

The Vanishing Conscience: *Drawing the Line in a No-fault, Guilt-free World* by John F. MacArthur, Jr., Nelson Books, Nashville, TN: 2005. (27 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Preface

1. Christians excuse and explain sin with secular psychology

The church as a whole is growing less concerned with sin, and more obsessed with self-exoneration and self-esteem. Christians are rapidly losing sight of sin as the root of all human woes. And many Christians are explicitly denying that their own sin can be the cause of their personal anguish. More and more are attempting to explain the human dilemma in wholly unbiblical terms: temperament, addiction, dysfunctional families, the child within, codependency, and a host of other irresponsible escape mechanisms promoted by secular psychology. Page 11

2. The church is assimilating false values of the world

The weakness of the church is not that we're too uninvolved in the politics or administration of our society, but that we too easily absorb the false values of an unbelieving world. The problem is not too little activism, but too much assimilation. Page 12

3. God calls individuals to salvation; not moral reform of corrupt society

Abundant evidence suggests that God has abandoned this culture to its own depravity. Certainly He is not interested in superficial moral reform for an unregenerate society. God's purpose in this world - and the church's only legitimate commission - is the proclamation of the message of sin and salvation to individuals, whom God sovereignly redeems and calls out of the world. God's purpose is to save those who will repent of their sins and believe the gospel - not to work for external corrections in a morally bankrupt culture. Page 12

4. God builds his church, and intercedes for them despite an evil world

God's purposes are being fulfilled, no matter how vainly people strive against Him. Titus 2:11 assures us that God's grace appears, bringing salvation in the midst of the lowest human depravity, teaching us to live "sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (v. 12).

There is great hope, even in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation, for those who love God. Remember, He will build his church and "the gates of hades will not

prevail against it” (Matt. 16:18). He also is able to make all things work together for the good of His elect (Rom. 8:28). Christ Himself intercedes for His chosen ones, people who are not of this world, even as He is not of this world (Jn. 17:14). What is His prayer? "I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth." (vv. 15, 17). Page 13

5. Society excuses evil with victimism

Bernard McCummings parlayed a similar victimism into wealth. After mugging and brutally beating an elderly New York man in the subway, McCummings was shot while fleeing the scene. Permanently paralyzed, he sued and won \$4.8 million in compensation from the New York Transit Authority. The man he mugged, a cancer patient, is still paying doctor bills. McCummings, the mugger - whom the courts deemed the greater victim - is now a multimillionaire.⁶

⁶Steve Lopez. "Thief Becomes a Millionaire Over a Beating," LA Daily News (2 December 1993),25. Page 22

6. No responsibility, consequence or evil

“In place of evil, therapeutic society has substituted 'illness'; in place of consequence, it urges therapy and understanding; in place of responsibility, it argues for a personality driven by impulses. The illness excuse has become almost routine in cases of public misconduct.”¹⁷

¹⁷Charles J. Sykes, A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 13. Page 27

7. The real problem is a spiritual one and call for a spiritual deliverance

But assume for the moment that the problem is sin rather than sickness. The only true remedy involves humble repentance, confession (the recognition that you deserve the chastening of God because you alone are responsible for your sin) - then restitution, and growth through the spiritual disciplines of prayer, Bible study, communion with God, fellowship with other believers, and dependence on Christ. In other words, if the problem is in fact spiritual, labeling it a clinical issue will only exacerbate the problem and will offer no real deliverance from the sin. That is precisely what we see happening everywhere. Page 27

8. Dismissing personal guilt has disastrous results

Personal guilt is for that very reason at the heart of what must be confronted when dealing with one's sin. But the disease-model remedy cannot address the problem of guilt without explaining it away. And by explaining guilt away, disease-model therapy does untold violence to the human conscience. It is therefore no remedy at all, but a disastrous prescription for escalating wickedness and eternal damnation." Page 27

9. Self-esteem theology and psychology embraced by Christians

One might think that victimism and disease-model therapy are so obviously contrary to biblical truth that Bible-believing Christians would rise up en masse and expose the error of such thinking. But tragically, that has not been the case. Victimism has become almost as influential within the evangelical church as it is in the unbelieving world, thanks to self-esteem theology and the church's fascination with worldly psychology. Page 29

10. Only by confessing sin and repenting, is there salvation and freedom from guilt

Disavowing our personal culpability can never free us from a sense of guilt. On the contrary, those who refuse to acknowledge their sinfulness actually place themselves in bondage to their own guilt. "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Prov. 28:13, KJV). "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [But] if we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn. 1:8-9).

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners! Jesus specifically said He had not come to save those who want to exonerate themselves (Mk. 2:17). Where there is no recognition of sin and guilt, when the conscience has been abused into silence, there can be no salvation, no sanctification, and therefore no real emancipation from sin's ruthless power. Page 34

11. All humans have a conscience

The conscience, Puritan Richard Sibbes wrote in the seventeenth century, is *the soul reflecting upon itself*.² Conscience is at the heart of what distinguishes the human

creature. People, unlike animals, can contemplate their own actions and make moral self-evaluations. That is the very function of conscience.

The conscience is an innate ability to sense right and wrong. Everyone, even the most unspiritual heathen, has a conscience: "When Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, *their conscience bearing witness*, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14-15, emphasis added).

²Richard Sibbes, Commentary. on 2 Corinthians Chapter 1, in Alexander B. Grosart, ed, Works of Richard Sibbes, 7 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981 reprint), 3:208. Page 36-37

12. The conscience must be informed by the Word of God

The conscience, to operate fully and in accord with true holiness, must be informed by the Word of God. So even when guilt feelings don't have a biblical basis, they are an important spiritual distress sign. If they're only signaling a weak conscience, that should spur us to seek the spiritual growth that would bring our conscience more in harmony with God's Word. Page 38

13. God's Word strengthens the conscience, human wisdom weakens it

The conscience reacts to the convictions of the mind and therefore can be encouraged and sharpened in accordance with God's word. The wise Christian wants to master biblical truth so that the conscience is completely informed and judges right because it is responding to God's Word. A regular diet of Scripture will strengthen a weak conscience or restrain an overactive one. Conversely, error, human wisdom, and wrong moral influences filling the mind will corrupt or cripple the conscience. Page 39

14. Believers cannot persist in sin with a clear conscience

Can Believers persist in sinning and yet enjoy a clear conscience? Certainly not. "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). The new birth entails a complete overhaul of the human soul (2 Cor. 5:17). A washed and rejuvenated conscience is only one evidence that such a transformation has taken place (cf. 1 Pet. 3:21). Love of righteousness and hatred of sin is another evidence (1 Jn. 3:3, 8). Believers whose behavior contradicts their faith cause their consciences to be defiled (1 Cor. 8:7). And those who profess Christ but ultimately reject faith and a good conscience suffer

shipwreck spiritually (1 Tim. 1:19) -that is, they prove they never truly believed in the first place (cf. 1 Jn. 2: 19). Page 42-43

15. The conscience must depend on God's truth, not personal feelings

An important aspect of educating the conscience is teaching it to focus on the right object - divinely revealed truth. If the conscience looks only to personal feelings, it can accuse us wrongfully. We are certainly not to order our lives according to our feelings. A conscience fixed on feelings becomes unreliable. Individuals subject to depression and melancholy especially should not allow their conscience to be informed by their feelings. Despondent feelings will provoke unnecessary doubts and fears in the soul when not kept in check by a well-advised conscience. The conscience must be persuaded by God's Word, not by our feelings. Page 49

16. The world approves and even boasts of sin

People are not ashamed of their sin; they boast about it. They go on televised talk shows just to glory in their own depravity. And the audiences love it. As the apostle Paul wrote, "Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them" (Rom. 1:32). Page 58

17. Example of the world's approval of sin

Politically, the gay rights movement has made substantial gains. In his first year as president, Bill Clinton appointed at least seventeen homosexuals and lesbians to public office - then invited them all to a breakfast reception to celebrate. "For the first time in the history of mankind a president has sought to break this barrier, this taboo," one of the appointees said triumphantly. "For that, Bill Clinton is going to go down in history."

9

⁹ "Quotable," Daily News (3 November 1993), 6. Page 68

18. Christians influence the world by the fruit of a spiritual life

Can society itself be saved? Certainly not without full-scale revival. Unless multitudes turn to Christ, the downward spiral is certain to continue. With so many dampened consciences and hardened hearts, it would take a revival of unprecedented proportions to reverse the downward direction of our culture. The problems are spiritual and cannot be solved through politics or education. Christians who believe political

activism can reverse the trends in our society do not understand the nature of the problem. True believers must realize that the state of our society is the result of the righteous judgment of God. God has not commissioned His people to reconstruct society. We are not called to expend our energies for moral reform. We are salt - a preservative for a decaying generation (Matt. 5:13). And we are lights designed to shine in a way that enables people who see our good works to glorify our heavenly Father (vv. 14-16). In other words, our primary task is to preach the truth of God's Word, live in obedience to that truth, and to keep ourselves unstained by the world (Jas. 1 :27). Our influence on society must be the fruit of that kind of living, not the product of fleshly energy or political clout.

What we can do, and must do, is keep our own consciences pure. We must saturate our minds and hearts with the truth of Scripture, and refuse to yield to the spirit of our age. To do that, we must understand our own sinfulness and know how to deal with our sins. That will be the focus of the following chapters. Page 75

19. God gives grace and mercy to mankind for His own glory

God says, "I am the Lord, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another" (Isa. 42:8). God has said, "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, and for My praise I restrain it for you, in order not to cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction. For My own sake, for My own sake, I will act; for how can My name be profaned? And *My glory I will not give to another*" (Isa. 48:9-11, emphasis added). In other words, God extends His longsuffering, grace, and mercy to mankind not because we are worthy of it, but for His own name's sake-for His own glory, not ours. "O Lord, *what is man*, that Thou dost take knowledge of him? Or the son of man, that Thou dost think of him? Man is like a mere breath; His days are like a passing shadow" (Ps. 144:3-4, emphasis added; cf. Job 7:17; 15:14; Ps. 8:4; Heb. 2:6). Page 86

20. Unbelievers cannot do spiritual good or understand spiritual truth

Total depravity does not mean that unbelieving sinners are always as bad as they could be (cf. Lk. 6:33; Rom. 2:14). It does not mean that the expression of sinful human nature is always lived out to the fullest. It does not mean that unbelievers are incapable of acts of kindness, benevolence, goodwill, or human altruism. It certainly does not mean that non-Christians cannot appreciate goodness, beauty, honesty, decency, or excellence. It does mean that none of this has any merit with God.

Depravity also means that evil has contaminated every aspect of our humanity - our heart, mind, personality, emotions, conscience, motives, and will (cf. Jer. 17:9; In. 8:44). Unredeemed sinners are therefore incapable of doing anything to please God (Isa. 64:6). They are incapable of truly loving the God who reveals Himself in Scripture. They are incapable of obedience from the heart, with righteous motives. They are incapable of understanding spiritual truth. They are incapable of genuine faith. And that means they are incapable of pleasing God or truly seeking Him (Heb. 11: 1).

Total depravity means sinners have no ability to do spiritual good or work for their own salvation from sin. They are so completely disinclined to love righteousness, so thoroughly dead in sin, that they are not able to save themselves or even to fit themselves for God's salvation. Unbelieving humanity has no capacity to desire, understand, believe, or apply spiritual truth: "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2: 14). In spite of all this, people are proud of themselves! Lack of self-esteem is not the issue. Page 88

21. Man is not naturally good

Salvation from original sin is only through the cross of Christ. "As through the one man's disobedience [Adam's sin] the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One [Jesus Christ] the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). We are born in sin (Ps. 51 :5), and if we are to become children of God and enter God's kingdom, we must be born again by God's Spirit (Jn.3:3-8).

In other words, contrary to what most people think - contrary to the presuppositions of self-esteem doctrine - men and women are not naturally good. Just the opposite is true. We are by nature enemies of God, sinners, lovers of ourselves, and in bondage to our own sin. We are blind, deaf, and dead to spiritual matters, unable even to believe apart from God's gracious intervention. Yet we are relentlessly proud! In fact, nothing is more illustrative of human wickedness than the desire for self-esteem. And the first step to a proper self-image is a recognition that these things are true. Page 90

22. God reveals His glory in forgiveness

God allows evil to continue even now so that He can display His mercy and grace fully through the redemption of sinners. Sin thus allows God to reveal His glory in forgiveness. Page 114

23. The saying “nobody’s perfect” should not be used as an *excuse* to sin

Nobody's perfect. That truth, which ought to make us tremble before a God who is holy, holy, holy, is usually invoked instead to excuse sinful behavior, to make us feel better. How often do we hear people brush aside their own wrongdoing with the casual words, "Well, after all, nobody's perfect"? People claim they're not perfect to boost their self-esteem, but it is another evidence of a vanishing conscience. There is accuracy in the claim, but it should be a timid confession, not a flippant means of justifying sin.

Page 126

24. We are “in Christ Jesus”

Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote,

We are actually in union with Christ and to him. You cannot have read the New Testament even cursorily without noticing this constantly repeated phrase - "in Christ" - "in Christ Jesus." The apostles go on repeating it and it is one of the most significant and glorious statements in the entire realm and range of truth. It means that we are joined to the Lord Jesus Christ; we have become a part of him. We are in him. We belong to him. We are members of his body.

And the teaching is that God regards us as such; and this, of course, means that now, in this relationship, we are sharers in, and partakers of everything that is true of the Lord Jesus Christ himself.⁸

⁸ Lloyd-Jones, 116-17 (emphasis added). Page 136

25. Sin remains in us, but does not rule over us

“Flesh” refers to the sinfulness that remains in us while we are on this earth. It is a corruption that permeates and influences every aspect of our being - body, mind, emotions, and will. It is what makes us susceptible to sin even after we are made partakers in the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4). Though sin does not reign in us, it nevertheless remains in us. It is dethroned, but not destroyed. Page 138

26. Christians are in the Spirit, but of the flesh

Unbelievers are said to be "in the flesh" (cf. Rom. 8:8-9). Christians are no longer in the flesh. We are in the Spirit. But we are still “of flesh” (1 Cor. 3: 1) - that is, we are still fallen humans. Paul even says, "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin" (Rom. 7:14).

Page 139

27. Christians are free to love and obey God

Moreover, because they have been justified from sin's penalty, they are also sanctified - liberated from sin's absolute tyranny. The old self is crucified and the body of sin nullified. That speaks of the change of character that is wrought in regeneration. Believers are emancipated from the total corruption of their natures that rendered them unable to do anything but sin. They are free to love and obey God. Page 139

MacArthur, Jr., John F. *The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing The Line In a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World*, Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994.