

The STRONG Christian 2

Strong in Character: the Undefined Conscience

We are looking for strength in the Christian. Strength is something that you build or can get. You may not be born strong, or be naturally strong, but you can become strong. What kind of strength do you want? As one saying goes, Don't pray for a lighter load, pray for a stronger back. We recognise that we carry many things in life. There is the psychic freight of attachments, experiences, personal perceptions, of true and false beliefs. The question is, What am I carrying for God? I need to get rid of excess psyche baggage. This is done by repenting and cleansing our conscience. Our conscience is expressed by what we say we will do. We defile our conscience when we do not do what we say we will do. We mean one thing and do another. The defiled conscience creates two persons: who we are and who we say we are. We have great intentions and then we wilt, shrug our shoulders, avoid the pressure, make excuses and fantasise results. And this is worse when we do it to ourselves, in our own private space. It is the recipe for deep personal powerlessness. We let ourselves off the hook. We compensate for personal failure. We can build extensive support systems that can adjust to and compensate for any psyche ambition. This maintains a psyche status quo where no threat (excitement) becomes too challenging or disruptive to psyche balance or personal control. We become too afraid to change. We neutralise any real effect on our lives, particularly the threat of God. God comes threatening our personal space with challenges to be, with the challenge to follow Jesus and become fishers of men. This can be very much against our personal agenda. The shock of following Christ is meant to be a shock and is intended to threaten our very being as we understand it. This is because Jesus Christ will supply us with an entirely new being (2Cor 5:17). Will I let go of the poverty and perceived grandeur of my own ego to be crucified with Christ? I think as Christians we can subtly resist God here. I think that this can particularly happen if you grow up in a church environment. One can grow up protecting one's self from perceived religious threats. Every Christian needs time to face God in their own space and in their own time. Ultimately, however, will I decide to let God supply me with an entirely new (resurrected) life? Will I surrender my Self to God? Or will I retain control of my life and my intended future?

What is my life? We cannot control our life. Suicide does not control life; it simply removes me from it, often as a deep form of anger and general hostility that I decide to direct towards my Self. Life is a gift from God. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life. Life is God's idea. With the gift of life, I have to do something with it. Most of us do not know what to do with our lives. We simply wait for something to happen. Our life is basically reacting to what happens to us. I need a goal for my life or a goal to express the life within me. Do you have a goal for your life? Are you living for something or someone? The measure of your life is what you are living for. Do you have a reason for being alive or is it that you just happen to be alive at the moment? Your life is of no consequence if there is no consequence to your living. Make an offering of your life to God.

Deciding on a consequence for our life is setting a goal for our life. What do we want our life to say? Do you want your life to be evidence for the reality and working of God? Do you want your life

to demonstrate some Christian proof of love, compassion, repentance, healing, or meaning as a victory over meaninglessness? As your life takes on a meaning you develop character. Character is the result of fighting for something. It is the mark of that fight in your life. Christian character is the result of fighting for Christian principles and reality in your life. If you have no distinct character to your life it is because there has been no real fight in your life. So far you have been a passenger or a tourist in life. You have passively accepted life as a fate. You have simply gone with the flow of events and circumstances that have made up your life so far. As far as you know, goodness knows what will happen next. But you hope that something will happen that is not too bad. But with God we can say that God makes all things work together for good to them that love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom 8:28). With God, attack life.

Those that take hold of God take hold of Life. With the life of God in you, you will start to reverberate with the creative force of the Creator of life. God has a purpose for His creation. I want to be part of that purpose and a testimony to it. Just as the creation has a purpose that God intends for it, so I need to intend a purpose for my life. Purpose is expressed by a goal and my goal will determine my character. Easy goal means easy (even non-existent) character. Nothing is formed. Tough goal means tough (determined) character is required if the goal is to be achieved.

Montgomery (of El Alamein) in a book on Leadership claims that character is 'knowing what you want to do and having the determination to do it' (The Path to Leadership, p11). In Rom 5:3,4 Paul says that 'we also glory in tribulations (afflictions) knowing that tribulation produces perseverance (works patience) and perseverance produces character and character produces hope'. Originally (in Greek) a 'character' meant a tool for engraving. This led to the idea of an impression or stamp created by an engraved figure. We can speak about 'character' and 'a character'. Both senses have to do with distinctive style. In this verse from Romans the English word 'character' is being used to translate the Greek word 'dokime' meaning tested or proven. So the idea is that strength of character (or any character at all) is revealed in those who have been tested and proven by affliction and have demonstrated patient perseverance in their affliction. Your ability to persevere creates your style of person, your character. Your character is your moral construction of yourself, which is always formed by adversity, for good or ill. James 1:2-4 says that we should count it all joy when we fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of our faith produces patience and patience should be allowed to do its maturing work, so that we may be complete, lacking nothing.

Conscience. Bad conscience divides us. Good conscience unites us. Part of having a goal is to establish our conscience. Conscience is our moral sense of having a goal. That which is for goal is good and that which is anti-goal is bad. This is based on the choice of goal that we make. Our conscience is our moral commitment to structure ourselves around a goal. It is the style of person that we are. It is our moral stamp. As we become strong in our chosen goal attainment we prove our character. We assert our moral base. Morality is the basic awareness of the difference between right and wrong. Good and evil are at the centre of the universe. We live in a moral universe. Part of our Christian conscience is to embrace and believe in certain moral values as

objectively true. In modern secular society it is believed that we create value by our choices. If I choose something it is therefore good (at least for me). But choice does not create value, it only recognises value. Values (which appear in choice situations) are presented to us in various cultural disguises. Because of our culture blindness (blinded by our own culture) we believe they are unique to us when, in fact, they are universal. Human behaviour is always moral because humanity is based on choice. My conscience is my distinctive personal structure of moral values. It is how I see good and evil. It is how I distinguish between that which is worthwhile and that which is useless. May I agree with reality!

The word 'conscience' literally means a 'seeing or knowing with'. I take this to mean that conscience is when I know my Self against or together with the world. My conscience is how I relate my Self to my understanding of reality. To the Christian this is always a moral experience. Some people want to make their experience of life amoral or without morality. This may be the artist or rather the arty person who says that 'art is life'. The aesthetic sense replaces the moral sense. But this creates moral confusion and lack of conscience because they have no equipment when moral decisions have to be made. They will act out of pure emotion or pure style. Maybe art can be used to alleviate oppressive moralised patterns in society. However, I claim that we can never avoid the basic moral platform of reality. One can use other culture formations such as science or commerce or war or sexuality (gender) to attempt to create amoral or supposedly moral-free spaces. But, once again, I claim that no-one can avoid the moral base of reality and all that these people are doing is confusing themselves when it comes to actual moral decisions, which cannot be indefinitely delayed. Moral issues cannot be avoided. They are continually working out their implications in our lives. I exist morally whether I like it or not. We may distract ourselves from our moral questions, but to refuse to answer them is, in itself, an answer. Their presence, although resented, cannot be avoided. These are the questions of good and evil in my life and in reality. Do good and evil in my life correspond with good and evil in reality? Am I in touch with objective moral truth or am creating my own moral morass (confusion)? Facing our moral questions requires courage and creates character. The way we answer our moral questions makes us the kind of person that we are.

Conscience in Scripture.

In the NT the Greek word for conscience is 'suneidesis' which means 'knowing with' which suggests our awareness of reality that is alongside reality itself. There is reality and our awareness of reality. We carry inside us our model of reality, what we believe to be the case. This model of reality contains facts that are either true or false. If we are out of touch with reality we are living in our own world and we need correction. There are a number of ways conscience is described in scripture. These are as follows:

Good (Acts 23:1)	Evil (Heb 10:22)
Pure (1Tim 3:9)	Defiled (Titus 1:15)
Perfect (Heb 9:9)	Weak (1Cor 8:7)
Purged (Heb 9:14)	Seared (1Tim 4:2).

In Acts 23:1 Paul says that he has lived with a good (clear) conscience before God. He has nothing to hide from God. He is transparent before God. He enjoys getting before God because it is a clarifying experience. In Acts 24:16 Paul says that he attempts to have a good conscience before God and man (a conscience void of

offence). Paul is not carrying the mark of any behaviour that is intended to offend God or man. His conscience is clear. In 1Tim 3:9, Paul says that he holds the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. An impure conscience is offended by mystery because it cannot defend itself nor control what it believes. An impure conscience is annoyed and frustrated by the purity of a faith held in mystery. The impure conscience is deeply offended and challenged by purity. The pure see God (Mtt 5:8). The impure cannot see and are afraid to see God. Perfection in Heb 9:9 refers to the conscience not being perfect through sacrifices. However, the work of Calvary is a perfect work with Christ the perfect sacrifice, as a lamb without blemish. Then this perfect sacrifice and the shedding of His blood is able to purge (cleanse) our conscience from dead works that we might serve the living God (Heb 9:14). This is a magnificent verse. It is saying that our attempts save ourself which have confused, stained and defiled our conscience have become a residue of dead works that confound our person and our attempts to live. It is the blood of Jesus that cleanses our guilty conscience. It is the blood that deals with the sin. Only the blood of Jesus can wash away our sins. The Blood is meant for the sin. The sin can be dealt with only by the Blood. When my conscience is purged then I can serve the living God. I am made free in order to serve.

A conscience can be described as evil. An evil conscience is a false conscience that believes wrong things and pursues wrong behaviours. Hitler had an evil conscience and that ended being extremely destructive. People can have a conscience (moral sense) that promotes evil. Heb 10:22 says that our hearts should be sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. The evil conscience condemns our heart. Titus 1:15 says that to the pure all things are pure. Sometimes it is hard to believe what people can be capable of. The pure are innocent and sometimes naive. They are not schooled in deception and duplicity. (Am I two people?) The pure are transparent. They have nothing to hide. The pure are not interested in impurity. It does not cross their mind or invade their spirit. But to the defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure. The impure only have an appetite for impurity. They attack purity and attempt to pull it down. Their mind and conscience are defiled. The defiled person is the morally outraged person. Somebody has taken advantage of them. They have been misused. The purity of trust has been betrayed by the impurity of the untrustworthy. The moral shock can be devastating. What is defiled is the conscience. When our conscience is corrupted then we cooperate with defilement. 1Cor 8:7 talks about the weak conscience and things offered to idols. Paul says that some people take offence at scruples. (Maybe the meat sold in the market was offered to an idol.) Whatever the case, Paul says walk in love with the brother with the weaker (more sensitive) conscience. To wound their weak conscience is to sin against Christ. Those who are maturer should walk in respect of those who may be less developed in the faith. Christ rules over all idols and their trafficking. Finally Paul speaks of the seared (cauterised, burnt) conscience (1Tim 4:2). In the last days people will give heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons. Their hypocrisy will be possible because of their branded, scared, wounded, maimed conscience. The scars on our conscience created by sin can only be dealt with by the Blood of Christ. Those who do not seek the Blood are in 'the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity' (Acts 8:23). They are bound for eternal destruction and perdition.