
“Having their conscience seared with a hot iron”

A reprint from *The ENJOY THE BIBLE QUARTERLY* — 1997, 3rd Quarter

— Keith R. Blades

The conscience is a fascinating part of our soul/spirit complex. Simply stated, it is the faculty of our inner man by which we judge what is right and wrong, or make value judgments. It operates on information that we accept as authoritative, coming from an authority that we acknowledge has the right to tell us what is right and what is wrong. The development and operation of our conscience begins early. As a child we learn from parental authority what is right and wrong. A system of norms and standards takes shape in our mentality and we evaluate what is right and wrong on the basis of it. During adolescence as the maturing process of our conscience advances on and preparations are begun for independent living, we begin to desire to exercise our conscience in an independent and responsible manner. With adulthood comes the fully mature, independent, and responsible operation of the conscience. As an adult, therefore, we occupy the position of accepting full responsibility for our actions and for the testimony of our conscience.

Now this is not the beginning of a treatise on the intricacies of the function of the conscience. Far from it. However, for us in this dispensation of grace, it is essential to understand and appreciate the basics of what our conscience is and the fundamental way it functions. This is because the function of our conscience is a very big issue in this dispensation, as we will note. But in particular, for the purpose of this article, we need to appreciate the function of the conscience if we are to understand the spiritual disaster and danger Paul describes when he refers to ones who have their “*conscience seared with a hot iron.*”

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils;

Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron;

Forbidding to marry, *and commanding* to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth.

(1 Timothy 4:1-3)

As Paul declares here, as well as throughout the Pastoral epistles, this dispensation of grace is going to be dominated by the effective operations of the Satanic policy of evil. Instead of sound Bible doctrine prevailing and the knowledge of the truth of what God is doing in this dispensation holding sway among Christians, the opposite will be the case. Unsound doctrine is actually going to dominate. Bible mishandling and misapplication is going to be the norm. The confusing of God’s program for Israel with His program for us in this dispensation of grace is going to prevail, as people not only fail to “rightly divide the word of truth,” but actually outright refuse to do so. And this they will do because of the effective operations of the Satanic policy of evil, as it victimizes Christians and successfully convinces them to believe “doctrines of devils” rather than the truth for and about this dispensation.

There are a number of facets to the reason for the success Satan’s policy of evil will have. Yet one issue is particularly cited in this passage for its integral role in Satan’s success. It is the issue of the conscience. But not a properly functioning conscience, you will note. Rather, one that

malfunctions because it has suffered injury and destructive damage. One that is in a state of spiritual disaster due to a spiritual "hot iron" being effectively applied to it.

In order to understand this issue, and the value Satan sees in producing a 'seared conscience,' we must first appreciate God's design for our conscience, especially in this dispensation of grace.

The Conscience in this Dispensation

As a quick glance at a concordance shows, the conscience is spoken about more by the Apostle Paul than by any one else in the Bible. In fact, it is almost exclusively a subject confined to Paul's epistles. And this really should come as no surprise. In view of how God is dealing with us today in this dispensation, it is natural for Him to make a very big issue out of our conscience and its operations.

In Galatians 4, for example, Paul teaches us that in this dispensation of grace we have received "the adoption of sons." Hence, God is dealing with us today as adult "sons" and not as "children." We are not being dealt with by God as He had dealt with Israel in time past, when He dealt with them as "children" using the "tutors and governors" operation of the Law and also keeping them in bondage to "the elements of the world." Instead, in this dispensation as "sons" we possess operations of God that are consistent with adulthood. We, therefore, are "under grace" and possess the "Spirit of adoption," by whom we are to be "led" as He operates in a very special way in our inner man.

Now since God has given us the "adoption of sons" and is dealing with us as adults, He is consequently dealing with us as ones with whom the mature operation of the mind and conscience is to be the norm. The mature operation of the mind and conscience are a natural part of adulthood. This being the case, in this dispensation the Spirit of God and the written

word of God function in a way that is in accordance with adulthood.

The written word of God to us is to be recognized by us as our final and sole authority. In connection with this, the Spirit of God who indwells us takes the word of God and through edification makes it the life of our mentality, which is what God has designed for it to be with us as "sons." Our minds, therefore, are to be "renewed" by the effectual working of the written word of God, just as Paul says, for example, in Romans 12:2.

And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is* that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

(Romans 12:2)

With the renewing of our mind the Holy Spirit takes the authoritative written word of God to us and educates us particularly in the knowledge of what God values and esteems. Our thinking, along with the norms and standards of our conscience, are adjusted by the authority of the written word of God to us and brought into conformity with it. We are then able to think about things as God does, know how to do things God's way, and labor with God in what He is doing. The word of God through the Spirit of God becomes the life of our inner man, particularly the vitality of our conscience. As such, therefore, we possess and are to operate solely upon the authoritative knowledge of what God says is right; what He says is truth; what He says He is doing, and the like.

In connection with this, as Paul declared to the saints in Corinth, we too are to realize that we are,...

...the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

(II Corinthians 3:3)

As "the epistle of Christ," the Lord's very own words to us are written upon the "tables of (our) heart" by the Holy Spirit through the process of edification. They are made living components of our heart, of our inner man and all its workings. As that epistle is written, the words of the Lord's mind and thinking become the material of our minds and thinking. Hence, as "sons" our hearts and minds can actually function in the very way God originally designed for the heart and mind of man to function — one-minded with His own heart and mind through the possession and effectual working of His very words within us.

Now it is in a mind that acknowledges the power and authority of the written word of God, and a conscience that operates on it, that all of this can be accomplished.

Competing Authorities

The Adversary is well aware that God is dealing with us as adult "sons" in this dispensation and he knows what that means. He understands far better than most Christians do, the role the written word of God is to have in the believer's life. In connection with this, one of the major strategic maneuvers of the Satanic policy of evil today is the establishment of competing authorities. That is, the establishment of other entities as authoritative, which are designed to directly compete with the authoritative declarations of the written word of God to us today in this dispensation. Through the operation of these competing authorities the design of the policy of evil is to supplant the written word of God as the final and sole authority. It seeks to undermine the authority of the written word of God in the believer's conscience and replace it with another authority. One that is considered by the believer to be at least equal to, if not greater than, the written word of God. This being done, Satan's ultimate goal can easily be achieved, which is to produce doctrinal corruption in the mind of the believer by having Satan's "winds of doctrine" and "doctrines of devils" accepted for the truth.

The effectual establishment of a competing authority is what Paul describes in I Timothy 4 when he refers to ones "having their conscience seared with a hot iron."

In teaching us about the Satanic policy of evil, the Apostle Paul describes a number of these competing authorities. Among them are the issues of: respected personages (II Cor. 11:1ff); forceful leaders (I Cor. 4:18-20); traditions (Col. 2:8); philosophy (Col. 2:8); science falsely so called (I Tim. 6:20-21); popularity (II Cor. 11:1ff); customs (I Cor. 11:16); dictates of society (I Cor. 4:8ff); strong ones in the faith (I Cor. 8:10-11); etc. Though each of these can be highly successful as a competing authority, there is one kind that excels at supplanting the authority of the written word of God in believers' lives. This is the authority of *subjective experience*.

Subjective Experience

Subjective experience can involve any experience in which a person's senses, feelings, or emotions play a part. However, we are concerned primarily with the subjective experience of spiritual phenomena. That is experiences either participated in, witnessed, or confronted with, which convince a person that God, or a spiritual being, has been at work. Such experiences would include witnessing or being involved in: a miracle; the giving of a sign; the operation of a spiritual gift; receiving a revelation from God; receiving the ministry of an angel; having a vision or dream from God; being transported by the Spirit of God; and the like.

Subjective experience is highly influential, especially when the experience is attributed to God's working. The power of such experiences to convince someone that God is at work, is something with which Satan is well familiar. Because of this, Satan has always been involved in counterfeiting the power of God with his own spiritual phenomena in order to establish the competing authority of subjective experience in

the conscience of God's people. But especially is this profitable for him to do in this dispensation, and it is the very thing Paul refers to in I Timothy 4 when he speaks about the activity of "seducing spirits" in connection with the searing of the conscience.

When something seduces it usually persuades by appealing to the senses. It entices by making an impression upon one's eyes, feelings, and desires. When Satan seduces, he does the same thing. However, as the following verse from Israel's program shows, what one sees and experiences in his seductions are counterfeit spiritual phenomena designed to make one think that God is at work.

"For false Christs and false prophets shall rise,
AND SHALL SHEW SIGNS AND WONDERS,
TO SEDUCE, if *it were* possible, even the elect."

(Mark 13:22)

Now it is important to note that in God's program and dealings with Israel, as He dealt with them as "children," the use of spiritual phenomena was commonplace. In fact, God had made a covenant with Israel by which He declared that He would deal with them by such things. He entered into that covenant in Moses' day and it became the basis upon which the people of Israel could talk about "our signs" and even "require a sign."

And he said, Behold, I make a covenant: before all thy people I will do marvels, such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation: and all the people among which thou *art* shall see the work of the LORD: for it *is* a terrible thing that I will do with thee.

(Exodus 34:10)

For God to "do marvels" and produce spiritual phenomena in His program and dealings with Israel is to be expected, in view of this covenant. For Israel to have subjective experiences by which they "see the work of the LORD" is to be expected, in view of this covenant. Hence, the record of God's program and dealings with Israel

is replete with experiences of spiritual phenomena. Especially is this so as recorded in the Gospel accounts and the opening chapters of the book of Acts, when the climactic stage in Israel's program had arrived. Signs, wonders, miracles, and other spiritual phenomena abounded during that time. God's 'covenant of marvels' with Israel was employed with great vigor.

However, when with the raising up of the Apostle Paul God declared the suspension of His program with Israel and brought in this present dispensation of Gentile grace, things changed. In this dispensation God has made no covenant with us declaring to us that He will "do marvels" among us, or that we will "see the work of the LORD" in our midst. In fact, not only has He made no such covenant with us, He teaches us that the opposite will be the case with us in this dispensation.

With the exception of the temporary need for the use of spiritual phenomena for a short time at the beginning of this dispensation, (as described in I Corinthians 12-14), the power of God operates in a different sphere today. It operates almost exclusively in the inner man. Instead of outward and visible, it is inward and invisible. Hence, we find Paul saying, for example,...

Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think,
ACCORDING TO THE POWER THAT
WORKETH IN US,...

(Ephesians 3:20)

...but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also IN YOU that believe.

(I Thessalonians 2:13)

Therefore, the issue with us in this dispensation is one of understanding and appreciating the excellency of the power of God's word operating within our inner man, instead of in the circumstances of our lives. And this is something

that is almost the opposite of how things were in Israel's program. Hence, Paul says to us,...

...we walk by faith, not by sight.

(II Corinthians 5:7)

"Not by sight," Paul says. Obviously, God has made no covenant with us declaring that we will "see the work of the LORD" in our midst. Instead, we are to "walk by faith" with a "spirit of faith" that is exclusively fastened on to what the written word of God says to us in this dispensation. We aren't to look for God to perform any spiritual phenomena. We aren't to operate on the basis of any subjective experience. The only one in the business of producing spiritual phenomena now is the Adversary as he works to sear consciences. Hence, unlike in God's program with Israel, the written word of God to us is to be the sole authority upon which our consciences operate. It is to be the sole authority for determining what is truth, what God is really doing, and the like.

The Seared Conscience

When flesh is "seared with a hot iron" it is cauterized. Its surface is burned, charred, and hardened. A deadened crust of tissue is formed in which there is no longer the sense of feeling. Searing renders it incapable of feeling. It renders it unresponsive, numb to the stimuli it should respond to.

The "hot iron" in I Timothy 4 that so effectively sears the conscience is the competing authority of subjective experience. What a physical "hot iron" does to flesh, the "hot iron" of subjective experience does to the conscience. Yet, accepting any other authority as equal to, or greater than, the authority of the written word of God, effectively sears the conscience and numbs it to the final authority that the word of God should hold in it.

In particular, it is the numbing power of subjective experience that results in the 'seared

conscience' Paul speaks about in I Timothy 4. By coupling together the childish operating principle that says seeing/feeling is believing, with disobedience to the command to "rightly divide the word of truth," the Adversary through his "seducing spirits" is able to successfully convince a Christian that the spiritual phenomenon he has experienced truly is of God. When so convinced, this personal experience of God supposedly working in his life now becomes the accepted authority for determining what God is doing. The conscience now becomes seared and so insensitive to the authority of what the written word of God says God is doing today. It is seared by the authority given to the subjective experience and it becomes numb to what the written word of God to us today has to say. The experience is the final authority now, and that's that. The seared conscience now functions as a wall of resistance. A wall of resistance to the power of the written word of God. And this constitutes a spiritual disaster for the believer. However, it is a great victory for the Adversary, as I Timothy 4 makes clear.

Biblists

In view not only of the competing authority of subjective experience, but all the other competing authorities as well, there is a little-used term that appropriately describes the kind of person a Christian should be. It is the term *Biblist*. (From *Bible+ist*, denoting a person who believes in and adheres to the Bible. Also, sometimes spelled *Biblicist*.) It was formerly used as a contemptuous term by Roman Catholicism for ones who rejected the authority of the Papacy and took the Bible as the sole rule of faith. Though originally coined by ones who have always rejected the written word of God as the ultimate, final authority, it nonetheless does properly describe what one is if he does recognize that authority and his conscience is sensitive to it. Such a one is a *Biblist*, and this is certainly what we should be. Indeed, in view of the Satanic

policy of evil against us we cannot afford to be anything less.

However, because the Bible sets forth not only what God is doing in this dispensation of grace, but also His program with Israel, we must "rightly divide the word of truth." Therefore, the absolute and sole authority for us in this dispensation is the "rightly divided" written word of God. This is the precise kind of Biblists we need to be. — *Keith R. Blades*