

Natural Law and the Conscience

by Greg Loren Durand



The first chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans teaches that, even in the absence of special revelation, fallen man not only knows that the true God exists (verses 20-21), but he also knows that this God has an absolute moral standard which binds all mankind and to which is attached the penalty of death for disobedience (verse 32). This "natural law" serves to "sufficiently instruct in a right course of conduct" and to "render man inexcusable" for failing in that course, thus subjecting him to a "righteous condemnation."¹ In other words, men are aware that there is a Covenant of Works because the "work of the law" has been "written in their heart" (Romans 2:15). This assertion is proven by the fact that every human religion is a manifestation, in one form or another, of a works-based system

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Book II, Chapter 2:22. See also John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), page 202; Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1850), pages 337-338.

of righteousness. Even the most primitive savage has a concept of an offended deity whose wrath he fears and whose favor he seeks to reclaim through good works, rituals, or even sacrifice.

The subject of which Paul wrote in verses 18 and 19 of the first chapter, and also in verses 14 and 15 of the second chapter, is the *conscience* – a word derived from the Latin *com* (with) and *scire* (to know or to discern). A man with a conscience is therefore a man “with knowledge.” Commonly referred to as “God’s vicegerent in the soul,”² the conscience is “the faculty by which [man] perceives the moral effect of actions in Time in reference to their results upon himself in Eternity. It is that sense which over and above the idea of Right and Wrong, has with it the idea of duty, the sense that it is right, and proper, and suitable to act this way, and not that; and the sense that if we do this way, then are we to be declared just; if we do that way, then are we to be declared unrighteous. That it is the sense of Duty and of Responsibility.”³ The function of the conscience is threefold: “The first is Prohibitory. ‘This act thou shouldest not do.’ The second, Recording. ‘This act I have done.’ The third is Prophetic. ‘Therefore for this act I am responsible’ The Prohibitory has reference to the Present; the Recording to the Past; the Prophetic to the Future.”⁴ It is there-

2. John Flavel, *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel* (Glasgow, Scotland: John Orr, 1754), Volume II, page 74; Thomas Watson, *A Body of Practical Divinity in a Series of Sermons on the Shorter Catechism* (Aberdeen, Scotland: George King, 1838), page 48; Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards* (New York: Leavitt and Allen, 1852), Volume IV, page 458.

3. William Adams, *The Elements of Christian Science: A Treatise Upon Moral Philosophy and Practice* (Philadelphia: H. Hooker, 1850), page 78.

4. Adams, *ibid.*, page 81.

fore the agent of the Covenant of Works, setting forth the moral standard, informing man that he has failed to meet this standard, and declaring that he stands before his Creator in a state of condemnation as a result of that failure. William Shakespeare put it thusly: "My conscience hath a thousand several tongues; and every tongue brings in a several tale; and every tale condemns me for a villain." Conscience may at times slumber, but it is awakened by the Spirit of God through the instrumentality of the moral law in the myriad of ways it is brought to man's attention, and again the conscience pronounces its judgment against sin (John 16:8; Romans 7:9). John Calvin wrote:

That there exists in the human mind and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service. Certainly, if there is any quarter where it may be supposed that God is unknown, the most likely for such an instance to exist is among the dumbest tribes farthest removed from civilisation. But, as a heathen tells us, there is no nation so barbarous, no race so brutish, as not to be imbued with the conviction that there is a God. Even those who, in other respects, seem to differ least from the lower animals, constantly retain some sense of religion; so thoroughly has this common conviction possessed the mind, so firmly is it stamped on the breasts of all men. Since, then, there never has been, from the very first, any quarter of the

globe, any city, any household even, without religion, amounts to a tacit confession, that a sense of Deity is inscribed on every heart.⁵

According to Calvin, the ability to investigate the “divine perfections” of God “is common both to those within and to those without the pale of the Church.”⁶ However, through his conscience, the unregenerate man can only know God as his Judge. Inheriting original sin from Adam, and worsening his condition by his own actual sins (Romans 5:12-19), the sinner is always running away from his Creator (Genesis 3:7-10; Revelation 6:15-17), and yet at every turn, God thunders out His judgments through the faculty of his own conscience (Romans 2:14-15). Indeed, there is a civil war raging within the unbeliever in which his depraved will compels him to indulge his sinful passions in opposition to the authority of conscience (John 8:34; Romans 6:16). In fact, the obstinate sinner will spend his entire life attempting to silence the voice of his conscience⁷ – to suppress the righteousness of God (Romans 1:18) – and in this effort he will only be successful if abandoned by God to his own lusts (Romans 1:28). The traditional Reformed doctrine of common grace enters at this point to teach that all men are not as evil as they could or would be because God inhibits such efforts to render the conscience inactive.⁸ Man longs for autonomy (Psalm 2:1-3), and often may behave as

5. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chapter 3:1.

6. Calvin, *ibid.*, Book I, Chapter 3:6.

7. Hermann Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (London: R. Baynes, 1822), Book III, Chapter 12:20.

8. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 2:3.

though he has achieved it.⁹ However, his own conscience – the ever-present voice of God’s moral law¹⁰ – acts as a barrier to the realization of his desire, preventing him from giving full vent to his depravity.¹¹

As Thomas Boston wrote, “[Sinners] are driven from sin, and to their duty, by the fear of hell and wrath, rather than drawn from the one to the other by any hatred of the one, and love of the other, in themselves.... It is the influence of the covenant of works in its terrible sanction, that moves them.”¹² The utter impossibility of escaping God’s presence should lead the sinner to repentance (Psalm 139:7), but, if left to himself, he will instead respond by hating his perceived tormenter (Job 21:14), and will either manufacture a deity to suit his lusts (Isaiah 2:8),¹³ or attempt to persuade himself that no deity exists at all

9. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, Book I, Chapter 5:94.

10. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 2:22.

11. It seems that this common grace was largely absent in the antedeluvian period, and as a result, the world was plunged into such moral chaos that its complete destruction was necessary. With the exception of Noah and his family, the entire human race at that time was a living illustration of Paul’s doctrine of reprobation in Romans 1:18-32.

12. Thomas Boston, “A View of the Covenant of Works From the Sacred Records,” in Samuel M’Millan (editor), *The Complete Works of the Late Thomas Boston* (London: William Tegg and Company, 1853), Volume II, page 273.

13. “Every individual mind being a kind of labyrinth, it is no wonder, not only that each nation has adopted a variety of fictions, but that almost every man has had his own god. To the darkness of ignorance have been added presumption and wantonness, and hence there is scarcely an individual to be found without some idol or phantom as a substitute for Deity. Like water gushing forth from a large and copious spring, immense crowds of gods have issued from the human mind, every man giving

(Psalm 14:1).¹⁴ The unregenerate man is therefore rendered unable to hear God's merciful offer of forgiveness as it is declared in the Gospel (Romans 10:21) and unable to trust in Christ for salvation (John 6:44, 10:26).

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himself full license, and devising some peculiar form of divinity, to meet his own views" (Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chapter 5:10).

14. "Atheism is the wish of a wicked heart, rather than the conviction of the intelligent mind" (Jared Bell Waterbury, *The Child of the Covenant* [Boston: T.R. Marvin and S.K. Whipple and Company, 1855], page 70).