



Remarks Concerning “Bound Conscience” presented to the 2009 Churchwide Assembly by the Rev. Dr. Timothy J. Wengert

One of the greatest legacies that the early Lutheran reformers bestowed upon the entire Christian church is what we are calling “respect for the bound conscience of the neighbor.” This notion came up in several different contexts in Martin Luther’s own lifetime. Thus, when standing before the Emperor, confessing his faith in 1521, Luther begged his accusers to show him from Scripture and clear reason that he was wrong, but if they could not, his conscience was bound to the Scripture passages about God’s mercy in Christ. But Luther had already made the same plea in October 1518, when he stood in Augsburg before the pope’s representative, Cardinal Cajetan. It is there that we discover that this appeal to the Cardinal to deal with him mercifully was actually an appeal to Luther’s pastoral and spiritual superior not to violate his conscience by merely dismissing his arguments and what he held to be central to the Christian faith.

There is a second way in which “the bound conscience” came up in the Reformation and it dealt with very specific practical, ethical dilemmas, similar in some ways to those dealt with by St. Paul in Romans and 1 Corinthians. The reformers knew that they could not simply act like the pope and decree that people obey them. Indeed, while Luther was in protective custody at the Wartburg Castle, the Wittenbergers attempted a coercive approach to Reform, making people do things that violated their conscience, including forcing lay people to receive both bread and wine at communion. Luther came back and, not by force but by persuasive preaching, got the Wittenberg church to respect those who were not at the same place as they were. As a result, communion in one kind remained an option for the churches in Saxony for fifteen years after the time Luther returned home. Later in his ministry, Luther addressed other issues, including war and peace, or marriage and divorce, using the same appeal to balance, fairness, and pastoral care.

Now, we could view Paul’s comments about meat sacrificed to idols or Luther’s problem with the laity receiving bread and wine as minor things. In the first instance, the question was whether such behavior broke the first commandment, not to worship other gods—hardly a small matter—and in the second instance it had to do with Luther being willing to set aside a command of Christ (“Drink of this ALL of you!”) for the sake of conscience. These are small things now precisely because these pastors of the church treated all consciences with respect.

We find echoes of this principle in the Augsburg Confession, in the discussion of fasting. The reformers outline their reasons for overturning the prevalent rules about fasting for several different reasons: the rules obscured Christ’s grace, they confused human practices for God’s commands to care for the neighbor, and, “In the third place, such traditions turned out to be a heavy burden to consciences. For it was not possible to keep all the traditions, and yet people thought that keeping them was required for true service to God. Gerson writes that many fell into despair doing this. Some even committed suicide because they had heard nothing about the comfort of Christ’s grace.” As important as the first two reasons were, the confessors insisted that *consciences* also needed care and respect from the entire church.

It is precisely this concern that lies at the heart of our proposal. Respect for the bound conscience does not mean that one can simply declare one’s conscience to be bound to a particular interpretation of Scripture, and then make everybody else deal with it. Respecting bound conscience is not a form of selfishness or an excuse to sin. Instead, it means that the very people who hold different, opposing viewpoints on a particular moral issue based upon their understanding of Scripture, tradition and reason must recognize the bound conscience of the other, of their neighbor who disagrees with them, and then work in such ways as not to cause that other person to reject the faith and fellowship in Word and Sacrament.