

# **Liturgy and the Delivery of a Good Conscience**

## **Our Earthly Reception of Heavenly Gifts**

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There is nothing better than a good conscience. It enhances our enjoyment of life in this world and provides us with a foretaste of eternal life with God in heaven.

Some forty years ago I was involved in a rather revealing exchange. It occurred in an annual family get together at our uncle's house. Late that afternoon I saw him standing outside by himself in the garden under a tree, smoking. I came up to him and asked him how things were going. He was a family doctor with a flourishing medical practice, a man in his late sixties. Earlier that year he had taken some leave for health reasons. In the course of the conversation he asked me what I actually did when I counselled people. After I had told him that I listened to people and prayed for them, heard their confessions and forgave their sins, he said: "John, I don't know what to do. I can't cope any longer. Most of those who come to me should see someone like you. But they don't know it! And even if they did, they wouldn't dare front up with you." When I asked why, he clammed up and changed the topic. Only later did I realize that he wasn't just speaking about his patients; he was speaking about himself and his own uneasy conscience.

If anything, things have got worse since then. Unless I am mistaken it seems to me that we are surrounded by people with a bad conscience, people who don't know why they feel so bad about themselves, let alone what to do about that nagging feeling. The more they try to bolster their fragile self-esteem, the worse they feel about themselves. Some even go to church to seek relief. That may be why we have a popular form of happy worship with praise singing which aims to make people feel good about themselves. And it does that for some. But only for short while until the euphoria wears

off. Then they need to return for another dose of praise therapy for themselves, a new high that masks how they really feel. That kind of worship ends up burdening the conscience still more by implying that all would be well if they obeyed God and accepted His plans to prosper them.

In contrast to that I want to explain how the classical pattern of worship has been designed to give us a good conscience. That's its chief pastoral purpose. In it God shows us why we feel so bad about ourselves, so that He can provide His remedy for our chronic unease. My basic contention is that through the divine service God delivers a good conscience to those who participate in it. By doing that he gives them a foretaste of heaven here on earth.

### **How does our conscience work?**

Our conscience is our capacity for self-evaluation. God has made us so that we cannot see our own faces, except in a mirror. And even that does not show us what we are like inside. Since others often see us better than we see ourselves, we learn to see ourselves through them and their assessment of us. Luther has this to say about how our conscience works (EA 44:298):

Its proper work (as Paul says in Romans 2) is to accuse or to excuse, to cause one to stand accused or absolved, terrified or secure. Its purpose is not to do (anything), but to speak about what has been done and should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved before God.

That sounds as if the conscience were our inner judge. And that, indeed, is how we experience its operation. But it, in fact, judges nothing by itself; it merely shows us how others see us, or, more profoundly, how God regards us.

This traditional, Biblical teaching on the human conscience differs from the all too common popular equation of a good conscience with good self-esteem, positive self-regard, feeling good about ourselves and what we do. Self-esteem, together with good health, is promoted widely as what is best for us in our lives by self-help pundits, therapists, educators, and, sadly, many preachers. The problem with this popular view is that regards our feelings about ourselves as an accurate index of our spiritual state.

So those who want to feel good about themselves are taught to regard guilt and shame as bad feelings that have no positive worth. They must therefore be disregarded and eliminated from the conscience by the practice of self-affirmation. According to David Yeago, we have a post-modern brand of Christianity, a version in which bad feelings are the new “hell” and the loss of self-esteem is a new kind of “damnation”. Its basic confession of faith is that, since God wants me to be happy, his job is to make and keep me happy. Nothing must hamper me in my pursuit of personal happiness.

The equation of a good conscience with good self-esteem is but the latest version of a much older teaching, the teaching of the sovereign conscience that has shaped so much of the western world and your own history as a country.

Put in its crudest terms, it is the belief that I am my own boss. I do not kowtow to anyone. No king, no lord, no master! Since I am my own ruler, no one can tell me what to do unless I should chose to seek their counsel. I make my own rules and live by my own standards of right and wrong. Since I am accountable to no one except myself, I am my own lawmaker and judge. Others must not judge me, except on my own terms, and in keeping with my own sincerely held beliefs. I absolve myself by making excuses for my bad behavior, making up for the bad things that I have done, and rejecting those who disagree with me. And that includes God! In that approach to life my conscience becomes my own self-constructed prison, a prison without any keys, since I am my own lawgiver and my own judge.

In contrast with these modern views the ancient Greek term for conscience implies that we are not only able to see ourselves as others see us, but are also aware of how that differs from the way we regard ourselves. That moral sense comes about through our interaction with others, beginning with our parents and what they expect of us. It results in our ability to assess whether our behavior is right or wrong. We learn to evaluate ourselves from what we do and how others regard our behavior. So we gain their approval by doing the right thing by them. The Bible adds to this common sense understanding by teaching that our conscience works best when we also see ourselves as God sees us. He differs from us in that He sees all that we have ever done, something that no one else can do. He sees the whole of us as persons; he alone sees and knows our hearts.

God is our lawgiver and our judge. That's good news for us and our confused world. Our conscience therefore has His Word as its guide - his law that tells us what is wrong in his eyes and shows us up when we are wrong, and his gospel which pardons us and approves of us as his adopted sons through our union with his Son Jesus. Thus our conscience is a kind of internal umpire that depends on God's Word for its proper operation, like a compass on the North Pole. It does not make its own rules, but applies God's rules. It does not instruct us, but receives God's instruction. It does not pass judgment on us, but receives God's judgment, his verdict on us and his sentence on us.

Apart from the light of God's commandments and his promises, our conscience fumbles around in the dark. It works properly in us when we listen to God's voice, his Word to us as law and gospel – law that exposes sin and convicts sinners, and gospel that pardons sin and justifies sinners. We therefore gain and retain a good conscience through faith in Jesus and the good news of justification by grace through his death for us. We have a good conscience through faith in Jesus.

### **How do we gain a good conscience and what does it provide?**

Consider a window in a house! The dirtier it is, the more marred it is, the less light comes into a room through it, and more distorted is the view out through it. The clearer and cleaner the window, the more the light floods in through it and the clearer is the view of the outside world. That's what our conscience is like. An unclean conscience, a bad conscience, does not let the light of God to shine into our hearts, so that our perception of God and the world around us is darkened and distorted. A clear conscience lets the light of God shine into our hearts, so that we see the goodness of God and his world more clearly. With light comes sight.

The purpose of Christ's human life, death, resurrection and ascension is to give us a good conscience. He delivers that to each of us personally through baptism. Thus St Peter declares:

Baptism...now saves you, not as the removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet 3:21-22)

Here Peter tells us four things about God's gift to us of a good conscience.

First, Peter identifies our salvation with the gift from God of a good conscience and associates both of these with the rite of baptism. Yet, even though baptism is something that happens at one time and in one place, it is not finished once the ceremony is over, just as marriage does not end after the ceremony has been completed. It is not just a past event; it is also a present endowment. It results in an ongoing relationship, a new state with increasing benefits that we receive every Sunday in the divine service. It does that *here and now*. So Peter declares that *baptism now saves us by giving us a good conscience*.

Second, when Peter says that baptism now saves us, he adds that this happens through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the risen Lord Jesus who saves us through baptism. We have a good conscience through his resurrection and ascension. Jesus gives us a good conscience because he is both enthroned as King with God the Father and present with us in the divine service. He is our mediator. He intercedes for us with the Father and brings the Father's gifts to us. He bridges heaven and earth in the divine service. He gives us access to heaven here on earth.

Third, Peter contrasts two kinds of cleansing. We are all familiar with the first kind of cleansing by washing with water. Whenever we are dirty we remove the dirt from our bodies by taking a bath. But that is not what happens when we are washed with water in baptism. That washing provides us to a different kind of cleansing, spiritual cleansing from sin. That happens repeatedly whenever we appeal to God the Father for a good conscience by confessing our sins and asking for cleansing from the stain of sin. Baptism gives us the right to come to God for cleansing; it gives us a permanent pass, a free ticket to use that bath house again and again. We do not receive a good conscience as a permanent possession once for all time on the day of baptism, but keep on receiving it as a gift from God the Father. This means that every divine service is an appeal to God for a good conscience.

Fourth, in Greek Peter speaks about an appeal to God *of* a good conscience. He, most likely, intends that to be taken in two ways. When we go to church we not only appeal to God for a good conscience but also appeal to God with a good conscience.

The good conscience that we receive from God makes us fit for God, open and receptive to him. It adjusts us to him, like a TV set that is attuned to the same frequency as a transmitter. Once we have a good conscience we have access to God's grace (Rom 5:1-2); we can confidently approach God the Father and ask him for what we need, the things that He has promised to give us. We therefore participate in the divine service in order to receive the gift of a clear conscience. That's why God wants us to go to church. We can't get that anywhere else on earth, but only there, fully from God, as He provides it for us. Yet that is not all! He gives us a clear conscience so that we can receive Him and His heavenly gifts for our life here on earth. That's the purpose of a good conscience. God cleanses it so that we can serve Him together with the angels and all the saints in the heavenly sanctuary.

I would now like to explain that further by looking at two passages from the Letter to the Hebrews. The first is from chapter 9:13-14. It compares the bodily purity that God gave to the Israelites in the old covenant with the purity of conscience that Jesus now provides for us: *if the blood of goats and bulls... sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*

Since safe contact with God and beneficial participation in the divine service depend on the purity of those who come to him, God Himself cleanses them from their impurity.

The contrast here is between two kinds of purification. While they are similar in some respects, the second is far greater than the first. On the one hand, we have the lesser bodily cleansing of the Israelites from the physical stain of sin through the blood of goats and bulls that were offered to atone for their sins. That partial, bodily cleansing gave them severely restricted access to God and His blessings at His earthly tabernacle. It ensured that the Israelites did not desecrate God's holiness by their impurity.

On the other hand, we Christians have a far greater, much more comprehensive cleansing through the blood of Jesus. His blood which we receive in Holy Communion, purifies our conscience, so that we entirely clean and holy. There Jesus, who offered himself up for us by his death for us, shares his purity and holiness with us, so that, like

him, we too are holy and without blemish before God (Eph 5:27). No spot! No wrinkle! We stand before God the Father in splendor with Jesus! He *purifies our conscience*, so that we can *serve the living God*.

That wonderful mystery is explored further in Hebrews 10:19-20:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Once again we have a sharp contrast between the Israel's service and ours. The Israelites had limited access to God at the tabernacle and the temple. While they could approach the altar for burnt offering in the outer court, only the high priest was allowed to enter the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement by passing through the curtain that separated it from the Holy Place. After washing his whole body, the high priest drew near to God with the blood from the sin offerings. He sprinkled that blood on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies, the incense altar in the Holy Place, and the altar for burnt offering in the outer court. Those holy places marked out the holy way by which God came to meet with his people and bless them in the divine service.

Unlike the Israelites, we have unrestricted access to God's presence in heaven itself. We can draw near to God the Father together with Jesus our great high priest. We serve as holy priests with him in God's presence. He washes our bodies with the waters of baptism. Through his flesh, his human body, we now have an open way into the heavenly sanctuary. Through his blood which cleanses our conscience we enter the heavenly realm with the full assurance of faith, confident that God the Father will welcome us warmly and give us a favorable hearing. So, since we have a good conscience we can enter the heavenly sanctuary through the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion and receive God's heavenly gifts for our life here on earth.

The architecture of our churches highlights our access to God in the divine service. They are usually divided into two parts, the nave and the sanctuary. While the nave represents this world, the sanctuary represents the heavenly world. The two parts are

joined by an open center aisle that passes the font and goes to the altar. The font gives us access to the altar by its provision of a good conscience. The altar is the place where heaven meets earth, the place where we earthlings draw near to our heavenly King.

Whenever we receive Christ's body and blood in Holy Communion we go down the aisle past the font in order to come up to the edge of the sanctuary, or, with even better symbolism in some churches, to enter into the sanctuary itself where we kneel around the altar. In some churches the stained glass windows in the sanctuary add another dimension to that. Since we have a good conscience, the light of God shines into our hearts, so that we, in turn, get a glimpse of the holiness and beauty of God here on earth. We see ourselves as God sees us, radiant with his holiness.

### **How does the liturgy deliver a good conscience to God's holy people?**

By itself the liturgy does not deliver a good conscience to those who participate in it. That is done by God himself through the proclamation and enactment of His holy Word and our faith in His holy Word. The order of the liturgy is designed to deliver a good conscience by doing what He has commanded and granting what He has promised to give us. Thus each part of the service is done with God's Word. Each part enacts God's Word in some way. That includes the prayers and songs, the confession of sins and the presentation of offerings.

Apart from God's word, the conscience cannot be sure that God is at work with His Spirit, nor can it be certain that it offers God acceptable service, worship that pleases Him (Heb 12:28). So the faithful enactment of God's Word is the means by which we receive a good conscience from God and enjoy serve him with a clear conscience. If any part is done without the Word, or contrary to what God has commanded and promised, the service darkens the conscience of God's people and fails to provide them with a good conscience. Worse than that, the devil uses what we devise for ourselves to burden the conscience.

To show how the liturgy has been ordered to address the conscience, see how each part works together with the whole to provide you with a clean conscience and to serve the triune God with a good conscience.



The divine service begins with the Invocation and the rite of Confession and Absolution. Both of these are addressed the conscience. The Invocation recalls our baptism and our right to appeal to God for a good conscience, a right that was given to us in baptism. While the prayer of confession owns and relinquishes the guilt that taints our conscience, the Absolution proclaims the Father's pardon through the Son by the power of the Holy Spirit. Once spoken by Christ's agent and received in faith, God's word of pardon gives us clear conscience for right participation in the rest of the divine service. It gets the devil off our backs. We need not fear God's disapproval, His condemnation, and the threat of punishment by him for desecrating His holiness. Not now nor at the end of the world!

We can be sure that God the Father is well-pleased with us, just as pleased as He is with His Son. Once we are absolved we are able "draw near to God with a true heart" in the full assurance of faith. We come before Him as beggars to receive gifts from Jesus in the Kyrie and as holy people who join the angels in their adoration of the triune God in the Gloria. Since we have a good conscience we can stand together with the holy angels and share in their heavenly joy.

After that comes the first main part of the service. Here the triune God addresses us and our conscience. We can now hear God's word properly since we have a good conscience, a clear conscience that does not mishear or misapply his Word. Through the Readings from the Scriptures God the Father speaks to us through Jesus and gives us His Holy Spirit as we listen to what He says. By His holy Word God enlightens our conscience, so that we see ourselves more clearly as children of God and become more attuned to Him.

Then comes the Sermon with its proclamation of God's Word as law and gospel. It plays a vital part in God's provision of a good conscience and its benefits by ensuring that God's Word is rightly heard. The focus of God's Word is on the conscience of God's holy people.

Our problem is that as soon as God speaks His Word into our hearts, the devil starts preaching to us as well, so as to undermine our faith by reinfected us with a bad conscience. He too uses God's Word; but he misspeaks it in order to confuse our minds and desensitize our consciences. He misapplies God's word so that we get things back

to front. On the one hand, he uses God's law to condemn penitent sinners and silence the message of the gospel. On the other hand, he uses the gospel of Jesus to excuse sin and disregard God's law. So the Sermon is meant to address the conscience of its hearers by preaching God's Word as law and gospel. It uses the law to expose sin and to show us the good works that are pleasing to God. It uses the gospel to justify sinners and make them holy. Thus the goal of preaching law and gospel is a clear conscience, a conscience free from guilt and shame. It drives the devil from our hearts and prepares us for the rest of the service. It keeps us clean and makes us holy.

As people with a good conscience, people who have cleansed from sin and sanctified by God's Word, we are able to present God-pleasing sacrifices to Him with the Offering and the Prayer of the Church. As holy people we don't present our offerings to God to secure favors from him or to make up for the bad things that we have done. Instead, we present them anonymously as the offering of the congregation for the work of the church and the care of people in need. As holy people we pray for the church, the world and people in need as we are guided by God's Word and led by His Holy Spirit. We can be sure that God the Father hears our prayers when we pray with a good conscience together with Jesus and with faith in his promises. That communal intercession for the world is our priestly service, the pure offering that Malachi had foretold in his prophecy of international worship in the age to come (Mal 1:11).

As people with a good conscience we enter the heavenly sanctuary by receiving the body and blood of Jesus in Holy Communion. We have access to that most holy of all holy places because we have been cleansed from sin. The absolution that we received at the beginning of the service is the key that opens up to door into the Father's house.

When we have a bad conscience that hampers us and at times even prevents us from receiving the blessings of the sacrament – the remission of sins, eternal life and salvation. Instead, our sin and guilt and shame is so magnified by God's holiness that we feel unclean and out of place in His presence. But when we come to the Lord's table with a good conscience we receive nothing but blessing from him. We receive everything that Jesus promises to give us, all that he has gained for us by his life and death, his resurrection and ascension. Best of all, there is nothing to fear from that encounter. No disapproval or displeasure; no rejection or condemnation! Instead there

is light and joy, thanksgiving and peace, wonder and delight, a warm welcome and adoration together with the angels. There in that meal heaven is open above us, before us, and around us, as we stand together with Jesus and the holy angels in the Father's presence. There we join with them in the heavenly liturgy as we "rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy" (1 Pet 1:8). And all that from the reception of Christ's body and blood with a good conscience!

After entering the heavenly sanctuary through the body and blood of Jesus, we are sent back into the world to continue our service of God with a good conscience. Two parts of the liturgy equip us for that - the Song of Simeon and the Benediction. Since we, like Simeon, have held our Savior in our hands and received the gift of salvation from him, we are at peace with God. We have the priceless gift of a good conscience. What's more, because we know that God is pleased with us, we are ready to die. We need no longer fear death because we no longer fear God's rejection of us. We have his approval now and always. So, paradoxically, since we are ready for death, we are also ready for life, real life, abundant life, a life of faith and hope and love, a life of increasing joy as praise-singers and thanks-givers.

The service ends with the Aaronic Benediction. By blessing us God commissions us as his priests, holy people who bring God's blessings to other people and then bring them and their needs to Him in our prayers for them. Since we have received Christ's body and blood with a good conscience, our bodies are shrines of the living Triune God, temples for God to reside in. We take God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with us wherever we go and show His hidden glory to the world around us.

So the service ends with the bestowal of His blessing on us in the Benediction. By that blessing He commissions us for life with Him in the world. It protects us from Satan and all the powers of darkness. It equips us for holy service in our station and vocation. It empowers us to work with Him as the bearers of His blessings in a world that is blind to God's goodness. We are sent out into God's world with a good conscience, a world full of sad people with a bad conscience. As "blameless and innocent children of God" we "shine as lights in the world", "without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation", by "holding fast to the word of life" and letting it shine out through us (Phil 2:16-17).

## **Conclusion**

Through the enactment of His Word God provides His people with a good conscience. That, I maintain, is the best gift that we receive from Jesus in the divine service. A good conscience grants us a foretaste of heaven here on earth. It also enables us to enjoy all the rest of God's good gifts to us in church and in the world.

While a bad conscience darkens our perception and diminishes our enjoyment of life, a good conscience opens our eyes to God's goodness, so that we see the world and human life in it with His eyes. We discover how He "richly provides us with everything for us to enjoy" (1 Tim 6:17). And that vision of life from a good conscience turns us into joyful, radiant thanks-givers.

Much more could be said about what is gained from a good conscience. But let me conclude with two descriptions from two different teachers. The first is from a pastor of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Dr. Lucas Woodford:

Jesus walked out of the tomb to forgive sins, cleanse impurity, defeat the devil, bring order to chaos, and give you a good conscience. And a good conscience enlivens the soul like nothing else can. It brings light amid darkness, hope to the hurting, confidence for the frightened, and security for the anxious. Having a good conscience is utterly freeing. Your mind is freed. Your emotions are unbound. All of a sudden the world doesn't seem so dark. It's easier to breathe. Your senses seem sharper. Your thoughts become clearer. Your feelings become fuller. Joy is real again. Hope is on the horizon. Life can be lived. That's the power of a good conscience. That's what so many desperately desire. And that's what Jesus Christ gives to you here and now.

The second is from St Augustine:

A good conscience is the palace of Christ; the temple of the Holy Spirit; the paradise of delight; the lasting Sabbath of the saints.