word and hold discussions like the evening in Minneapolis. Poor memories are refreshed and reminded of the importance of keeping faith and a good conscience.