

## MORAL KNOWLEDGE & MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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*(A section from the booklet "Free Will & Conscience")*

### THE RELATION OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE TO MORAL ABILITY

Clement of Alexandria said, "To obey or not is in our own power, provided we do not have the excuse of ignorance."<sup>53</sup> And Origen said, "Our own power – when separated from the knowledge of God – does not enable us to make progress."<sup>54</sup> Pelagius said, "For it is impossible for anyone to please someone, if he does not know what it is that pleases him."<sup>55</sup> That is why the Psalmist said, "Teach me good judgment and knowledge" (Ps 119:66), "Give me understanding and I shall keep thy law" (Ps 119:34), and "I have chosen the way of truth" (Ps 119:30).

To be accountable to do better, one must know to do better. One could not be capable of fulfilling their obligation without knowledge of their obligation. One is capable only so far as they are knowledgeable. Since accountability never exceeds ability, accountability never exceeds knowledge, as knowledge is a prerequisite of ability.

What a man does not know to do, a man is not, and could not be, capable of doing. And what a man is not capable of, a man cannot be accountable for. Accountability is always in accordance with ability, and accountability is always in accordance with knowledge, because knowledge is a precondition of ability.

Neither disobedience nor obedience can occur without light. A man can neither obey nor disobey what he does not know. Men are always capable of obeying or disobeying the knowledge that they do have, but men are never capable of obeying or disobeying knowledge that they don't have. Obedience and disobedience require light; obedience and disobedience require a law or commandment. When there is knowledge, both obedience and disobedience are possibilities, the will choosing the one or the other. Under light, there can be no neutrality, the will must yield or resist, accept or reject. When revelation is perceived by the mind, the will must either embrace it or suppress it. Men are capable of obeying, and capable of disobeying, only insofar as they are under light, only to the degree that their moral obligation is revealed unto them, only to the extent that their requirement is clearly known and perceived, only to the length as they are granted the revelation of conscience. All men are either evil or good because they either obey or disobey the law of love, which God has written on their conscience.

Knowledge of obligation and ability to obey or disobey are interwoven. By logical connection, since ability is the unalterable and undeniable condition of accountability, knowledge must also be an unalterable and undeniable condition of accountability, since knowledge is a necessary requirement of ability.

Without knowledge, people may have the capability of ability, but not the actuality of ability; that is, they may be capable of achieving or capable of learning before having the required knowledge (such capability of learning being a prerequisite to the attainment of any knowledge), but they are not capable of performing or doing until the acquisition of the knowledge has been attained.

Therefore, one is only capable or able of what one is knowledgeable of, and since the extent of accountability is the extent of ability, and the extent of ability is the extent of knowledge, personal accountability cannot, does not, and will not exceed personal knowledge.

### **THE RELATION OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE TO MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

Accountability never can, does, or will exceed ability, and ability never can, does, or will exceed knowledge. One is only accountable to what one is capable of, and one is only capable of what one is knowledgeable of. One cannot be morally accountable if one is not morally capable, and one is not morally capable of what one is not morally knowledgeable of. Therefore, a revelation from God, as to what is required, is a necessary condition of accountability. Accountability is in accordance with known or revealed obligation, never being less than, or more than, this knowledge:

“Where no law is, there is no transgression” (Rom. 4:15);

“To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17).

Charles Finney said, “A . . . condition of moral obligation is light, or so much knowledge of our relations as to develop the idea of ought-ness . . . the perception or idea of the intrinsically valuable.”<sup>56</sup>

Let it be understood that increased knowledge equals increased responsibility, which necessitates an increase in accountability. The more knowledge that one has, the more that one will be accountable for. Therefore, increased disobedience to increased knowledge equals an increased guilt. Violation of greater knowledge is a “greater sin” (Jn. 19:11), which necessitates a “greater condemnation” (Matt. 23:14; Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47; Jas. 3:1). A “greater sin” is a violation of greater knowledge. All sin is equal in its nature, being rebellion against light, but not all sin is equal in its degree of guilt or in its deserved degree of punishment, which is measured and determined by the amount of light a person sinned against. A sin is “more atrocious,” said John Fletcher, which is committed “against greater light and knowledge.”<sup>57</sup> All men know that they are obligated to the law of love, but knowledge of what love truly entails and requires may vary in degrees from one person to another; the end demanded by love is clearly known by all (*the highest well-being of all*), but knowledge of the means demanded by love depends upon the amount of knowledge one has. All men, however, are obligated to do what God has clearly revealed to them as to what they should or ought to do.

Judgment is according to revelation. Wrath is according to light. Not a single soul has ever gone to hell for sinning when he lacked the knowledge that it was wrong. But all souls have gone to hell because they knew better than to sin and to rebel against God. All who sin do so against their better judgment; they do so contrary to the demands of their conscience. All sin is a violation of what is intelligent, it is against what is reasonable, against the intuitions of the reason and against the clearly perceived dictations of the conscience. Sin is always against known moral law. Sin is never reasonable or intelligent (Ps. 111:10; 119:34, 100; Matt. 7:24), but is always contrary to reason and intelligence (Matt. 7:26), and is therefore inexcusable (Rom. 1:20). God has given a conscience, which testifies of His own existence and declares His reasonable moral demands, to all men of all nations (Jn. 1:9; Rom. 2:15; 1:21). Con-science is “con” and “science,” which means “with knowledge.” All intelligent individuals have knowledge, and know better than to sin, and therefore ought to will in accordance with their knowledge. All sinners who have a conscience choose to sin with knowledge that what they are doing is wrong, and therein lay their guilt.

Sin is voluntary disobedience to moral light (Jas. 4:17). Sin is the hearts rebellion against perceived reality and truth (Rom. 1:18, Rom. 1:28). Charles Finney said, “To be in bondage to sin... is a most guilty state, because it is so altogether voluntary, so needless, and so opposed to the dictates of a person’s reason and understanding of God’s righteous demands. To go counter to such convictions he must be supremely guilty.”<sup>58</sup> Winkie Pratney said, “To be morally perfect then is to conform our lives to moral light; to live up to that which God reveals in His word and By his Spirit as best for all of us.”<sup>59</sup> If moral perfection is to obey moral light, moral depravity is to disobey moral light, it is to live contrary to perceived knowledge, to rebel against the revelation of God, to walk opposed to the received truth of reality (Jn. 3:18-20, Acts 6:10, Acts 7:57, Rom. 1:18, Jas. 4:17). Gordon Olson said, “Holiness is a descriptive term applied to moral beings who voluntarily obey their moral obligation, conforming to their moral light or perception of truth.”<sup>60</sup> Therefore the word wicked is a descriptive term applied to moral beings that voluntarily disobey their moral obligation, who walk contrary to their moral light or perception of truth.

The measure of responsibility/obligation and accountability/guilt is in exact proportion to the mind’s perception of moral law, proportioned exactly to the degree of the individual’s knowledge of right and wrong. A man’s guilt is proportioned to his ability, and his ability is proportioned to his knowledge, causing him to be guilty only to the extent that he was capable of better, and making him capable of being better only to the extent that he knew better. Guilt cannot exceed ability, and ability cannot exceed knowledge; ability must precede guilt, and knowledge must precede ability. So, moral guilt can only proceed out of moral knowledge and moral ability. Therefore, personal accountability will never exceed personal knowledge. All are judged by the knowledge that they possess, and are found innocent or guilty in accordance with that knowledge.

If a man sins a sin of ignorance (Lev. 4:13), doing that which “ought not to be done” (Lev. 4:2), “he shall be guilty” only “when he knoweth of it” (Lev. 5:3), and is

held responsible only when it is “known” (Lev. 4:14). There is also the sin of being willingly ignorant (2 Pet. 3:5). One is willingly ignorant when knowledge is available and attainable, within the reach of an individual, yet that person willingly refuses to attain it, refusing to reach out for it. Such knowledge is within the realm of attainability (attainable because of that person’s ability), yet it is refused and ignored. Such a sin of ignorance is truly the sin of ignoring the attainable truth. This was, no doubt, connected to the case of the Israelite in Leviticus who could sin a sin of ignorance when knowledge and revelation was made available by God to all of Israel.

Moral responsibility and moral accountability cannot exceed moral knowledge. Conscience is absolutely essential for responsibility, character, and accountability. Moral knowledge is an unmovable precondition of moral guilt. The entire world is guilty of sin because the entire world has a conscience; in other words, the entire world knows better.

The very foundation of *just* wrath and *deserved* condemnation is knowledge of obligation. “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, *who hold the truth in unrighteousness*; because that which may be *known* of God is *manifest* in them; for God hath *shewed* it unto them. For the invisible things of him from creation of the world are *clearly seen*, being *understood* by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20). Men are under the “wrath of God” because they “hold the truth,” because of what is already “known” and shown to them, because of what is understood, the truth which they suppress and reject “in unrighteousness.” Because of this knowledge, they are “without excuse” for their behavior. Justin Martyr said, “In the beginning, He made the human race with the power of thought and of choosing the truth and doing right, so that all men are without excuse before God.”<sup>61</sup>

“For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do *by nature* the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are *a law unto themselves*: Which shew the work of the law written in their *hearts*, their *conscience* also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom. 2:14-15). By “nature,” all men are “a law unto themselves” because of the “thoughts” of conscience all men inescapably have, the natural revelation given to them by God, both of His own existence and of His moral requirements. All men, in all cultures, on all continents, necessarily affirm the existence of God and the requirement of love. God and His law of love are known by all; the consciences of all men make these revelations inescapable.

Irenaeus said, “Yet, at the same time, He issued His own *exhortations*, in order that those who do not obey Him would be righteously judged because they have not obeyed Him.”<sup>62</sup> Natural revelation forms the basis of responsibility and accountability, the very foundation of judgment and condemnation, the reason of guilt and blameworthiness. And as more revelation is granted upon the foundation of natural revelation, responsibility and accountability must increase. And if increased disobedience follows the increased revelation, then judgment, condemnation and guilt must increase as well.

Winkie Pratney said, "Morality is essential the ability to think, to feel, to freely originate choices, and perhaps most importantly perceive and response freely to moral light, the knowledge of what is best and right."<sup>63</sup> Men are responsible and accountable for the precise reason that God has given them a conscience and a free will. God does not judge and condemn morally ignorant or morally crippled individuals. God judges and condemns rebels who know to do righteously, are capable of doing righteously, but are unwilling to do so.

The very existence of morality and immorality is dependent upon the existence of moral knowledge and moral ability, without these, moral character cannot exist at all. And if moral character cannot exist, moral responsibility and moral accountability cannot exist. The reality of moral character implies the existence of moral responsibility, moral accountability, which must also imply moral ability and moral knowledge.

### **THE CLEAR AND EXPLICIT TEACHING OF DIVINE INSPIRATION RESPECTING MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

That a man is guilty only to the extent that he knew better because of his conscience, that accountability is measured by the knowledge of a man's conscience, and increased knowledge equals increased accountability, can be clearly derived from the following passages:

"Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you" (Matt. 11:21-22);

"And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But

he that knew not, and did not commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall much be required" (Lk. 12:47-48);

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34);

"Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth" (Jn. 9:41);

"If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin" (Jn. 15:22);

"Where no law is, there is no transgression" (Rom. 4:15);

"Sin is not imputed when there is no law" (Rom. 5:13);

“To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17);

The Bible also says that some sinners have a “greater sin” (Jn. 19:11). It teaches that hypocrites (who all know better) will have a greater damnation (Matt. 23:14; Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47). It explains that teachers (who by necessity know more) are accountable to a stricter judgment (Jas. 3:1). See also: Matt. 10:15; 11:24; Mk. 6:11; Lk. 10:12, 14; Rom. 1:18-20; Heb. 10:26; 2 Pet. 2:21.

It is abundantly clear that all men are judged and accountable to the knowledge that they have; those with little knowledge are accountable to that little knowledge, no more and no less, and those with greater knowledge are accountable to that greater knowledge, no more and no less. Personal moral responsibility and personal moral accountability never exceed the limits of personal moral knowledge.

### **MORAL KNOWLEDGE AND THE AGE OF MORAL ACCOUNTABILITY**

The Scriptures teach what is commonly called “the age of accountability,” or “the age of reason,” when a child reaches the age when his mind is developed, and he has a proper conscious idea of right and wrong; when he can knowingly affirm and distinguish between the good and the evil.

“Your children, which . . . had no knowledge between good and evil” (Deut. 1:39);

“For before the child shall know<sup>1</sup> to refuse the evil, and choose the good” (Isa. 7:16);

“For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil” (Rom. 9:11);

“To him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (Jas. 4:17).

Psychology itself testifies that the mind of a child slowly develops, and is not fully developed at birth. When individuals have the conscious idea of right and wrong, and have the perception of the Divine and of human value and worth, then they are accountable for their moral actions and states. But if they do not know any better, then they cannot do any better, and, therefore, they have no sin or guilt, their character being determined by their knowledgeable choices. Guilt can only be prescribed to the one that knows to do better than what he does, to the one who “knoweth to do right” but “doeth it not,” to him “it is sin” (Jas. 4:17). Moral ignorance would, in fact, be moral innocence, as the moral condition of Adam and Eve was innocent, though they were naked, before the opening of their eyes when they knew right from wrong. What is tolerated because of ignorance is never tolerated when there is knowledge.

One can be guilty or praiseworthy of nothing except for that which is intentionally committed, and nothing can be intentionally committed that was not knowingly committed, that which was known to be right or wrong.

Charles Finney said, “Moral law is a pure and simple idea of the reason. It is the idea of perfect, universal, and constant consecration of the whole being to the highest good of being. Just this is, and nothing more or less can be, moral law; for just this, and nothing more or less, is a state of heart and a course of life exactly suited to the nature and relations of moral agents, which alone is the only true definition of moral law.”<sup>64</sup> All intelligent agents are therefore moral agents; all with a conscience (*moral consciousness*) are accountable to that conscience (*moral consciousness*), no more and no less.

Jesus Christ had “innocent blood” (Matt. 27:4, 24) because he lived and never sinned (2 Cor. 5:21). Newborn babies also have “innocent blood” (Deut. 19:10, 2 Ki. 24:4, Ps. 106:38) because they haven’t yet committed any sin (Rom. 9:11), but they are morally guilty when their consciences (*moral consciousnesses*) develops, and they choose to voluntarily sin for themselves, against their better judgment.

\*53 Clement of Alexandria; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers

\*54 Origen; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 295, published by Hendrickson Publishers

\*55 Pelagius; *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, p. 45, published by The Boydell Press 55

\*56 Charles G. Finney; *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 1851 Edition, p. 47

\*57 *Checks to Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume One, p. 290, Published by Carlton & Porter

\*58 Charles Finney, *Principles of Salvation*, p. 172, published by Bethany House

\*59 Winkie Pratney; *The Nature and Character of God*, 1988, p. 232, Bethany House Publishing

\*60 Gordon Olson, *The Nature and Character of God*, 1988, p. 232, Bethany House Publishing

\*61 Justin Martyr; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 285, published by Hendrickson Publishers

\*62 Irenaeus; *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 286, published by Hendrickson Publishers

\*63 Winkie Pratney, *The Nature and Character of God*, 1988, p. 172, Bethany House Publishing

\*64 Charles G. Finney; *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 1851 Edition, pg 36