

April 2009

Dear neighbours,

It doesn't bother some people but it does bother many.

How do I set at rest a nagging conscience? A troubled conscience? A screaming conscience?

How can I obtain certain forgiveness to absolve my conscience from the sins of which I am only too much aware? Could I know peace of mind, as one of our poets understood it – "calm of mind all passion spent"?

Some, to escape their conscience, try to kid themselves that there is no God. Others try to belittle the Bible which speaks of these things. "If I can but destroy or discredit the Bible," they think, "there will be no accusing voice." But the conscience will not be as easily subdued. Memories of sin have the power to haunt the mind. In the still moments. Out of the blue. There is no telling or controlling when. Still others become workaholics to bury their thoughts in activity. Which is all right until you stop, as stop at some point you must. Then conscience kicks in again.

"It's a minefield," you try to say to yourself, "if I pursue this matter further. It will open up vast issues which I do not want to have to face. Is there a God? Did He create the world? Would He be interested in me? What is His character? Is He holy? Is He love? Is He a consuming fire? Is the Bible true? Is Jesus really still alive? How do I know? Do His achievements still hold good?"

All these things, if we consider them, may cause turmoil. But if we don't, we will still find ourselves left with pangs of conscience - no peace of mind.

On the other hand, if we yield, the Lord will prove the power of His work and the truth of the Bible by granting us that which we could never achieve ourselves. Peace of mind. Peace with God. The forgiveness of sins. Everlasting life. Belief in resurrection and life after death. It is indeed a quest worth beginning; but it is not the journeying but the conclusion that ultimately matters.

Let every one be fully persuaded in his own mind (Romans 14.5). We must each reach a conclusion one way or another and stand by it for eternity.

If it is to be a personal venture then get hold of a Bible. For accuracy's sake, it needs to be the Authorised Version (AV). You may be the sort of person who begins at the beginning of a book and soldiers right through to the end. Fine. If not, may I suggest your earliest reading should include Mark, Luke, Genesis, Romans, John, Isaiah 40-66, and Matthew interspersed with a Psalm at every opportunity. You would benefit from reading the Psalms in order.

But God has appointed "messengers" to help us understand the gospel. The ministers who explain the meaning of the Bible. Not such as put forward their own opinions but those who draw out and make clear what God says. We will make the going easier for ourselves if we allow ourselves to be directed in our thinking in such a way.

At every service at Friston Baptist you will hear an explanation of a Bible passage. The Sunday afternoon service is especially geared to the preaching of the gospel as the means by which we are introduced to all these great things (1 Peter 1.25). You are welcome to attend any service – on Sundays at 1045hrs and 1400hrs and on Tuesdays at 1930hrs. Our website (address above) contains a large number of these explanations. The sermons on the web would provide you a course in itself.

But I'm sure the time would come when you would understand that the Lord is looking for us to take part in corporate worship. It isn't all about resolving issues which occur to our minds.

To return to our theme. The absolving of the conscience. "Absolution," as it is traditionally known, does not do the job, because it depends very largely on someone else's say-so. What the Bible portrays is quite different.

It presents the Lord Jesus Christ as fully God (and therefore with authority to forgive sins – Mark 2.10) and, at the same time, fully man (and therefore knowing the human condition from within). But, more than that, being without sin, He was able to live perfectly and acceptably before God. On the other hand, we can't.

As the curse of death is God's reward for our sin "the wages of sin is death but the gift of God eternal life" (Romans 6.23) we must not only die but bear our iniquity for ever. In other words, whatever else is involved, it means a troubled conscience in perpetuity. But Christ being sinless, offered His life in death as a ransom for our sins.

In other words He made a substitutionary atonement for sin. He took the place of each believer individually, and suffered the penal sanction which God requires for our sin on our behalf. It also works the other way. His perfections are likewise counted to those whose sins are atoned for. The letter to the Romans sets this out thoroughly and was the part of the Bible which brought Luther out of bondage into peace with God. If this is where you are in your thinking, reading the letter to the Romans is your next priority.

Substitutionary atonement works, as, indeed, it was designed by God to work. It brings the labouring conscience peace. It is founded not on what we have done or not done, as the case may be, but on the one act of Christ upon the cross at Calvary. It is a finished work and it has power to absolve every believer who commits himself/herself to such a Saviour. "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4.10). "As it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Hebrews 9.27-28).

Penitence and penance are not the same things as repentance. Saying "sorry" to God is not the repentance of which the Bible speaks in 2 Corinthians 7.10. "Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death." Be sure your repentance towards God is genuine – the nub of the struggle may lie just here for many.

The core belief of the Christian faith is rock solid. Namely, that Jesus Christ made an atonement for the sins of His people once and for all. Everyone who believes (upon repentance) shall be saved (Acts 2.21). The apostle Peter preached saying, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call...Save yourselves from this untoward generation" (Acts 2. 38-40).