

Paul's Conscience in Acts: Here we Stand

The world bears down on the church and is never shy about hating Her confession. This is nothing new. When the world bore down on St. Paul he responded, "I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man" (Acts. 24:16). This statement recorded by Luke in the book of Acts is a clear confession of faith spoken to a world that was obstinate toward the Gospel. We all marvel at the Acts of the Apostles and ask if we would be able to confess the same in a world that hated us as much as it hated them. But the truth is we have the same Gospel! When Martin Luther stood before Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Worms, he confessed the same Gospel and took "many pains to have a clear conscience before God and men." Luther stood on the Confession of the Gospel and would not waver even in a world that hated him and the Gospel which he brought to the erring world, which was, "we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:1)." This is the same confession that we have today, and the world still hates such a confession. So, we must stand with St. Paul, Luther, and confessing Lutherans throughout the world and proclaim, "Here we stand!"

The world and its damnable faux-gospel have always had expectations of the Church and her true confession of who Christ is and the atoning work that He has done for us. In the book of Acts, St. Paul was brought before Felix and accused by Tertullus for, "being a plague," "ringleader for a sect," and "profaning the temple." The world hasn't changed. Satan is still the prince of this world, yet he has no hold on Christ (John 14:30). Still Satan and his mistress (the world) attacks that which is foreign to it and there is nothing more foreign to him than Christ and His bride, the Church. We must stand before the world with a clear conscience, just as St. Paul did before Felix.

In Acts Chapter 24, Tertullus accused St. Paul before Felix saying, "By examining him yourself you will be able to find out from him about everything of which we accuse him." And St. Paul answered, "I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust. So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." St. Paul stood firm in the confession, for the conscience is never active but rather it sits in our hearts as a judge over our thoughts and deeds. And so, the Holy Spirit leads St. Paul to recognise that he could not have a clear conscience toward God or men without proclaiming what he knows to be the pure, sweet, simple truth of the Gospel. If he wavered in the truth before Felix, he could not have a clear conscience. If he denied the truth because of his fear of men, he would have sinned.

Whereas, St. Paul could stand before the accusations from Tertullus with a clear conscience, the unbelieving Jews at Pentecost could not stand with a clear conscience before St. Peter's accusation in Acts. 2:36-38. St. Peter accused them saying, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." At this, their consciences panged as they were, "cut to the heart," and questioned Peter on how they were to be saved, and Peter confessed to them their need for the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. St. Paul having the Gospel could stand with a clean conscience as could St. Peter and Luther, yet the Jews not having the Gospel stood convicted by their conscience. This is the benefit of a good confession: that Christ as our defence allows us to stand with a clear conscience.

When asked to recant his writings which denied indulgences and reclaimed the Gospel for generations, Luther confessed, "I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us." With Luther's confession there are clear parallels to St. Paul before Felix. Luther's conscience was captivated by that which he was confessing; the word of God. Likewise, St. Paul took many pains that his conscience would be clear by not confessing a faux-gospel but the true faith. Both of these men did so in the midst of a pluralistic world and at great personal cost. Did Martin Luther, like St. Paul, know that his life was in danger? Did he know that he might be killed for the sake of the Gospel? Sure. And did this create apprehension and fear in these men? I'm sure it did. Yet the Holy Spirit strengthened these men to stand firm in the truth of the confession of the one true faith. These men stood by the Scripture and the proclamation thereof for to do otherwise would go against their conscience and to do so is both an offense to God and to other men. Conscience, by its very nature, longs for a clear confession of faith.

It's rather easy to look at these great men and wonder how they were able to hold true to their consciences while confessing the faith to such a hate filled world. Yet, today we Lutherans find ourselves in the same situation. The world and its faux-gospel still attack Christ's bride daily. There has never been nor will there ever be this side of heaven, a shortage of heresy and blatant

hatred toward the church. First, we must have a conscience well-formed by the Word of God. Then we must stand and be true to our consciences by proclaiming the true word of God as not to be an offense to God and toward men. We stand on the same confession as St. Paul and Luther and our consciences are bound by the same word. This confession is this: That Christ died the death of all of us, so that life would be given to even the most unworthy of us.

In this world where opposition to the church is all around us, to remain in clear conscience we confess the Gospel of Christ. This was true for St. Paul, for Luther God's greatest gifts, curbs our confession of the truth, that Christ is the one true God. So, confess the Gospel in clear conscience. Confess that Christ died so that we would live. Confess that you have been washed in the waters of Holy Baptism into the newness of life. Confess boldly and with tranquil conscience. Here we stand! We stand with St. Paul and with Luther because we stand on the full doctrine of Christ.