

I am Bill's Conscience

By Mark Roberts, editor • robertsmark@sbcglobal.net

I am not a cricket. I'm not even a perfect guide, and you shouldn't always follow me. I am, however, part of God's plans to help you do what is right. I am Bill's conscience.

This is a tough time to be a conscience. Bill's grandfather and great-grandfather respected their consciences, and listened to them carefully. People spoke of how "I couldn't live with myself if I did that" which was just a reference to respecting the power of a guilty conscience. Now it seems few care about guilt (one of my chief weapons) and most just want to extinguish my voice completely. These ideas about sin, guilt and the conscience has its affect on my Bill too. Sometimes it seems like Bill just wants to do whatever Flesh and Self say, without regard to what God says. ***That's a big problem for me because my job is to let Bill know when he has done wrong.*** That what a conscience does: it's an awareness inside of you that judges whether what you are doing is in harmony with your own moral standards. That means when Bill does something he shouldn't I will be right there to let him hear all about it. Using godly sorrow and guilt I can do wonders for Bill's spirituality. Indeed, I can help Bill repent of sin so he will be right with God! *"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death"* (2 Corinthians 7:10).

Of course, Bill doesn't like me very much some times. Ears perked right up and tuned in carefully to that psychologist on the radio who talked about how I can cause stress and trauma if Bill listens to me. He said guilt was always bad and should be ignored, and that if Bill feels afflicted by his conscience then he ought not listen to me. What a terrible thing to tell people! If Bill ignores me enough eventually I will become defective. The truth is I get discouraged easily and if Bill won't listen to me when I tell him he is doing wrong I will get quieter and quieter. Finally I will be silent, leaving Bill to practice evil without any inner pangs of guilt or moral qualms at all. Paul speaks of such when he says

some wicked persons "have their own conscience seared with a hot iron" (1 Timothy 4:2). Bill needs me, but Bill has to listen to me or I will ultimately disappear.

There is more you need to know about me besides just my potential to be ruined. You should know that I am not very smart. Yes, I afflict Bill when he does wrong but I don't have any sense of right and wrong on my own. Truthfully, I'm clueless about morals, sin and evil. I believe pretty much anything Mind tells me. So if Mind tells me it is okay Bill can do it and I will not say anything about his actions. Why? Because I think he is doing right! This can be a *big* problem. For example, Paul said once said "Men and brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day" (Acts 23:1) even though during part of his life he had killed Christians. How could Paul do that and still have a good conscience? Simple. His conscience didn't know that persecuting the church was wrong. This is why Disney's personification of me as Jiminy Cricket, singing "Always Let Your Conscience be Your Guide" is so flawed. I don't much appreciate being portrayed as a bug in a tux, but worse, I cannot "always" be Bill's guide. Your conscience is good, and it is from God, but it is not a trustworthy guide because a conscience is only as good as the information we have been given to work with. Paul had it right when he said "My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor. 4:4).

Not only can I sign off on bad behavior, sometimes I can raise a ruckus over something not sinful at all. Such is described in 1 Corinthians 8 as a weak conscience: *"Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled"* (8:7). Eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol wasn't sinful, but some brethren didn't understand that so when they ate their consciences began to howl. Some of Bill's brethren today are so proud of how they have all kinds of scruples

please turn to page 4

Afraid to Marry?

By *Dane Felicien* • danef@necusa.com

In America today the average age for marriage continues to rise. More and more young people date continuously, or as it referred to now “hang out.” It is fashionable for a couple to live together first before, if ever, considering marriage, as if to see if this relationship will work out. Young adults are in a lot less hurry to settle down in marriage. Why is this, and what does the Bible say about it? In seeking answers I solicited the answers of a few married couples (married from a year to over fifty years) to assist with the practical application of what we shall discover from the scriptures.

The place to begin is the very first date: “For the Lord God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him” (Gen 2:18). Adam was on the very first date which resulted in a very long lasting marriage relationship. True, Adam and Eve were the very first and only couple, but their actions shows how from the beginning precedence was set for what God approved. God created man’s domain in five days and saw that it was good. Then on the sixth day, the Lord made every beast of the earth. Then He made man and put man in the Garden of Eden to have domain over all that He made. Then the Lord acknowledged that it was not good for man to be alone, yet He brought Adam every beast of the field, the air, every living creature for Adam to name (Gen 2:19). Adam however was still without a helper comparable to him (verse 20), so God created woman. Can you imagine Adam’s elation upon seeing Eve the very first time? I do believe that God knew that no beast could be Adam’s ultimate companion, however, He wanted Adam to discover for himself his need of woman.

From hence, we began dating. Dating is the time we discover our need for another, and is ultimately focused on marriage. The precedence of Gen. 2:18 lead back to our initial questions on dating. If you are of marriage-able age and are dating but not considering marriage, then why not? The married couples I interviewed all agree that there is not a set time lapse between dating and marriage, neither am I advocating one. However, we are not naïve to the influence of the world to portray God’s ways and Word as antiquated. If God blesses marriage and pronounces it good then what are you afraid of?

Are you afraid of commitment? It’s a consensus among the couples that the commitment to marriage is a reflection of our commitment to serving God. One of the “liberal” attitudes encouraged by the world is hanging out no strings attached. “It doesn’t have to get so serious.” Really? In the world of casual encounters necessary evils evolve, the temptation of casual sex, sex before marriage, cohabitating to give commitment a try; all of which the repercussions has more strings attached than the perceived, outdated, God

ordained dating. The sexual union is sanctified by God in marriage (Hebrews 13:4, Proverbs 5:19). Consider an entire book of the Bible, The Song of Solomon, describes the physical pleasures of married love. Remember God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. Adam recognized this blessing God provided and made good on his commitment, an example we do well to mimic in our dating relationships.

Are you afraid of love? The first thing we should do is remove the stain of the world’s definition of love as an emotional feeling. The Christian ought to know love means so much more than that. We know God is love (1 John 4:8) and 1 Corinthians 13 documents what love is. As imitators of Christ we should be able to substitute ourselves as the pronoun in the Corinthian chapter of love. In so doing we are not afraid to love, and be loved. Still, notice that the casual “hanging out” preference to dating may lead to feelings of love. These feelings “sneak up” on us, and before we realize it we may be standing at the altar. Isn’t it better if your spouse was one you dated with the intention of getting married?

Are your fears confounded by the portrayal of marriage? Again a Christian ought to separate the often portrayed view of married couples living to work, raising kids, and balancing a chaotic lifestyle from the reality of a God ordained marriage. Yes marriage like any other commitment requires time and effort. When I asked the married couples what tests their relationships the general responses were no different from that experienced by a single person. As a matter of fact there were more positives in the union that offered encouragement towards commitment. Before consulting Dr. Phil I would suggest an amiable chat with the married couples within your local congregation to recognize God’s advice in practice.

The Christian dating ought to contemplate marriage as the consequence of dating – a joyful one! It is a step towards maturity in life and your walk with the Lord. If you are dating but finding no one to marry, consider the invaluable responses of the couples interviewed. Do not lower your standards, values, or your hopes. Work on developing more relationships with other Christians. For example, you can meet other Christians at gospel meetings in the area. Patience is still an invaluable virtue. Don’t ever force a relationship comforted that marriage does not have a timetable. Pray! Pray! Pray! God answers the prayers of His children. Consider putting God as a priority even in your conversations. It will help you discover the similarities in value with the one you are dating. Remember God himself saw that it was not good that man should be alone. So “in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths (Proverbs 3:6).” Above all, don’t be afraid to enter into the God blessed state of marriage! †

This is the last issue for 2004. Due to holiday mailings we will not publish a December Abundant Life.

BACK TO BASICS

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What the church is NOT

Awareness of the nature of the church as Jesus designed it is essential. We need to appreciate the local church of Christ as it is revealed in the Bible, and be content with that.

A somewhat different task is to raise warning flags from another perspective, regarding what the church is *not*. Because this task is not consistently undertaken, there is confusion in some quarters. We must respect what the church is *not*. The church has primarily spiritual responsibilities. It has the task of causing the gospel to be proclaimed, Acts 13. The church is to edify Christians, Ephesians 4:11-13. The responsibility of the church in temporal matters is to tend to the needs of indigent members of the church, as it did in Acts 6. If an activity or work is not legitimately located in one of these three areas, it is *not* appropriate for the church of Christ. With these considerations before us, consider what the church is *not*.

The Church Of Christ Is not a Democracy. Democracy is government “by the people ... in which the supreme power is retained by the people”. Democratic governments inspire such sentiments as, “one man one vote”, et al. The church, bought and built by Jesus at the price of His blood, is evidently a kingdom: Christ is the king, and His decrees are expressed on the pages of the New Testament, II John 9. Our especial concern here, however, is of the church in the local sense, and it is in this realm that some think they find democratic rule. They do not. Doctrinally, the local church is directed by the teaching of Christ. The elders of a local church, those who “are over you in the Lord” (I Thessalonians 5:12) are not legislators. They do, however, have the responsibility of leading the flock, of guarding the flock, and this they must diligently do. In connection with this they are to be “not domineering over those in” their charge (I Peter 5:3). Decisions in temporal matters are to be made by the bishops(elders). They may and should consult the members as to their wishes in some particular matters, but when decision time comes they must do what they deem *best*, not most popular. It does not matter if their decision is contrary to the wishes of a few, or of many: it is to One they “will have to give an account” (Hebrews 13:12) and they must act in accord with that.

The Church Of Christ is not a Political Entity

Questions with moral implications – wet-dry elections, abortion “rights”, et al – occasionally get “on the ballot”, and churches (usually, through their preachers) are sorely tempted to weigh in on the side of truth and right. It is appropriate for every Christian to make his/her voice heard in every legitimate way possible, in such matters: but they do this as individuals, not as a collective. It is not the work of the church to bring influence to bear on behalf of this issue or in opposition to that one. This is said in full recollection of candidates holding forth in various pulpits on behalf of their election. It does not matter that many do it – many do many things for which they have no authority – it is *wrong*, and that body whose Head is Jesus will shun such.

It is not that the moral/political questions under consideration are unimportant; it is rather that the matters for which the church is to expend its energy are infinitely more important.

The Church Of Christ is not a Secular School.

The church is to be involved in edification, spiritual building up. This certainly involves the imparting of information; but the information to be imparted is spiritual. It is by the word of God that edification is accomplished, the growth in grace and knowledge of its members. It is no rare thing today to see churches involved in the provision of secular education all the way through high school. There are many things that can be said to commend such arrangements; but the one thing that *cannot* be said is, ‘this is what Jesus died for.’ It is fine for young people to be taught ‘reading ’riting and ’rithmetic’; but that is a responsibility of the family, not of the church. The preeminent concern must be for the wisdom that is eternal: Ephesians 5:17, “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is”.

The Church Of Christ is not a Rec Center. Young folk – and most older ones, too – love recreation. Playing ball, camping, taking field trips, exercising: these are a sampling of good things identified as recreation, and every one should be participating in them. Parents should make deliberate efforts to provide such for their children, and for themselves. As we have seen in other areas, this is *not*, however, work the church is to be involved in. It is misappropriation for the local church to use its resources in such things. Recreation is a family matter.

Conclusion: Many human institutions are created for particular works, and no one thinks it strange if they do not allow themselves to be diverted. Why can men not have at least equal respect for the purpose of the Head of the church? †

Conscience from p. 1

against almost everything and anything – even though these things aren't really sinful in and of themselves. They seem to delight in how their consciences go off over everything and anything. I see some of these brethren with their giant and super sensitive consciences and it makes me kind of sad. The conscience wasn't meant to get out of control like that. Usually such consciences end up dragging their owner into Phariseism where really serious matters are neglected in favor of obscure piety (see Matthew 23:23).

Since a conscience can be fooled into okaying sin and just as well flag something right as being wrong you may think we are fairly useless. But there is actually great value in keeping me clean and pure. If Bill lives in concert with my directives, as he feeds me good information from God's word, he can do all kinds of good in the Kingdom of heaven. A clean conscience gives him the confidence to teach others the Gospel. Bill knows hypocrisy turns people away from the Lord, so he always checks with me before Mouth speaks of Jesus. When I give him the green light the words of eternal life can go forth to save people. My benefits aren't just for everyone else though. Mostly I help Bill keep out of trouble. He hates it so when I distress him about sin! So, when he

is tempted, and I begin to get worked up about it, he often stays out of sin just so I'll be quiet. Heart really likes that, and it makes me feel stronger than ever. I have helped Bill beat our old enemy many times. The Bible and me are a potent force when put together!

Conscience is kind of a funny thing. I am able to be a real help or a real hindrance to Bill. How about your conscience? Is it helping you serve God? **Mark**

TAPE OF THE MONTH

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