

THE DECAY OF CONSCIENCE

by

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I believe it is a fact generally admitted that there is much less conscience manifested, by men and women, in nearly all the walks of life, than there was forty years ago. There is justly much complaint of this, and there seems to be but little prospect of reformation. The rings and frauds and villainies in high and low places, among all ranks of men, are most alarming, and one is almost compelled to ask: "Can nobody be safely trusted?" Now, what is the cause of this degeneracy? Doubtless there are many causes that contribute more or less directly to it; but I am persuaded that the fault is more in the ministry and public press than in any and all things else. It has been fashionable now for many years to ridicule and decry Puritanism. Ministers have ceased, in a great measure, to probe the consciences of men with the spiritual law of God. So far as my knowledge extends, there has been a great letting down and ignoring the searching claims of God's law, as revealed in his Word. This law is the only standard of true morality. "By the law is the knowledge of sin." The law is the quickener of the human conscience. Just in proportion as the spirituality of the law of God is kept out of view will there be manifest a decay of conscience. This must be the inevitable result. Let ministers ridicule Puritanism, attempt to preach the Gospel without thoroughly probing the conscience with the divine law, and this must result in, at least, a partial paralysis of the moral sense. The error that lies at the foundation of this decay of individual and public conscience originates, no doubt, in the pulpit. The proper guardians of the public conscience have, I fear, very much neglected to expound and insist upon obedience to the moral law. It is plain that some of our most popular preachers are phrenologists. Phrenology has no organ of free will. Hence, it has no moral agency, no moral law and moral obligation in any proper sense of these terms. A consistent phrenologist can have no proper ideas of moral obligation, of moral guilt, blameworthiness, and retribution. Some years since, a brother of one of our most popular preachers heard me preach on the text "Be ye reconciled to God." I went on to show, among other things, that being reconciled to God implied being reconciled to the execution of his law. He called on me the next morning, and among other things said that neither himself nor two of his brothers, whom he named, all preachers, had naturally any conscience. "We have," said he, "no such ideas in our minds of sin, guilt, justice and retribution as you and father have." "We cannot preach as you do on those subjects." He continued: "I am striving to cultivate a conscience, and think I begin to understand what it is." ["]But naturally neither I nor the two brothers I have named have any conscience." Now, these three ministers have repeatedly appeared in their writings before the public. I have read much that they have written and not infrequently the sermons of one of them, and have been struck with the manifest want of conscience in his sermons and writings. He is a phrenologist, and, hence, he has in his theological views no free will, no moral agency, and nothing that is really a logical result of free will and moral agency. He can ridicule Puritanism and the great doctrines of the Orthodox faith; and, indeed, his whole teaching, so far as it has fallen under my eye, most lamentably shows the want of moral discrimination. I should judge from his writings that the true ideas of moral depravity, guilt, and ill-desert, in the true acceptation of those terms, have no place in his mind. Indeed, as a consistent phrenologist, such ideas have no right to be in his mind. They are necessarily excluded by his philosophy. I do not know how extensively phrenology has poisoned the minds of ministers of different denominations; but I have observed with pain that many ministers who write for the public press fail to reach the consciences of men. They fail to go to the bottom of the matter and insist upon obedience to the moral law as alone acceptable to God. They seem to me to "make void the law through faith." They seem to hold up a different standard from that which is inculcated in Christ's Sermon on the Mount, which was Christ's exposition of the moral law. Christ expressly taught in that sermon that there was no salvation without conformity to the rule of life laid down in that sermon. True faith in Christ will always and inevitably beget a holy life. But I fear it has become fashionable to preach what amounts to an antinomian gospel. The rule of life promulgated in the Gospel is precisely that of the moral law. These four things are expressly affirmed of true faith, of the faith of the Gospel:

- 1st. "It establishes the law."
- 2d. "It works by love."
- 3d. "It purifies the heart."

4th. "It overcomes the world."

These are but different forms of affirming that true faith does, as a matter of fact, produce a holy life. If it did not, it would "make void the law." The true Gospel is not preached where obedience to the moral law as the only rule of life is not insisted upon. Wherever there is a failure to do this in the instructions of any pulpit it will inevitably be seen that the hearers of such a mutilated Gospel will have very little conscience. We need more Boanerges or sons of thunder in the pulpit. We need men that will flash forth the law of God like livid lightning and arouse the consciences of men. We need more Puritanism in the pulpit. To be sure, some of the Puritans were extremists. But still under their teaching there was a very different state of the individual and public conscience from what exists in these days. Those old, stern, grand vindicators of the government of God would have thundered and lightened till they had almost demolished their pulpits if any such immoralities had shown themselves under their instructions as are common in these days. In a great measure the periodical press takes its tone from the pulpit. The universal literature of the present day shows conclusively that the moral sense of the people needs toning up, and some of our most fascinating preachers have become the favorites of infidels, skeptics of every grade, Universalists, and the most abandoned characters. And has the offense of the Cross ceased, or is the Cross kept out of view? Has the holy law of God, with its stringent precept and its awful penalty become popular with unconverted men and women? Or is it ignored in the pulpit, and the preacher praised for that neglect of duty for which he should be despised? I believe the only possible way to arrest this downward tendency in private and public morals is the holding up from the pulpits in this land, with unsparing faithfulness, the whole Gospel of God, including as the only rule of life the perfect and holy law of God.

The holding up of this law will reveal the moral depravity of the heart, and the holding forth of the cleansing blood of Christ will cleanse the heart from sin. My beloved brethren in the ministry, is there not a great want in the public inculcations of the pulpit upon this subject? We are set for the defense of the blessed Gospel and for the vindication of God's holy law. I pray you let us probe the consciences of our hearers, let us thunder forth the law and Gospel of God until our voices reach the capital of this nation, through our representatives in Congress. It is now very common for the secular papers even to publish extracts of sermons. Let us give the reporters of the press such work to do as will make their ears and the ears of their readers tingle. Let our railroad rings, our stock gamblers, our officials of every grade hear from its pulpit, if they come within the sound, such wholesome Puritanical preaching as will arouse them to better thoughts and a better life. Away with this milk-and-water preaching of a love of Christ that has no holiness or moral discrimination in it. Away with preaching a love of God that is not angry with sinners every day. Away with preaching a Christ not crucified for sin.

Christ crucified for the sins of the world is the Christ that the people need. Let us rid ourselves of the just imputation of neglecting to preach the law of God until the consciences of men are asleep. Such a collapse of conscience in this land could never have existed if the Puritan element in our preaching had not in great measure fallen out.

Some years ago I was preaching in a congregation whose pastor had died some months before. He seemed to have been almost universally popular with his church and with the community. His church seemed to have almost idolized him. Everybody was speaking in his praise and holding him up as an example; and yet both the church and the community clearly demonstrated that they had had an unfaithful minister, a man who loved and sought the applause of his people. I heard so much of his inculcation and saw so much of the legitimate fruits of his teachings that I felt constrained to tell the people from the pulpit that they had had an unfaithful minister; that such fruits as were apparent on every side, both within and without the church, could never have resulted from a faithful presentation of the Gospel. This assertion would, doubtless, have greatly shocked them had it been made under other circumstances; but, as the way had been prepared, they did not seem disposed to gainsay it.

Brethren, our preaching will bear its legitimate fruits. If immorality prevails in the land, the fault is ours in a great degree. If there is a decay of conscience, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the public press lacks moral discrimination, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the church is degenerate and worldly, the pulpit is responsible for it. If the world loses its interest in religion, the pulpit is responsible for it. If Satan rules in our halls of legislation, the pulpit is responsible for it. If our politics become so corrupt that the very foundations of our government are ready to fall away, the pulpit is responsible for it. Let us not ignore this fact, my dear brethren; but let us lay it to heart, and be thoroughly awake to our responsibility in respect to the morals of this nation.