

Evangelical Examination of Conscience

For those with a Roman Catholic heritage an *Examination of Conscience* may be familiar. It's a series of questions, often based on the Ten Commandments or some form of catechism, which you are meant to ask of yourself before going to confession: Have I committed this or that sin? Have I had that wrong attitude? Where is my heart not right with God?



Being lumped together with confession it's something the evangelical church has shied away from. And not for no reason – at its worst, when mixed with penance instead of penitence an examination of conscience could be taken as a desperate attempt to unearth every wrongdoing in order to avoid the wrath of a vengeful god.

But at its best, when done in the light of the God of justice and mercy in whom forgiveness is a rock-solid given because of the cross of Christ, it is an act of devotion, a humble willingness to have oneself shaped for the Kingdom of God.

This is a thoroughly evangelical practice in line with the psalmist of Psalm 139:

Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

In this I agree with David Gushee from a 2005 Christianity Today article where he sees in such examinations a “rich moral inventory” and decries the “staggering moral sloppiness that frequently characterises us” as evangelicals. And he asks:

Which evangelical traditions today train their adherents in

the kind of rigorous self-examination represented by the Catholic tradition of the “examination of conscience”? The Puritans and the followers of Wesley used to engage in such practices, but they have largely disappeared.

Which evangelical traditions today encourage the kind of daily self-examination and rigorous accountability represented by the evangelical Wilberforce? Can one find this kind of moral seriousness actively taught in any branch of the evangelical world?

Christianity is more than an event, an experience, or a set of beliefs. It is a way of life characterized by moral seriousness and the quest for holiness.

I recently put together an Examination of Conscience for an Ash Wednesday service. I did this by looking at a whole bunch of different resources, most of them catholic, and picking the good questions without losing the hard questions. It has been a worthwhile exercise.