

Richard Bernard and his book on conscience

Richard Bernard is one of the lesser known Puritan pastors and writers. Not counted worthy of a place in Joel Beeke's *Meet the Puritans* he is referenced in the newer *Puritan Theology* and is included in Benjamin Brook's 19th century three volume work *The lives of the Puritans*.

What I want to do today is to say a little bit about Bernard, something about writing on conscience and then try to summarise Bernard's book on conscience.

1. Richard Bernard

Bernard lived 1568-1641 in the reigns of Elizabeth, James and Charles. He was a contemporary of Puritans such as Dod (1555-1645), Perkins (1558-1633), Ames (1576-1633) and Sibbes (1577-1635). This was an extraordinary period of English history when, following the Reformation, there were a number of godly and diligent men in the country, determined to take forward the work of the gospel as it had been rediscovered shortly before on the continent.

Bernard produced mostly practical works, works that were eventually superseded by ones from later writers in the same vein. His most influential volume, on the work of the ministry. *The Faithfull Shepheard and his practice* was a handbook for ministers. His most popular work *The Isle of Man* was reprinted many times. His *Faithfull Shepheard* rivalled Baxter's *Reformed Pastor* and his *Isle of Man* may have inspired Bunyan's *Holy War* both better known works. In 1865, James Nichol republished Bernard's sermons on the Book of Ruth, *Ruth's Recompense*.

Richard was the son of John Bernard (1515-92) and his third wife, Anne Wright and was born in Epworth, Lincolnshire, the later birthplace of Methodist father John Wesley. It appears that when a small boy, two prominent ladies (Isabel and Frances Wray) took notice of him and paid for his schooling. Like Perkins and Ames before him, he became a student at Christ's College, Cambridge in the 1590s (entrance 1592, BA 1595, MA 1598). During his time in college he would have been aware no doubt of the executions in London of the separatists Barrowe, Greenwood and Penry.

Following this he returned home to Epworth where he completed a translation of the ancient Roman playwright Terence. By 1601 he had apparently married. They went on to have six children. Some had quite unusual names, eg Cananuel (who later became a minister himself), Besekiell and Hoseel. His daughter Mary married Roger Williams (1603-1684) in 1629 and emigrated with him to New England in 1631. His son Masachiell also emigrated to New England in 1636. He wrote that year to the church elders and magistrates in Massachusetts Bay Colony about their church practices and enfranchisement provisions.

Bernard gained a living at Worksop, Nottinghamshire but his refusal to conform to expected rituals meant that he was deprived of this living in 1604 or 1605. He moved to Gainsborough for a period, where he spent time with the separatists and later Pilgrim Fathers William Brewster (1567-1644) and John Robinson (1575-1625). He appears to have embraced separatism at this time and in 1606 he covenanted with about a hundred people from Worksop and neighbouring parishes to form a church. By the following year he had returned to his parish post, however, his brief flirtation with separatism over for good. He wrote against separatism in 1608.

He was not a separatist but he was a Puritan. In 1608 he was 'presented' for refusing to use the sign of the cross in baptism. It happened again 1611. He then moved south and in 1612 succeeded the faithful and godly Dr Bisse in the parish of Batcombe, near Shepton Mallet, North East Somerset.

In 1634 he was again under attack for his nonconformity. The new Bishop of Winchester, Walter Curle (1575-1647) though a friend to Archbishop Laud had been a friend of Bernard's in college. Perhaps this enabled him to weather the storm. Bernard dedicated his book on conscience to Curle, then Bishop of Bath and Wells (1629-1632). He was Bishop of Winchester 1632-1647.

Bernard had assistance at Batcombe from a Robert Balsom (d 1647) then an Edward Bennet. His successor was Richard Alleine (1611-1681) ejected in 1662.

Robert Greaves (ODNB) says "throughout most of his career Bernard was an example of those godly protestants who practised as much nonconformity as they could within the established church, yielding to authority as necessary but willing to work with those bishops who appreciated his marked commitment to elevating the piety of his parishioners through preaching and catechising."

Writings

A listing of Bernard's 30 or so works will give you an idea of his relatively wide range of interests. His first publication in 1602 was *A Large Catechisme*. It was twice reprinted in his life time and is one of two catechisms he produced, the other an abbreviated version of the first. He also later wrote in favour of catechising.

We have mentioned *The Faithfull Shepheard*. Published in 1607 and 1609 (enlarged) it was again enlarged for the final time in 1621. *The Isle Of Man, Or, The Legall Proceeding In Man-Shire Against Sinne Wherein, By Way Of A Continued allegorie, the chiefe malefactors disturbing both Church and Common-wealth, are detected, etc* appeared some twenty times or so from 1626 on.

He also wrote against separatism (1608) and later in favour of the Church of England (1610). He may have written anonymously against some things in the prayer book in 1641. He wrote against Rome (1619 and 1626) and in 1623 wrote a work called *Looke Beyond Luther* to demonstrate the antiquity of Protestant Christianity. He wrote commentaries on Psalms (1616), Revelation (1617) and Ruth (1628). He also wrote on assurance (1609) maintaining ministers (1613) witchcraft (1627) Christian warfare (1629) the Sabbath (1641) the regulative principle (1644).

Other works include *Contemplative Pictures With Wholesome Precepts* looking at God, Satan, Goodness, badness, heaven and hell (1610); *A Staffe of Comforth to Stay the Weake* (1616) *A Weekes Worke, And A Worke For Every Weeke* (1616); *The Good Mans Grace. Or His Stay In All Distresse* on good works (1635); on *The article of Christ's descension into hell* (1641).

At the end of his life he also produced two large works which were both what we would now call Bible dictionaries.

Collected editions of his works in Latin and English appeared in 1607, 1614, 1629 and 1641.

Book on conscience

His book on conscience *Christian See To Thy Conscience* first appeared in 1631. Its full title is *Christian see to thy conscience or a treatise of the nature, the kinds and manifold differences of conscience, all very briefly, and yet more fully laid open then hitherto by Richard Bernard, parson of Batcombe in Somersetshire*. It was published in London by Felix Kyngston for Edward Blackmore. It is a small book in format and covers 416 pages.

It begins with a 9 page dedication in Latin addressed to Curle as his *reverend father in Christ*. This is followed by an 8 page dedication in English *To the right worshipful and worthily honoured Sir Robert Gorge, Knight. And to his truly religious lady, the peace of a good conscience here, with the perfection of blessedness hereafter*. This is Robert Gorges (1588-1648). One of four brothers, his mother Helena had been a Swedish noble woman and a lady-in-waiting at the court of Elizabeth I. His seat was Redlynch, Somerset.

A further eight pages describe the book's contents, which are in 54 short chapters. Before we look at it, it is good if we say something more generally about writings on the conscience.

2. Writings on the Conscience

Before the Puritans

Christians have long studied conscience, especially in connection with *casuistry*. Several early Puritans, such as Greenham (1532-1591) and Dod, were famous for evangelical casuistry. Such people Jim Packer says “never wrote formal treatises of casuistry” but “practised informally on friends and other troubled souls” and were “famous for a season or two as powerful casuists”.

Etymologically, casuistry is from the word *case* (Latin *casus*) and refers to “the application of moral principles and the determination of right and wrong in particular cases in light of the peculiar circumstances and situation” (E D Cook, NDOT). It has acquired negative and positive connotations. Paul Helm once called it “an ugly word, with a chequered history ... synonymous with trickery, a falsification of the moral accounts” but concluded that “we must all be casuists”!

Speaking impartially, we may say that casuistry seeks to give detailed moral guidance. More positively, it deals with proper moral action in single, concrete instances (*cases*) and is often spoken of in connection with special forms of discipline or to describe a branch of ethics. It is impossible to

frame express general moral rules for every situation, so casuistry is necessary to make law more specific, less obscure, better applied. Such activity goes back at least as far as the Pharisees.

Mention of the Pharisees brings us back to those negative overtones. These arise when casuistry is used to provide excuses or permit exceptions with little apparent warrant. The whole practice came into disrepute the rise among certain Jesuits (founded 1534) of an unprecedented organisation and documentation characterised in many people's eyes by moral laxity.

Scattered references to conscience can be found in early church fathers. According to Douglas Milne, Augustine (354-430) "worked on the idea of conscience as moral witness". Later writers sometimes refer back to the early writings. Early in sub-apostolic times a tendency is discernible to regulate the moral life by outward legalism and foster a casuistic treatment of ethics. This disposition was further promoted in western theology under the influence of Stoic thinking. (The first book on casuistry was probably by the Stoic Cicero, BC 106-43). There was also a tendency toward legalism in ecclesiastical doctrine, one seen even in Augustine, and continued to be characteristic of the western catholic ethical system for many years.

The chief impetus to the development of casuistry was the institution of ecclesiastical penance. This arose quite early and attracted to itself an elaborate ritual, including the imposition of ecclesiastical penalties for individual sins. The customary rules pertaining to the ancient forms of procedure and the relevant codified decrees of separate synods were collected, supplemented and arranged by compilers. Definitive manuals were made for confessors.

Further developments in casuistry were promoted by the entire method of scholastic ethics, with its subtle disputations; the influence of canonical repetition and the universally obligatory institution of auricular confession brought in at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Such influences led to the rise of a distinctive systematic discipline, *theological* (as distinct from philosophic or legal) *casuistry*. A special class of teachers, casuists or schemists, cultivated this in the medieval church and later in universities. Writings embodying the discipline are so-called *summa* of cases of conscience. *Summa* is Latin for "whole" and refers to the comprehensive nature of such works.

Thomas Aquinas (c 1225-1274) became the chief architect of the medieval understanding of conscience and a major influence on all subsequent theologians. While the Reformation stands between the Puritans and Aquinas, there is nevertheless a measure of continuity. Scholastic Protestants like the Puritans consulted their scholastic predecessors, willing to learn from them.

By the time of the Reformers the practice of penance had deteriorated into a form of commerce. Luther is famous for having refused to recant at the 1521 Diet of Worms, saying "... my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe." It was in the light of such struggles that Luther and others forged a renewed and biblically based understanding of the doctrine of conscience.

According to Mark R Shaw, Melanchthon, author of the confession, developed the doctrine of conscience beyond Luther but Calvin took things further again. He certainly rejected Roman casuists who had "no more scruples than the Scribes and Pharisees about laying on men's shoulders burdens". He felt such casuists were intent on "ensnaring men's soul's" and seeking to "tyrannously oppress consciences." However, like Luther and Melanchthon, he had a good deal more positive to say about conscience and the moral law.

The Reformation introduced a multitude of new moral questions. In difficult situations people often appealed to the Reformers and their successors, or turned to the university faculties of theology. In this way Luther and Calvin's collected letters, as well as the counsels of Melanchthon, furnished copious illustrations at large in the matter of evangelical resolutions of conscience. Systematic collections of faculty decisions mark the transition to an increasingly evangelical casuistry.

The Puritans built on their Reformation heritage, taking advantage of the relative calm after the storm to deal with the difficulties that inevitably arose in the aftermath of Reformation. Milne says "Far from being innovators ... the Puritan divines were merely carrying forward emphases inherent in the Reformation movement itself." "Retrospectively" he says "Calvin's doctrine of Conscience constitutes an adumbration of the later Puritan teaching."

The new broom of the Reformation initially swept away much of the theory and practice

characteristic of medieval pastoral care but had nothing to replace it and it soon began to be evident that Protestant practice was not living up to Protestant doctrine. “Early optimism that faith and a good conscience would provide adequate guidance was soon replaced by a realisation that Christian liberty could be misunderstood.” Protestants became increasingly aware of differences between justification and sanctification, the importance of church and state discipline and the crucial role of the Ten Commandments in the Christian life and beyond. At the same time social and economic change and, from 1558, Elizabeth I’s determination to leave the Church of England largely unreformed created a climate for change. In this period Puritan casuistry arose.

Pastors found themselves needing to take time in their preaching to show the inseparability of faith and duty to society and spent significant amounts of time tackling pastoral problems. The Puritans were at first devoid of the well-honed pastoral routines characteristic of the best of the now resurgent Romanists. In 1603 Richard Rogers bemoaned how “the Papists cast in our teeth that we have nothing set out for the certain and daily direction of the Christian”. Henry Holland (1583-1650?) complained how ministers tended rather to “guess uncertainly to apply good remedies, than know how to proceed by any certain rules of art and well grounded practice.” Clearly many felt the time ripe for a new evangelical casuistry. It was not likely to be forged overnight, however.

While happy to learn from their medieval precursors, when it came to “more recent Roman casuists” there was ambivalence. While willing to learn from anyone, casuistry had become “well nigh inseparable from the confessional”, making for obvious difficulties. The Puritans' concern was not to provide manuals for confessors but instructions “for all reasonable and devout Christians ... worthy to be followed with all care by all men.” By their diligence they were able to make the 17th Century one in which, uniquely, casuistical divinity became a subject of popular interest.

Further, many were wary of the “mischievous science” of the Jesuits. For example, their doctrine of probabilism. This taught that in doubtful cases, one may follow any probable opinion however remote, and was open to abuse. They also encouraged equivocation and over-subtle distinctions between means and ends. Within the Roman Church rigorists (chiefly Jansenists) and laxists (chiefly Jesuits) soon fell to disputing.

Four distinct causes of anti-Jesuit thinking have been identified in Protestant writers. First, ignorance and prejudice and the fact that the Jesuits were the national enemy. Also “the scandalous nature of much of the authentic Jesuit teaching” and their tendency to legalism rather than an emphasis on holiness.

In his preface ‘To the reader’, Ames speaks of “some veins of Silver” in the midst of “a great deal of earth and dirt” out of which he has drawn “some things that are not to be despised” but warns against “death in the pot”. His desire is that “the children of Israel” will not need to go down to “the Philistines” (ie the Papists) to have their tools sharpened in the future. Even as late as the time of Baxter the same concerns were being expressed.

Perkins and Ames on conscience

In the Puritan period, two figures dominate. Towering over the rest are William Perkins and William Ames. With Baxter, Gordon Wakefield says they were “the most outstanding and exhaustive of the Puritans” in seeking to resolve cases of conscience. First, Perkins, “perhaps the most significant English theologian of his age”, “prince of puritan theologians and ... most eagerly read”, “mightiest preacher” and “most widely known theologian of the Elizabethan church”, one who made a “quite extraordinary contribution” in the area of casuistry and conscience. His major work on conscience was first published in 1596. Three other books were also issued on the subject and Perkins was working to synthesise them at the end of his life. They appeared posthumously, in 1606, as *The whole treatise of the cases of conscience distinguished into three Bookes*. It was one of the first books where “Reformed theology took precedence in the elaboration of casuistry”. Other Puritans refer to conscience and have a sense of its importance but “Perkins represents a new phase in the progressive development of Reformed teaching”. His work, says Milne, “was truly historic since he initiated not only a Puritan but a Protestant casuistry”. For Markham his “understanding of conscience is the central factor in his writings”. His unique approach provided “a fresh outlook on

the problems plaguing the lives of his fellow men". Mark Shaw similarly claims that "the key to Perkins' thought is found in his casuistry". His casuistry was "a torch to re-ignite the existential dynamic of the faith so visible in the thought and experience of Calvin, Luther and the early English Reformers". Perkins showed, in L John Van Til's words, "an intense interest in conscience not found in the works of his puritan peers." Van Til argues that it is not going too far to say that he introduced a whole "theology of conscience". It is not that he cast aside previous Puritan distinctives but that he sought to view them all through the prism of conscience, identifying it as the key to enabling the Christian to accurately keep his soul in the state that it should be.

The other great Puritan writer on conscience is Perkins' one-time pupil William Ames, "... the greatest theologian that Puritanism produced" (Bronkema). Theology Professor in Franeker, Friesland, he produced two major works - *The Medulla Theologica* of 1623, enlarged 1627 and subsequently published in English as *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, and a companion volume on conscience, based on his doctoral work, in 1630. The second part of the *Medulla* is supplemented by *De Conscientia*, which in turn focuses first on the workings of conscience then systematically treats the Ten Commandments, giving specific applications for daily Christian living. Thus it engages in biblical casuistry. "Ames" says Milne "imparted a new fullness and scope to the field explored by Perkins". To say, as L John Van Til wants to say that "the similarity between what Perkins and Ames had to say about conscience all but ended with the word *conscience*" is a distortion but that there are significant differences cannot be denied.

Sprunger identifies three chief elements in Ames - Ramist philosophy, orthodox Calvinist theology and puritan moral piety. These same qualities are in Perkins and, to greater or lesser degree, other Puritans. Richard Muller sees Ames as following a Puritan methodological pattern in publishing not only a major work on theology but also a major practical treatise. He suggests a similar phenomenon is observable in Perkins who had developed "not only a system of casuistry but also a system of doctrine, which he developed at considerable length in *An exposition of the Creede*. The *Marrow* or *Medulla* itself exhibits this pattern. It begins notably "Theology is the doctrine of living to God" then proceeds to divide between faith (doctrines) and observance (practical application).

Others

Though Perkins and Ames, with their major works, easily dominate the landscape, they are not alone. Others include

- 1617 Samuel Ward (1577-1634) *Balm from Gilead to Recover Conscience* on Hebrews 13:18
- Well known Puritan Richard Sibbes published little in his life-time but after his death friends began to publish his works. He refers to conscience in various places, especially in his exposition of 2 Corinthians 1 where he deals at length with verse 12
- Robert Harris (1578-1658), Westminster Divine, published two bulky volumes in 1654. One contains eight sermons on conscience originally published in two volumes in 1630.
- 1643 *The Soules Looking Glasse* by William Fenner (1600-1640) is on Romans 2:15.
- 1649 Samuel Rutherford (1600-1661) *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience*
- 1652 William Twisse (1578?-1646) *The Doubting Conscience Resolved*

Samuel Clark (1599-1682) produced several works in this area, David Dickson wrote on cases of conscience in *Therapeutica Sacra* (Latin 1656, English 1664). James Durham (1622-1658) wrote on cases of conscience in his 1675 *The Law unsealed* a practical exposition of the Ten Commandments and on conscience in *Heaven upon earth* in 1685. *The Morning Exercise at Cripplegate or Several Cases of Conscience practically resolved by sundry ministers*, some 75 in all, appeared also in 1660, under the editorship of (the aptly named) Thomas Case (1598-1682) and subsequently in 1661 and 1664, edited by Samuel Annesley (1620?-1696) who wrote often on cases of conscience.

- 1672 Joseph Alleine (1634-1688) *Divers Practical Cases of Conscience Satisfactorily Resolved*
- 1676 Nathaniel Vincent (1639?-1697) *A heaven or hell upon earth*
- 1677 Henry Stubbes (1606?-1678) *Conscience the best friend upon earth*

Among the works of Ezekiel Hopkins (1633-1690) there is a short treatise on conscience based on Acts 24:16. There are also insights into conscience in the published works of Puritan giants such as

Goodwin, Brooks, Owen, Manton and Charnock. Bunyan's portrayal of Mr Conscience in his *Holy War* is full of interest and insight, revealing a Puritan understanding of the subject. In 1653 Richard Baxter published *The right method for a settled peace of conscience*. He followed this twenty years later with his massive and comprehensive *Christian Directory*. This "sum of practical theology and cases of conscience" has been called "a lasting monument to Puritan endeavour in this field". It includes discussion of the conscience among many other things and is so exhaustive, it is unsurprising that nothing on such a scale was attempted again.

3. Bernard on the conscience

Bernard's work is divided into 54 short chapters. In the first twenty chapters he expounds what conscience is and in Chapters 21-50 he talks about the various types of conscience, good and bad. His closing chapters give some final counsels regarding the subject and a final chapter on conscience in eternity.

What it is

He begins by stating that conscience is "God's so powerful a Vice-gerent, as there is none that is not void of reason, but doth acknowledge, at one time or other, the authority thereof." (1) We all have one but exactly what it is, is disputed. He points out that there is no Hebrew word for it but sees the idea there as it is in the New Testament under other words. The word is used, first (if he is correct) in John 8:9 and in Paul. "The common subject in whom it is, is the reasonable soul of every man." (3) It is also in devils he argues and to have only a trembling conscience is to be like a devil.

He distinguishes it from understanding, memory, will and heart (even though it is sometimes spoken of under this term). The best of his six arguments are the last two, namely that conscience is such a thing that it cannot be worked to our own will and pleasure. It commands us and we are unable to make it speak or be silent by our own power. Similarly "it hath such an over-ruling power over men and devils as it neither is nor can be awed by any but only by God himself". (6)

Though distinct from other soul faculties conscience interacts with and rules over them all. Having said this, in Chapter 3 he closes the chapter with a formal definition.

That it is a faculty in the soul, having all the rest attendants so, as it commands the whole man in the execution of its offices. (9)

Chapter 4 looks at the etymology of the word, which signifies *knowing with another*. Conscience knows in a way that is beyond the understanding – a self-aware, reflective and convicting knowledge. A realisation of such knowledge will keep us from mere head knowledge, wrong thinking and conceitedness.

Chapter 5 begins by defining conscionable knowledge as *a certain, particular, applicatory knowledge in man's soul, reflecting upon himself, concerning matters between God and him.* (15)

He then works through the statement, beginning with the three adjectives. The knowledge is certain as it is like God's voice from heaven. It is particular in that it takes general principles and applies them to particular situations. It is applicatory as it is has to do with myself not others. He gives the example of David when he realised Nathan's parable applied to him and adds "By this we see why the vain people can be content to hear sermons that apply not home to them, that which is taught; but cannot endure application – because this only works upon the heart for reformation." (21)

As for the knowledge being reflective he describes it by means of a favourite Puritan illustration – that of the mirror. He picks up six points – the eye is seeing not blind, looks in the mirror (something able to reflect), the mirror is God's law, it reflects whether the law is obeyed, the steeling or silver backing of the mirror is taking the law in its proper sense, this steeling both stops the looker looking right through and shows what the person himself is like. If conscience does these two things that leads to two questions, which he deals with.

1. How come so many understand their duties but neglect them? They look at the mirror of God's law with squint eyes, one eye on something else such as pleasure or fame. They don't look long enough either. Even when they do reflect they often find some excuse for not obeying.
2. Why doesn't everyone reform himself? Though they see the dirt on their faces they forget what

they saw and even if they remember they lack God's Spirit to enable them to wash clean. The final thing about this knowledge is that it is about matters between man and God. Conscience he describes as being like God's bailiff.

Chapter 6 then contains five sections on the other part of conscience, the witness. The knowledge is with God and with the help of the understanding, the memory, the rule and a framed conclusion. Like other Puritans he says that conscience reasons syllogistically, concluding a man in sin.

He treats the rule that binds conscience to its conclusions in Chapter 7, seeing it in nature, the Ten Commandments and the New Testament.

The conscience deals only with the person whose conscience it is. It is wrong then for some to say that they cannot come to communion because conscience troubles them about what someone else has done to them. He is careful not to absolutise this idea but insists on the general rule.

Chapter 9 lists five things that conscience meddles with – understanding, thoughts, memory, the heart's will and affection and conscience itself.

Chapter 10 itemises 12 different areas conscience has to do with. He lists baptism (if one is older), preaching, our own hearing and learning, in witness or apologetics, in moral honesty, in serving God, in atonement with God, in drawing near to God, words especially swearing and cursing, our life and how we live it, in our desire for the salvation of others and praying for ministers and when we are tempted to backslide.

Its acts or offices

Chapters 11-16 move on to acts or offices of conscience. He names six.

1. Conscience acts as an overseer or eye in a man. Conscience sees everything.
2. Having observed all it acquaints man with himself. As the eye looks into the mirror or rule so the man sees what he is really like.
3. He goes on “Conscience playing the part of a true friend, and not of a flatterer, and discovering man to himself concerning his ways, either good or evil, in the next place it becomes to be his Director and Teacher.” (74)

This guidance includes three areas – things commanded, things forbidden and things indifferent. In the last case conscience raises questions such as whether a thing is expedient and profitable, whether it will lead to a loss of Christian liberty, whether it will be a stumbling block to a weaker believer and whether it be edifying. Thus conscience acts with varying degrees of efficiency. These facts are a rebuke to those who ignore conscience or who are inconsistent listeners or who think it has nothing to say about matters indifferent.

4. Conscience acts as God's register or notary. He suggests *That though Conscience be not ever speaking to rebels against God, yet it is ever writing.* (84). Conscience is like a spy within recording all we do. It was widely accepted among the Puritans that conscience is one of the books that will be opened and read on the Day of Judgement.

5. He speaks fifthly of how conscience acts as a witness either for or against us. It can excuse (with regard to past, present or even future) and does so in regard of both manner and matter. Otherwise it accuses in similar ways. The third section of Chapter 15 deals with three questions – whether Adam's conscience accused before the fall - only potentially; whether the conscience was created evil, then – no, as its power is from God, is commended by him, is a means of proceeding against the wicked, a means of good and is found in the best of God's children.

6. Conscience “sits down as a just Judge of Oyer and Terminer, to hear and determine, to give sentence, against which there is no appeal to be made.” (98) Conscience either acquits and absolves or binds and condemns. The result is either joy or sadness.

Reasons for, excellency of, failure of and ways to stimulate conscience

Then follow four more chapters before we come to the long list of different types of conscience good and bad that take up most of the rest of the book.

Ch 17 - reasons why God has given man a conscience – to be a witness for God in his just proceedings; in order to convict man that God is powerful, wise, merciful and just; to secure due

reverence and obedience to God's commands, service and worship. Also, so that man may know himself better, making him better disposed to God and man; that he may listen to God's Word; to increase the fear of God and for the better ordering of society.

Ch 18 - on the excellency of conscience. He cites its being the principal part of God's image in man, its acting as God's vice-gerent, its being the most right and pure faculty (this is perhaps a mistaken notion), its power to show a man himself, its independence, its power to encourage God and hold back from evil and its role on the day of judgement.

Ch 19 admits that not all are subject to conscience and suggests a number of reasons why. The first are all to do with disorders in man's soul caused by the fall – namely, weakness of conscience, abuse of wit, wilfulness and doing violence to one's affections. Failing to take God's threatenings seriously and an excess of material wealth are also often factors.

Ch 20 - seven ways to sharpen up conscience – Bible intake, taking warnings against sin seriously, use your memory, moderate passions and bridle lusts, understand how to learn from adversity and trouble, sit under a powerful ministry not a flattering one and lastly be persuaded that the voice of conscience is God's voice (which I would suggest is to overstate the case).

Kinds of conscience

Bernard spends most of the rest of the book looking at different kinds of conscience, some found in unbelievers, some in believers. He comes up with over twenty different sorts. Other Puritans do something similar, though they come up with differing names for them. This is one of the difficulties of the movement from the data we find in the Bible to a systematic presentation of the truth. These differences should not lead us to despair, however, but rather to take note of the various suggestions and compare and contrast until we feel we are getting somewhere.

We will confine ourselves here mainly to Bernard's suggestions. These are spelled out in under two main headings and these two then are further subdivided, something the Puritans loved to do.

1. Evil (Ch 22) Hebrews 10:22. The conscience unpurged from dead works is in every unregenerate person. There may be evil in the conscience of the regenerate but only the regenerate have an evil conscience. He expands on this by asking who has one (every one born with original sin), how it comes to be evil (“by the hereditary corruption, and inbred pollution; by the mind defiled by unbelief .. and dead works ... till it be purged by Christ's blood” (119)) and how it continues evil (ill-breeding and bad education, deficient ministry, unblessed ministry, resisting and hating reproof, preference for flattery and a deceitful heart, turning God's grace into wantonness, sinning against light, blinding by Satan and pride and self-conceit.) As for putting conscience right he recommends in children – good education and instruction in the Word, correction with instruction, restraint from evil words and deeds, keeping from evil company, timely vocational employment and good government in a good course.

Older people should get “acquaintance with the rule, to understand it well, by squaring their life thereafter, by daily searching and trying their ways by the rule; and by observing their agreeing with it, to hold on with increase or the discord and disagreeing from it, and then endeavour to be reformed.” (122)

1.1 Still and quiet or stirring and unquiet (Ch 23). Bernard subdivides the evil conscience into the still and quiet and stirring and unquiet. He gives nine sorts of the first (dead, blind, sleepy, secure, lukewarm, large, cheveril, benumbed and cauterized) and five of the second (erroneous, superstitious, scrupulous, terrifying and desperate).

The still and quiet conscience, he says, belongs in “all dull Nabals, and the muddy spirited”. (126) This conscience is evil because it does not do what it should. It is caused by ignorance, especially wilful ignorance, by self-deception, by an attitude that assumes warnings are for others, having a good reputation and by carefully avoiding anything that might waken the conscience. Bernard warns how dangerous such a conscience is and gives advice for detecting it and changing it.

1 Dead (Ch 24). One sort of still and quiet conscience he labels dead. In this category he places infants, mad people and those “past feeling”

2 Blind (Ch 25) Ephesians 4:18. Here he has in mind the heathen and those in gross ignorance. He admits of degrees of blindness but says all such are in misery.

3 Sleepy (Ch 26) Again a good conscience may sleep but this is a habitually sleepy conscience caused by ignorance due to laziness, coldness in religion, doing duties in a perfunctory way, etc. The remedies are fairly obvious but also include a wise use of vows.

4 Secure (Ch 27). This sounds like a good thing but is used to point up how some are worse than sleepy and seem to lack all care whatsoever. They are falsely secure, filling their minds with gathering arguments to counter conscience. He likens such people to the rich man in Jesus' parable who tells himself to eat, drink and be merry. Such people have false views of God's mercy, low views of holiness and unrealistic ideas of deathbed repentance. He again gives causes and remedies.

5 Lukewarm (Ch 28) He reserves *luke warm* for a rather modern sounding type, what he calls "Adiaphorists, Time servers, men that be indifferent to their religion, this or that." (162) These people, knowing there are many religions and many sects within them, say it does not matter which you follow and that they are all the same anyway. Again the remedy is obvious.

6 Large (Ch 29) It is as wide as the way to hell and can be found in rank unbelievers and in false professors. It refers to a man who "can swallow down sins great and many; that can admit cart-loads thereof without any rub or let" to his conscience (Bernard). The only sin here is being found out.

7 Cheveril (Ch 30) Bernard, following Greenham before him uses the word *cheveril*, which refers to stretchable leather, like kid's leather, used for making gloves or purses, for another sort of conscience. Perhaps a *spandex conscience* would be the modern term. It refers to those who pick and choose what to be conscientious about. Such make conscience subject to their own wills, or are hypocritical or deceitful.

8 Benumbed (Ch 31) A *benumbed* conscience, Bernard's next category, is often due to lack of repentance and can affect a believer - David, before Nathan confronted him about his sin with Bathsheba, an obvious example. Fenner likens a benumbed state to deep sleep.

9 Cauterized (Ch 32) 1 Timothy 4:2. This is the conscience of the heretic, the man past repentance. This is caused by hardening oneself to the truth. Bernard appears to hold out hope for a remedy but he is quite pessimistic.

1. 2 Stirring (Ch 33) This is the case of all the unregenerate who, when they sin, mind the rule and so hear from conscience. This occurs because of awareness of guilt and the law and a lack of repentance. Such a conscience brings about shame and fear. It is remedied by the blood of Christ and repentance and so being brought from under the law into a state of grace.

There follows five types of stirring evil conscience.

1. Erroneous (Ch 34) Here the conscience works but not seeing the rule clearly or using it properly. It may excuse where it ought to accuse or accuse where it ought to excuse. This is the conscience of the weak, the young, the zealous without knowledge. Ignorance of the rule, abuse of it or substitution of another one cause the problem, leading to superstition, schism and other ills. Rather prosaically,

"The rectifying of this erroneous conscience is this, to know the true rule and the true sense of it; to hold only to it, and rightly to use and apply it" (194)

Bernard attempts to deal here with the thorny question of whether conscience should always be followed. He says it should but argues for the cultivation of conscience too.

2. Superstitious (Ch 35) Here he has in mind all those we would today call superstitious. Such people are concerned about their own self-appointed ways of worship and the providence of God. Such people must stop following men and their ideas understand Christian liberty in Christ. He also gives instructions on how to properly think of providence.

3 Scrupulous (Ch 36) Although this again sounds like a good thing this term is used to refer to those who are really over scrupulous. This arises when a person wavers in his thinking, misapplies general rules and confusion about the existence of things that are truly indifferent. Once again the several ills caused and the remedies for them are given at length.

4 Terrifying (Ch 37) This is the conscience of a Cain, a Belshazzar or a Felix. It can only be escaped by faith in Christ as in the case of the Philippian Jailer.

5 Desperate (Ch 38) The only difference he has in mind here is that the person with this desperate conscience is not saved from it, although he does suggest later that there is a cure – but this is no doubt if we avoid getting into desperation in the first place.

“This is the raging conscience, restless like the sea, or as a deer shot with the arrow sticking in him; or as a band dog (ie a large and fierce one) awakening, and ever barking, giving no quiet or ease, day nor night” (224)

2. Good (Ch 39) Acts 24:16. Eventually he comes to the counterpart to the evil conscience, the good conscience.

“The goodness of it stands in seeing aright, in acquainting a man truly with himself, in well directing of him, in witnessing with, and so rightly excusing and acquitting him.” (233)

This good conscience he then speaks of under three headings – natural, moral and regenerate.

2.1 Natural (Ch 40) This is the perfect conscience Adam had at the beginning that is now lost.

2.2 Moral (Ch 41) This is the common civility found both inside and sometimes outside the church. It is not enough to save anyone.

2.3 Regenerate (Ch 42) This is the renewed conscience we all need by grace.

This regenerate conscience he says in Chapter 43 is bound not only by law but by the gospel too. After explaining how the law binds and does not bind in the Christian he looks at seven types of conscience found in the believer. These are

1 Tender (Ch 44) This commendable but rare conscience promotes humility, watchfulness, fear of offending, precise walking, care not to offend, eagerness not to cause offence in things indifferent and a blamelessness. Bernard goes to some lengths to distinguish this conscience from an over-scrupulous one, which is always the danger for tender consciences.

2 Wounded (Ch 45) This long 10 section chapter deals at length with the situation where a believer sins against his conscience. The anguish caused can be brief or can extend over a period.

In Chapters 46 and 47 he again makes distinctions. First between the wounded and desperate conscience and then between the afflicted conscience and “the passion of melancholy” what we now call depression. Here we see typical Puritan counsel.

3 Quiet good (Ch 48) This is “the peaceable conscience clearing, acquiting, and absolving, like Saint Paul's” (350) or Enoch's or Abraham's. He is keen to distinguish it from a quiet evil conscience or to suggest that it will always be quiet.

4 Upright (Ch 49) 5 Pure (Chap 50) 6 Justifying (Chap 51). There is not much differentiation here but it gives Bernard the opportunity to further explore the advantages for the Christian to cultivate and sensitive and well informed conscience.

Chapter 52 is very brief. It is on the singular effect which ariseth from a good conscience regenerate, quiet, etc. The next chapter again makes a careful distinction – between confidence and presumption.

The final chapter (54) considers conscience not only in this life but also at death, on the last day and in heaven or in hell. In heaven conscience will comfort us because there will be nothing weak or sinful in us any more. Many Puritans and others understood the never dying worm and the unquenchable fire of hell to refer to conscience. Dyke understands it in this way – if the worm of hell should die, the fire would go out. That is to say, if the guilt of conscience could be removed then the punishment would end. Bernard connects the worm idea with being bred of corruption, “gnawing and griping in the stomach and bowels” and constantly turning, each element pointing to evil conscience. Conscience drives home the sinner's ill desert to him in hell. As the worm never dies so the torment goes on – restless pain and an inability to die, with weeping and gnashing teeth.

Bernard's final words are very solemn indeed and worth pondering

“Consider these woeful effects of this hell-worm hereafter, which now lieth at rest within thee, that hast hardened thy heart in wickedness. Oh betimes look to thy conscience, make it thy friend that God may be also thy friend, lest it become thy foe, and be the hell-worm among the damned fiends, there to torment thee for ever and for ever.”