

Christ as the Lord of the Conscience

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Preacher: Stewart Gill

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of April 1999.

The preacher is Stuart Gill. His sermon is entitled Christ as the Lord of the Conscience and is from Romans chapter 14 verses 1 to 18.

Amen.

In Jesus' name, amen. This morning I want to speak about a subject that's been much in the news.

We keep hearing about conscience. We question whether Monica or Bill have a conscience. Perhaps Monica has a conscience over food and fashion but not over other things.

[1 : 22] We've heard over this past week how the government didn't appear to have a conscience one day over Kosovo and then the next day it suddenly seems to have found a conscience.

So conscience is something that's very much in the news. But what about in the church? I think one of the good things that's come about in recent years as we've had discussions over ministry of women within the church and the ordination of women debate has been a renewed interest in the whole issue of conscience.

If you can excuse me for a second in relapsing into my Presbyterian background but I would like to share with you a statement from the Westminster Confession of Faith.

The Westminster Confession of Faith was written by Anglicans but adopted by Presbyterians. And I believe in there we find a magnificent statement of human freedom.

Let me read you a section of chapter 20. God alone we read is Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his word or beside it in matters of faith or worship.

[2 : 50] The short statement I think is an excellent commentary on Romans 14 that we just had read to us earlier. Because I believe in Romans 14 we get one of the best statements in the scriptures on this whole issue of conscience.

Now if we know anything at all about the period in which the Westminster Confession was written a period which Marxist historians have called the English Revolution then we're aware that this statement was written not in the midst of an armchair discussion on how to tolerate difference and diversity.

It was a period of great turmoil in English history. Events in that time opened up wide cleavages between church and state. Well meaning people were appalled at the divisions and violence in society.

How could there be responsible freedom within such a society? How could there be respect for different understandings of religious truth?

How could there be a recognition of claims of conscience? I think the answer they give was simple and yet quite profound and quite biblical that Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the conscience.

[4 : 20] We must admit as we look around the friends that we have that they come from a variety of theological approaches in our churches.

We live in a society where there are many different denominations. Some of us might have friends who are Baptists or Church of Christ or Uniting Church or Presbyterian or perhaps even other Anglicans.

How can we allow for variety within a common allegiance to Jesus Christ? Christians are all different. I think this church is a great example of differences that we have.

Different races, different classes, old people and young people coming together to worship. People with different temperaments were all created differently.

How do we live together as a community? Paul in Romans chapter 14 is looking at some of the tensions in such a diverse community in the church in Rome, in the Christian society in Rome.

[5 : 32] How do we live with people within the same church that we don't agree with? They love the Lord, don't they? They're attempting to live out their Christian faith.

How do we relate to them in such a context? Let me make it a little bit more personal. We often hear young people saying today, I've got to be me, I've got to be my own person.

And we particularly see this probably between the ages of 13 and 21. I see this amongst many of the students that I have to deal with at Ridley in the residential college.

Many in that time period are setting their goals for life. They're assessing conflicting claims for allegiance. The claims of their peers versus the claims of their family.

The claims of faith versus the claims of no faith. They're deciding how to be part of a whole, yet at the same time remaining true to themselves.

[6 : 40] How are they going to discover themselves? What whole are they going to be part with? Who are they going to identify with? How will they integrate both?

Those are the kinds of questions that I think liberty of conscience confronts us with. So this morning I want to look at a number of issues.

The coercion of conformity or peer pressure. Freedom of faith. Claims of conscience and limits of liberty that I believe arise out of chapter 14 of Romans.

First of all, the coercion of conformity. If we're aware of what's going on in the world, then we realize that there's an increasing move towards conformity.

And looking back on this, we can say that it's been a historical process that's been underway for centuries, really since the time of the Industrial Revolution. No longer were men and women separated by distance, living as self-contained units in their little villages, spending their days in quietness and in peace.

[7 : 57] Population expanded as the technological revolution brought about progress. Skill in the manipulation of minds grew as the understanding of human psychology developed.

Regimentation, coercion, and even in some cases mind control became features of life. And we see this particularly today as we look at such issues as globalization and how we're all interconnected through the Internet and through the various media that we use.

In this environment, people have to ask themselves, how can I think for myself? Can I refuse to be prepackaged? Young people in particular perhaps come to us and say, I know what my parents want me to think.

I know what the church wants me to think. But I want to be myself. I don't want to be pushed along by expectations that other people have of me.

I think young people in particular need to be careful that in seeking to be their own person that they're not merely exchanging one set of controls for another.

[9 : 14] The pressure of parents, the pressure of church being replaced by the pressure of peers, by the expectation of people in their high school or university.

But speaking more widely, I think we all have to be careful that we really are our own person. What kinds of coercion are we going to face as we turn on our television, as we read our newspapers?

Do we have the courage to be different? Are we being swept along with whatever goes, the emotion of the moment, the appeal of a slick manipulator, an attractive teacher, a compelling professor, a television presenter?

Young people in high school or in university are at a stage in life when they are establishing patterns of thinking and reacting that will be with them for years ahead.

But how about those of us who have already developed patterns? Can we change? The pressure towards conformity isn't something that's new, nor is it limited to the non-Christian.

[10 : 29] In Romans 14, Paul makes a striking observation. He reflects on the fact that the church in Rome had been a place where difference and even weakness wasn't tolerated.

The strong pushed their way and the weak felt coerced and intimidated and pressured. Twice Paul repeats the same question in verse 4 and then in verse 10.

Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Who are you to judge someone else?

The strong and the weak. The pressure for religious conformity. Everyone had to be the same, although God had created everyone differently.

Religious people have been doing this for thousands of years. Throughout human history, the ayatollahs of Iran are nothing new. Sometimes we can feel a bit smug about this in the Christian church, but let's remember that just a few years ago that Jonestown was an aberration of a fundamentalist Christian religion.

[11 : 45] In recent days, we've seen the same thing even here in Melbourne. If we look at the headlines in newspapers over the past year, 50-year-old sex surfaces in Melbourne.

Where did that sex surface? In some strange aberration of the Christian religion. It surfaced within Anglican and Presbyterian churches. Too often Christians, I think, ignore the clear teaching of the Bible that we shouldn't show contempt for the creature.

Both because contempt for the creature implies contempt for the creator and because it demonstrates a deep insecurity that needs to force people into our mold, into our pattern of thinking.

If people don't think the same way as us, then they're not off us. We forget, as Paul reminds us in Romans 14, that you and I and each person on the earth is individually responsible and accountable before God.

True evangelism, in that sense, isn't manipulation. It's respect for the individual. And it's effective only as it respects that full individuality and uniqueness with which God has endowed each human being.

[13 : 13] Even in Christian homes, communication between parents and children breaks down often. Especially in homes where differences are discouraged and superficial agreement is forced.

Certain topics are off at limits. Sometimes we feel that we can't share openly doubts and difficulties that we may have as we progress in our adult faith.

Children may not feel free to discuss certain issues within the family. The result is that instead of a home being a place where all the subtle pressures of the world around us can be resisted and where we can talk about them openly and freely, home discourages the development of personal conviction and stamina.

Is it the same in the church? Are there some issues that are off limits that we refuse to face up to? Many of you will have studied Hamlet when you were at school and you may recall the most remarkable advice given to a son by a father.

This above all to thine own self be true and it must follow as night the day. Thou canst not then be false to any man. These are great words.

[14 : 35] They speak about integrity, the refusal to capitulate under peer pressure, the willingness to resist, the coercion, the conformity. You might ask though, how can I resist in our society the pressures towards conformity?

How can I refuse to capitulate before the pressure towards uniformity? And Paul in Romans 14 describes the kind of person whose inner resources, inner resources of character and grace are able to resist such pressures and to be accepted and to accept.

First of all, he speaks of the basis for acceptance. He says that God has accepted us. Romans 14 verse 3 we read, those who eat must not despise those who abstain, those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat for God has welcomed them.

He speaks here of us being free before God, that God has accepted them, God has accepted you and me if we have come to Christ.

He's accepted us in and because of Christ, what Christ did on our behalf on the cross. And being accepted by God then means that we have a God-given capacity for individual action.

[16 : 12] That I don't have to prove myself either for God or my peers. That I'm accepted, I'm accepted first of all by God and that's the most important thing in that I'm free.

And I'm freed then to be myself. Accepted by God, we are freed to accept ourselves that the Creator has made us as we are, that we have unique gifts, that we have unique capabilities, that our struggles to preserve personal integrity to be ourselves are so often related to the people who attempt to put us down if we don't conform to their expectations.

And in such situations we never come to terms with ourselves. We allow ourselves to be conformed by others rather than being conformed by God who has accepted us.

When you're pressured by someone who will put you down if you don't conform to their expectations, we've got to realise that there are no preconditions for God's acceptance of us.

God has freed us to be ourselves. I think there are many of us as adults who have never come to terms with ourselves and were easily stampeded because we want others to do for us what we've never done for ourselves, what God has already done for us, accept us.

[17 : 43] Third, we accept other people for what they are, not for what we want them to be. We read in Romans chapter 14 verse 1, welcome those who are weak in the faith.

You may consider, Paul says, that an individual's scruples of conscience are ridiculous, but he or she who shares with you a common loyalty to the same Lord, have the same creator, and we're told, don't look down upon them.

They're part of the body of Christ. Well, what kind of home do we have? What kind of church do we have? Is it a place where acceptance and mutual respect are given for human relationships?

The poet, Robert Frost, speaks of a conversation between a husband and wife as to whether they will let a vagrant farm labourer back into their home.

And Mary reminds Warren in the poem Death of the Hired Man that Silas has come back home to die. Home? Warren mocks. Yes, what else but home?

[19 : 01] Mary replies. It all depends on what you mean by home, Warren answers. And he adds, home is the place where when you go there they have to take you in.

Mary gets in the last word. I should have called it rather something you somehow haven't to deserve. That's how God accepts us.

Is that how we accept other people? Surely we'd want for our young people indeed for all people within the church a family which will be a home you somehow haven't to deserve.

A place where there's mutual acceptance based upon self-acceptance premised on God's prior and unconditional acceptance. this will give us the strength amid all the pressure to conform.

Well, we've dealt with generalities so far. Coercion, acceptance, these terms are somewhat vague. What about a specific situation when I feel pressured to do something that I know is wrong?

[20 : 16] Knowing the security of acceptance gives us the courage to stand for what we think is right. How do we know what is right in a given situation?

How can I tell which temptation to say no to? Paul's word to help anyone caught up in the moral decay of our time is conscience and it's significant that it's first of all to the Greeks in Corinth that he actually uses the word conscience because the word conscience speaks out of a Greek culture that goes back 600 years before Christ to the time of Aristotle.

Conscience is like the little black box that they're always trying to find after a plane has crashed. It's the monitor that was put in by an outsider to listen to the conversations, to overhear the struggle between right and wrong, to assess the moral quality of any decision.

It was to the Greeks a link providing order and continuity in a disordered and discontinuous world. Paul takes this word out of paganism and gives it a Christian quality.

He speaks of the weak conscience in 1 Corinthians 8 verse 10. In chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians he goes on from verse 23 to refer to the believer's freedom in Christ.

[21 : 47] If questions affecting conscience should be raised, Paul believes, and they shouldn't be brought up unnecessarily, then they have to be treated seriously.

We within the church have a responsibility as brothers and sisters in Christ for one another. Respect the other person's conscience no matter how weak or unimportant you may think it to be.

And let's listen to our own conscience. Samuel Rutherford, the great 17th century Scottish theologian who was suffering for the claims of conscience in a Scottish jail wrote this, conscience is a dainty, delicate creature, a rare piece of workmanship of the maker.

Keep it full without a crack, for if there be but one hole so that it leak, it will with difficulty mend again. Sure we're all aware that the non-Christian conscience can be destroyed through failure to heed its promptings.

Paul warns Timothy about conscience in 1 Timothy 4 verse 2 that conscience should be seared with a hot iron that only Jesus Christ can cleanse our consciences from the acts that lead to death.

[23 : 10] so that we may serve, he says, the living God, how much we need that cleansing, the cleansing that comes through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Another great Puritan writer, Thomas Fuller, said that a guilty conscience is like the suburbs of hell. A guilty conscience is like the suburbs of hell.

you may remember, if you saw chariots of fire, how Eric Liddell, when he was crossing the channel by steamer to take part in the Olympic games in Paris, he's pacing back and forth on the deck, wondering if you'll have the courage to maintain his conviction against running on a Sunday.

He's able to stand up against the persuasions of the Prince of Wales, he refuses to capitulate to all the pressures of patriotism and ambition, and this long before he receives the message on the Thursday when he finally runs the race.

He already knows the secret, them that honour me I will honour. The claims of conscience, let's not violate our conscience, let's treat it with respect, let's honour the consciences of others, particularly in the scruples and weaknesses of fellow believers.

[24 : 49] We are keepers of our brothers' and sisters' consciences. As we guard theirs, so we guard our own. Finally, the limits of liberty.

How far can we go in this? Are there no limits to the respect and honour that were to show to the conscience of the weaker brother? The 16th century adopted a rally cry, conscience should always be followed.

Well, should conscience always be followed? Is there no limit to individual liberty? What are the bounds of freedom when I allow it to become anarchy? If everyone believes that they're following their conscience but they have a different leading.

Martin Luther in the 16th century had the courage of a man of conscience. At the dying of worms with 11 words he struck a resounding blow for freedom of conscience.

Sure everyone knows what he said, here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God, Amen. What motivated Martin Luther to stand against tyranny and depression, to be a prophetic witness to the Lord Jesus Christ in his own day?

[26 : 09] Why was he prepared to undergo a crisis of conscience? How could he stand against the authority of his day in obedience to another?

Before he left for worms he gave the answer and it's found in a sermon titled The Three Kinds of Good Life for the Instruction of Conscience and there's much good teaching that I believe we can learn lessons from here.

Luther likens questions of conscience to the parts of a church. He says first of all there's the churchyard which represents questions about externals. These are issues that we might not quibble over.

As if God were concerned in the slightest whether you eat fish or meat whether you keep feasts or fast. These are not great issues of conscience. He then says that when you come into the nave which represents matters of better and sounder doctrine where you should distinguish between the wheat and the chaff.

Finally he says you approach the altar which represents truth about the very presence of the living Lord himself. Here he says there can be no compromise.

[27 : 27] The great issues of heaven and hell life and death here the believer must stand firm in his or her faith. They cannot fudge their convictions about these truths.

They are accountable to Jesus Christ as Lord and Judge. This is what Paul was saying that we are accountable to Jesus Christ as Lord and Judge that we have to stand before our Judge one day.

Why did Luther come to the Diet of Worms willing if need be to die for conscience sake for his principles because I believe that having been given by the Holy Spirit as he said a pure free cheerful glad and loving heart a heart which is righteous seeking no reward fearing no punishment that with that gift of complete acceptance by God he had the courage to obey the claims of conscience and he knew the limits of liberty he knew where to stand firm and where to allow tolerance in diversity how do we learn to stand firm Romans 14 provides three determining principles love love love love love love love love love love that binds us together in one family love instructs our consciences informs our wills keeps us in submission to one another we read in Romans 14:7 none of us lives to ourselves alone and none of us dies to ourselves alone finally we are reminded that we shall appear before the judge each of us will have to give an account of ourselves to God whatever is ours whatever is in our power whatever God has entrusted to us with the disposal of another great

Puritan writer wrote we will willingly resign and give up to the will and commands of our superiors but as to our minds and consciences and the things of his worship and service he has reserved the sovereignty of them to himself to him we give account of them at the great day during the second world war one of the greatest 20th century apologists C.S.

Lewis was speaking to a group of servicemen about the cost that he had to face of being a Christian Don in the University of Oxford he'd expected that the university might have had some measure of tolerance and liberality some recognition and acceptance of the sanctity of honest belief and sincere conviction that was a place of learning and openness I'm sure many of us as undergraduates have gone up to universities thinking that they were those kinds of places Lewis discovered as others have discovered before and since that in this world there are few persons so illiberal as the person who claims to be a liberal there are few persons so irrational as the person who claims to be rational Lewis's liberal and rational friends didn't object to his intellectual interest in

[31 : 39] Christianity it was the argued proper subject for academic argument and debate but you wouldn't seriously consider practicing it that was going far too far Lewis recounted to these airmen his painful memories of hostility and animosity in order to encourage the servicemen to face the cost of commitment to Jesus Christ so that they might realize that the follower of Jesus Christ can expect neither respectability nor popularity in the world and he then pointed them to Christ to his indignities upon the cross and as an example for them C.S. Lewis had learned the important lesson of not conforming under peer pressure it's not easy for us to make Jesus Christ rather than the peers who pressure us whether they be students at university whether they be family or friends whether they be workmates it's not easy for us to keep

Jesus Christ as the Lord of our conscience but if we learn to serve him in the fullness of his acceptance of us and if we try to learn to live responsibly in the freedom that he provides us with then we'll know that if the son shall make us free then we'll be free indeed to be aware of how conscience works within the believer should help us to understand more of the grace and work of God within us as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling conscience guides us to do God's will in each situation we face in life conscience judges us by the high standards it knows the will of God conscience causes us to have a sense of guilt most of all conscience points us to Christ the saviour we read in Romans chapter 14 verse 7 we do not live to ourselves we do not die to ourselves if we live we live to the Lord if we die we die to the Lord so then whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's for to this end

Christ died and lived again so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living Amen