

CONSCIENCE

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What is conscience?

- The classical Greek word for 'conscience' is *suneidēsis*, meaning "moral awareness" or "moral consciousness." Conscience is, therefore, part of a person's internal rational and reflective capacity. Some call this the 'inner voice' which enables us to distinguish between the rightness and wrongness of our words, actions and thoughts.
- Christians believe that it is God our Creator who provides this inward ability to facilitate moral restraint. Hence, conscience is what ultimately distinguishes human beings from animals.
- This critical inner awareness is not an independent judge of actions but bears witness to the norms, standards and values we embrace, and apply, in our lives.
- Conscience makes its presence known by our feelings of mental anguish and guilt when we violate it and feelings of pleasure, well-being, and a sense of peace within ourselves when our actions, thoughts and words are in conformity to our value systems and beliefs.

The Biblical perspective

The Greek word translated as "conscience" in the New Testament is not found in the Old Testament. That does not mean that conscience was not operating then. You only need to read the story of Joseph to know that his brothers were afflicted by their conscience for selling him into slavery and for lying to their grief-stricken father. The Hebrew term for 'heart' is much more used as a term for this self-awareness. For example, twice when King David did something he knew to be wrong, we are told that 'his heart smote him', i.e., struck him hard (1 Samuel 24:5; 2 Samuel 24:10). [Newer versions like the NIV do use the word 'conscience' instead of 'heart' to help readers understand the concept better.]

The lack of a Hebrew word for "conscience" may be due to the Jewish worldview, which was **communal** rather than individual. The Hebrew considered himself as a member of a covenant community that related corporately to God and His laws, rather than as an individual. In other words, the Hebrew was confident in his own standing before God if the Hebrew nation as a whole was in good fellowship and standing with Him.

The New Testament concept of conscience is more **individual** in nature, though not exclusively so. The word is used 31 times in the New Testament, mostly by the apostle Paul, and involves a number of major truths.

First, conscience is a capacity given by God to enable human beings to exercise self-evaluation

Our conscience is an indication that there are universal laws of right and wrong implanted and operating within us, whether we are Christians or not, and whether we believe in a God or not. Evidence of this innate sense of right and wrong is a general agreement in all cultures about certain basic moral issues (e.g., murder, incest, paedophilia, lying, stealing, adultery, etc. are always wrong). Where did we get this idea that something is bad and something else is good? How do you know something is evil?

You can only do so if you believe there is such a thing as an absolute and objective moral law, from which something can fall short of. For example, an action is

considered as good only if there was a standard which states that a particular action is good and that to do the contrary is bad. When we say something is evil, it presupposes there is a standard of goodness (from which evil is a deviation from it).

C.S.Lewis:

*My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I gotten this idea of just and unjust? **A man does not call something crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.***

If there are laws, then there must be a lawgiver. A non-personal force cannot give laws; only a lawgiver can. Our conscience, therefore, is a strong piece of evidence that there is supreme holy being. Christians believe it is God, our Creator, who planted His laws in every heart.

This is exactly what Scripture teaches us. Humans, made in the image of God, have an innate sense of right and wrong, a moral monitor that either “approves or accuses” (see Romans 2:14-15). Their conscience accuses or defends them, when they embark on a course of action. This applies even to those who do not know God. Paul, for example, pointedly says that the Gentiles have consciences that bear witness to the presence of the law of God written on their hearts, even though they did not have the Mosaic Law (Romans 2:14-15).

The Fall, and the entrance of sin into human history, has drastically affected conscience but has clearly not destroyed it. There are still universal moral codes. As Christians would say, conscience is part of the residue of the image of God in mankind. Augustine spoke of it as *‘the inner part of man in relation to God.’*

The fact that God gave mankind a conscience, along with His Word, His Son, and the Holy Spirit makes mankind culpable and responsible for how they behave and for the choices that they make.

Second, the conscience is a servant of the individual’s value system.

Over the course of our lives, we assimilate values and beliefs by osmosis, by what is taught to us, and through what is modelled in the lives of others. We develop a certain worldview and a system of beliefs, even if we cannot always articulate them. The conscience reacts when one’s actions, thoughts, and words conform to, or are contrary to, a standard of right and wrong as we know it. Our conscience does not react in a vacuum.

So, our conscience is not an **independent** authority that originates judgments. It is not like a judge who gives the final opinion on what is right or wrong. Just because our conscience convicts us that something is right or wrong, it does not mean **objectively** that they are right or wrong. After all, right and wrong, although there are universally accepted values, often differ between people. It is our value systems and beliefs which have set the standards. In this regard, conscience is not a completely reliable guide and cannot be said to be unadulterated voice of God.

Hence, a man or woman may actually be sincerely following a wrong moral standard that deepens convictions about the “rightness” of certain actions. You can see this today, for example, on issues such as abortion, assisted suicide and suicide bombing. Consider Paul before his conversion: Saul (as he was then known) persecuted Christians with a **good conscience** (Acts 23:1). His deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) told him to “do right” and his ethical standard was “it is right to persecute Christians.” Thus he followed his conscience but what he did was wrong, because his deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) was **ill-**

informed. God needed to change his convictions, which He did - beginning at the Damascus Road with his salvation.

1 Corinthians 8 and 10 reveals this more fully. In the context of 1 Corinthians, a weak (or a less well informed) conscience is one without an adequate knowledge base in regard to idols and meat offered to idols (i.e., a wrong value system), and therefore suffers feelings of guilt (when they don't have to!). Some in the Corinthian church were weak in their understanding and believed that such idols were actually gods which really existed. Paul makes the case that, since idols are not real gods, it makes no difference if food has been sacrificed to them or not. The 'strong' (or those with a more mature conscience) have a proper knowledge and are therefore free of guilt.

The issue of eating meat offered to idols is not resolved on the basis of conscience but on the basis of a worldview shaped by the Scriptures. What we think and believe results in what we do and how we act. In this respect then, conscience merely monitors the worldview that exists within us.

If your conscience is continually exposed to the right teachings, it will be sharpened and enabled to have a real sense of what is right and wrong in different situations. You can now see how conversion in Christ, the Scripture, and the work of the Holy Spirit come together to produce a **mature conscience**. That is why it is important to seek wise counsel and to reflect upon that counsel in the light of Scripture and prayer.

Third, Scripture teaches us not to force a person to act against his conscience

So what happens when we disagree, given that conscience is not a totally reliable guide and our understanding of Scriptural principles is maturing slowly? Paul does protect the function of conscience in weak believers of 1 Corinthians, but not because they are correct or because their views should be forever tolerated. If the strong were to force the weak to conform against their values (albeit wrong), they would thereby destroy a **process of conviction** God created so society could police itself. The solution is to address the foundational values. As the value set is informed and changed in the light of Scripture, there follows an accurately reset conscience.

While a person's judgment may be wrong in light of a biblically enlightened worldview, he or she must be given correct information and the opportunity to pursue maturity without oppressive external manipulation. We treat them with Christian love and compassion. By pressuring someone to do what they believe is wrong you will push them down a path that will ultimately lead to their destruction.

Although unreliable as a guide, our conscience is still an indispensable inner voice we need to pay heed to. We still need to always ask whether our conscience is the voice of God to me or not. It may or may not be. However, the Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: *'If you forsake (conscience) and go against it, you reject the authority of God, in doing that which you think he forbids you.'* I must respect my conscience, even when it is objectively wrong! At that point, I may not know it to be wrong. Conscience warns us, and we must heed its warnings. Act against it and a guilty conscience casts a long shadow that we find difficult to shake free of.

That is why the CiP, in its response to the consultation on religion, personal values and beliefs (December 2016), defends the right of everyone to act in accordance with his conscience, even if not everyone in the leadership team or in the CiP membership shares his convictions. Some pharmacists are, reluctantly, willing to supply EHC (Emergency Hormonal Contraception), on the basis that this is preferable to an unwanted pregnancy which leads to an unloved child or an abortion.

Other Christian pharmacists believe EHC to be abortion in all but name. Those who are willing to supply must support the right of those unwilling, in good conscience, to supply.

In this instance, it is not a question of the stronger or more mature giving way to the weaker brother. It is simply to accord with the Biblical principle that we cannot force someone to act against his conscience, even if we disagree with him or her. We allow the other person to act with integrity and honesty and in line with his convictions. If I do not do what I believe to be right, or if I do what I believe to be wrong, I cut myself into two, and becomes a person who believes one thing but does another. We must never be the cause of someone else stumbling spiritually. We pray for each other.

Fourthly, our conscience can be hardened

When a person becomes a Christian, his/her conscience is heightened, by being informed both by Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is a **lifelong process**. However, the New Testament warns that our conscience can be “seared” or rendered insensitive as though it had been cauterized with a hot iron (1 Timothy 4:1-2). Such a conscience is hardened and distorted, no longer feeling anything. A person with a seared conscience no longer listens to its promptings, and he can sin with abandon, and delude himself into thinking all is well with his soul because he is not troubled within.

A hardened conscience does not happen at once. Sin is a choice. It may be that we are not fully informed by God’s word; it may be we sin despite knowing our actions are wrong. Once we compromise and go against our conscience, we will find it easier to compromise in that area a second time, then a third, and so on. Continued sin then desensitizes the conscience. Unconfessed sin and ongoing unbelief leads us into serious danger, both in this world and in the next to come (see Hebrews 3:12-13).

As a society we can culturally reject God’s way for us. **Proverbs 14:12, ‘There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.’** A culture can distort conscience so much that people will call **‘evil good and good evil...put darkness for light and light for darkness...put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter (Isaiah 5:20).** Not only can conscience be so twisted that it becomes inaccurate; it can even be reversed.

Real Christianity awakens the conscience. Faithful Christian ministry speak to awaken consciences. The awakened conscience is a work of the Holy Spirit of God. Martyn Lloyd Jones, the great twentieth-century preacher, wrote this: *‘The real trouble with the unregenerate is that they do not know and understand the truth about sin....the moment a man understand this true nature and character of sin he becomes troubled about his soul and seeks for a Saviour. It is the peculiar function of the law to bring such an understanding to a man’s mind and conscience.’*

Bear in mind that conscience, in itself, has no power as an aid to obedience. You may sense what is right to do, but you do not have the power or inclination to do right. Confronted with a guilty conscience, we would be wise to respond with godly sorrow and repentance and seek God’s forgiveness. We can only find this in God’s grace and mercy. This is the road to a cleansed conscience and how joyful that is. Thomas Aquinas called conscience, *‘man’s judgement of himself, in line with God’s judgement of him.’*

HOW CAN THIS BE APPLIED TO OUR PERSONAL LIVES, CORPORATE LIFE IN THE CHURCH AND TO OUR PROFESSIONAL LIVES

A daily and close walk with God

We cannot separate our professional life from our inward spiritual life. The Bible knows nothing about the separation of home, church and work. You are either obedient in all or you are obedient in none.

Our conscience is God-given, even though is not entirely reliable. We need to listen to this voice. Our conscience can be reset only in relation to Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Unless we study Scripture seriously, spend time with God, and learn from our church, we are not likely to make much progress. There is no such thing as a lone-ranger Christian, able to discern right and wrong by himself. The goal of the Christian believer, then, is to develop a **mature conscience**.

Obedying your conscience can have consequences to your professional career! But not obeying your conscience will destroy your soul. It comes down ultimately to God's way or your way. The danger we face, personally or professionally, is to say, 'No, not today Lord. Maybe tomorrow'.

It is not a case of knowing the Biblical answers to every situation you find yourselves in. There is certainly a place for that. What is more important is to spend time with God and His word, and allow the Holy Spirit to shape our character. As you mature spiritually, even when you do not know all the answers, you are more likely to make the right decisions as your conscience is heightened by God. Have you experienced occasions when you don't really know what is the best thing to do, and yet there is an inner witness that recoils from a course of action?

Meeting with Christian professionals

Many issues in our professional lives need serious evaluation and discussions in conjunction with other Christian professionals. There is why there is a need for Christian professionals to get together to discuss some of the ethical issues in our professions and how Scriptural principles speak to us on these. We need wise counsel and serious study. We can have a powerful Godly influence on each other.

In our world, we are primarily influenced by the secular, godless culture. How much we need other Christians to restore that balance. That's why the Christians in Pharmacy (CiP) exists, for you.

Engage with your non-Christian professional colleagues and with society

Do not force a fellow professional to act against his conscience even if we believe they are wrong. This applies whether they are Christians or non-Christians. We need to engage with them. We, as Christians, cannot be passive and not present the Christian view. We need to pray for a spiritual awakening in others and that their conscience is sharpened by the gospel.

Dr. Chik Kaw TAN, Christians in Pharmacy, at a talk given to the Christians in Pharmacy meeting in London on 25 March 2017

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