

Spiritual Morality

Four hundred and fifty one years ago, the Reformation of the church had its "official" beginning. Many evangelical Christians around the world still commemorate this great occasion in special worship services.

Various issues led earnest people to protest against the Medieval church. However, it is generally agreed that the matters of justification by faith and the freedom of conscience were of the utmost importance.

And, after all these years, the Roman Catholic church and the churches of the Reformation are still deeply divided over these two great factors which concern the total personality of man. The question of the freedom of conscience has been brought into the limelight once again through Pope Paul's *Humanae Vitae* "Of human life," an encyclical giving direction on family planning.

The role of the conscience in the moral life has been obscured by the Medieval church and now through Pope Paul's *Humanae Vitae*. The Roman Church is in moral lordship over the individual. The individual is not permitted in that system to be directly confronted by the Will of God in Scripture.

Rather, the moral considerations and decisions are left to the church. Luther pushed aside this un-Biblical spiritual over-lordship. He taught that faith is the individual's personal trust in God's revelation in Christ, mediated by the Word of God alone. Through the personal confrontation with the living God, the individual receives not only assurance of salvation but also, through the reading of God's Word, he will come to know God's will for his life.

As Luther restored God's Word in its proper place so did he restore conscience to its Biblical place. He said of himself "My conscience is bound in the Word of God." Protestants accept this as a vital and liberating truth. A conscience enlightened by God's Word will point out God's requirements for life to the believer. It does this not in vague generalities, but in a practical and concrete way.

We ought therefore to stand or fall by the convictions of our conscience. Luther liberated conscience from the bonds of the Medieval church. He stressed the right of individual private judgment and responsibility as two of Protestant's great principles. We rejoice in these freedoms, but also recognize its grave and great responsibilities. We alone are responsible to a holy and just God for our actions.

This makes us free and binds us at the same time. "Freedom of conscience is a necessary correlate of the Christian life. No believer has a right to go beyond the clear requirements of Scripture in drawing up a list of infallible don'ts and imposing it absolutely upon others in the name of a sensitive conscience.

Only the healthy conscience, trained to react instinctively in response to the New Testament revelation of the will of God, makes for a spontaneous spiritual morality." (p.525 Carl F. H. Henry, Christian Personal Ethics.)

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