

*the monitor
of decisions
and actions*

9 CONSCIENCE

Perhaps no aspect of ethical discourse is more interesting and relevant than a consideration of conscience. Nearly all of us have functioning consciences. We are aware of them. We experience their pressures. We struggle with them. We rely on them. However, there is no general agreement about what precisely the conscience is. A variety of theories, definitions, and descriptions confronts anyone who examines what has been said and written on the subject. But despite this diversity and disagreement, there is near consensus that conscience exists and that it is indispensable. In order to come to terms with self, others, and God, an individual must have a conscience and be able to respond adequately to it.

There are some individuals in whom conscience is missing, either because it never developed or because it was destroyed in some way. The person without conscience is a serious menace to himself and to others. Although he may intellectually recognize the difference between right and wrong, there is no emotional support for the good, and no aversion for the evil. A person in this condition is comfortable, even "high," while doing something which is known to be wrong, or feels no regret about

refusing to do something that is good and necessary. The technical term for such a person is "psychopath," or "sociopath." Such people constitute a threat to society and usually end up in prison or institutions for the criminally insane.

I. NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE CONSCIENCE

In this brief chapter an exhaustive treatment of conscience is impossible. Rather than an exposition and critique of various views and theories, this is a simple and, hopefully, a practical exposition. The goal is to deal adequately with what the Bible and evangelical theology affirm about conscience and to relate this to the daily life of the evangelical Christian. Stated concisely, the position taken here is that *conscience is the self in the process of ethical deliberation and evaluation.*

A. Conscience Is Not External

In both technical and popular discussions, conscience is often identified with factors or persons *outside* the individual. Conscience is, for example, described as the voice of God within, or as the voice of the church, or one's parents, or society. In other words, conscience is regarded simply as the internalization of external influences. Somehow, through dependent relationships and learning situations, a person becomes conditioned to respond to the will and authority of others even when they are no longer present. Such phenomena do occur. They are related to conscience and must be considered by the ethicist, but I do not believe that any or all of these are the same as conscience. The term *conscience* is best reserved for that which is essentially *internal*.

B. Conscience Is the Moral Self

Your conscience is not someone or something else working in or upon you. Your conscience is you, those elements of your psyche, your inner self, which deal with issues of right and wrong behavior. Your conscience is comprised of mental, emotional, and volitional components. It is you operating with these components to make moral decisions, to act upon them, and to

test them for validity afterward. Your conscience is a monitor built into you which is itself part of you.

C. Conscience Urges Compliance

In advance of any ethical decision or moral action, your conscience urges you to conform to your convictions about right and wrong. It applies spiritual and moral pressure. It leads or, if necessary, drives you toward the right and away from the wrong. If you are moving or drifting toward evil, it sounds the alarm, warning of the imminent deviation. If you are steering a true course, it reassures and reinforces. Your conscience is constantly checking on your ethical and moral responses. Even before you make your decision or begin to act upon it, your conscience supplies its strong and significant input.

D. Conscience Sits in Judgment

Before the act, conscience tries to control and direct. Afterward it passes judgment, and it does this in a manner that is both independent and insistent. It accuses and punishes you for evil decisions and actions, often mercilessly and relentlessly. Even if you are innocent before the law of the land, even if society accepts and approves of what you did, your conscience will condemn you if *you* believe what you did is wrong. In response to the accusations of conscience, people do some remarkable things, as will be described later in this chapter.

On the other hand, conscience also acknowledges and praises you for doing what you believe is right and for avoiding what you believe is wrong. Few rewards can match the approval of one's own conscience, the sense of relief and satisfaction that comes from knowing that you have been faithful to your moral convictions. A "good" conscience is in part one which commends you. A "bad" conscience is in part one which condemns you.

II. CONSCIENCE AND THE MORAL STANDARD

Because they are closely related, conscience and the moral standard are often confused. There is a difference. Clarity and consistency require that this distinction be observed.

A. Conscience Applies the Moral Standard

Your moral standard is your set of beliefs and judgments about what is right and wrong to do. It is your impression of God's will, your guidelines for conduct, your ethical norms to the extent that you have worked them out. As will be explained below, your conscience does not formulate or establish these standards. Other forces and factors do that. Nor is "conscience" merely a synonym for "moral standard." Rather, your conscience is the enforcer of your moral standard. It refers you to your moral standard and attempts to persuade you to live by it.

Your moral standard may be compared with the legislative branch of government, which passes laws and decides how individual and social behavior should be regulated. Your conscience may be compared with the executive branch, which enforces the law, and the judicial branch, which determines guilt and innocence and imposes penalties for wrongdoing.

B. The Moral Standard Is Formed by Learning, Experience, and Belief

Every human being has an inborn sense of right and wrong. This is regarded by many as a lingering vestige of the image of God, or insight into His will which God planted in people at the creation. Traditionally it has been termed the "natural knowledge of the law." Valuable and useful as it is, the natural knowledge of the law is incomplete and distorted. Much of the awareness of God's will was obliterated in people by the fall. All is limited by our human finitude and dimmed by our sinfulness. Part of our basic development as human beings has to do with the building and revision of the moral standard, our sense of right and wrong. From family, peers, society, culture, and the church, formative influences reach us and shape our moral standard.

A Christian's moral standard is, hopefully, formed and informed primarily by God's Word and Spirit. Throughout life this standard is in the process of being enlarged, reinforced, or revised. New issues rise out of the new possibilities that confront us as a result of social and technological change. We must make judgments and decisions about their moral significance in order

to act responsibly concerning them. In some cases new information or improved perception make it necessary for us to change our moral standard. Your moral standard is your understanding of what you ought and ought not to do. Your conscience keeps this before you and urges you to conform to it.

III. POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS

Conscience can be a major force and factor in our lives. It is capable of affecting us profoundly and of rendering us vital services. However, it also has its limitations. It can be ignored and disabled. It can also make mistakes. To expect too much of conscience is as unwise as to expect too little.

A. Persistent, but Not Irresistible

When violated, conscience can inflict great pain and distress. It can make us uncomfortable over long periods of time, haunt and hound us for years, perhaps never relenting until we finally comply with its demands. For example, the United States government has a "Conscience Fund" to receive money from taxpayers who successfully falsified their returns, but are eventually driven by conscience to pay everything they owe. From time to time the news media report on individuals who committed crimes for which they were never apprehended. Decades later, in some cases, these individuals have turned themselves in to the authorities. Although they had evaded justice, their consciences would give them no rest.

Conscience can also act powerfully to prevent wrongdoing. I know a woman who, although elderly and severely arthritic, chose to live in poverty rather than accept an insurance settlement which her conscience recognized as fraudulent. Her husband was killed in a collision with an automobile driven by a person who was drunk. It happened at an intersection controlled by a stop light. She was the only passenger, and there were no other witnesses. Because the other driver was heavily intoxicated at the time of the accident, everyone—the police, the insurance company, even the driver himself—assumed that he had gone through the red light and caused the accident. The

insurance company was ready to make a large financial settlement, which the woman needed, for her husband was her only source of income. However, she knew beyond all doubt that her husband, and not the drunken driver, had gone against the red light. Her lawyer, friends, and family pleaded with her not to divulge this, but her conscience protested. Drunk or not, the other driver had not caused the accident and should not be blamed for it. She was not entitled to the settlement under the circumstances and would not seek or accept it. As a consequence she had to live on a meager welfare allotment for the rest of her life. Conscience is an awesome force with which to reckon.

However, conscience is not irresistible or invincible. It can be ignored or defied. If suppressed often enough in a given area, it may eventually stop complaining, that is, it may become caloused or totally inoperative in that area. If violated often enough in many areas, the conscience can be destroyed, along with faith itself. "Some men have not listened to their conscience and have made a ruin of their faith" (I Tim. 1:19, TEV).

The gradual desensitization of the conscience is not an uncommon experience, even among Christians. Many report that the first time they committed a certain sinful act, their conscience reacted sharply with acute distress and guilt. The next time they did it, the reaction of conscience was noticeably diminished. After numerous repetitions of the act, the conscience no longer responded at all. Whether the act is one of dishonesty, cruelty, sexual immorality, or blasphemy, the conscience can eventually be silenced.

Unfortunately, there are some "educational" or "therapeutic" experiences which are deliberately designed to have this effect. For example, some "human sexuality workshops" expose participants to motion pictures depicting a wide variety of explicit, immoral sexual activity, followed by discussions with persons who admit to being involved in this activity. The purpose is to relieve participants of their "hang-ups," that is to say, the tendency of their conscience to recognize and reject these behaviors as evil. Viewing enough of this material has an effect similar to doing it oneself. It stills the conscience in this area. First of all, it removes objections regarding the involvement of others in these behaviors and eventually regarding one's own involvement.

These observations are not intended as a blanket condemna-

tion of sex education or sexual therapy, both of which can be done in a morally sound manner, and which need to be done in many cases. Rather, what is described and condemned here is calculated efforts to disarm consciences, to render them helpless against morally harmful stimuli.

B. Consistent, but not Infallible

A healthy conscience is reliable in the sense that it almost always points in the same direction, like a good compass. It points to *your* moral standard. Although it may and should undergo constant review and a certain amount of revision, your moral standard remains essentially the same today as it was yesterday. Tomorrow and in the years to come that standard will probably not differ markedly from what it is now. With great consistency your conscience, if it is functioning properly, will direct you to that standard when you are trying to make up your mind about what you ought to do.

Conscience is not soft, and it is not easily fooled. It will not readily succumb to rationalization, whether from you or from someone else. Conscience often refuses to be swayed even by strong popular opinion or by the serious dangers which you may encounter if you follow its guidance. Stubbornly and steadily, conscience points in the direction that your moral standard indicates, like the needle of a compass holding firmly to magnetic north.

Reliable is not the same as infallible. Though consistent and reliable, the conscience can make mistakes simply because the moral standard to which it refers is not always correct. Your moral standard may be misinformed in some areas. From various sources you may have received the impression that certain behaviors are sinful even though God, in fact, approves of them. And, of course, the reverse also happens. Paul refers to Christians who sincerely believed that it was sinful to eat meat (Rom. 14). Elsewhere Scripture refers to Christians whose moral standard has accommodated itself to adultery. Twentieth-century moral standards are no less susceptible to error. "Let your conscience be your guide" is valid only if these limitations are kept in mind.

IV. GOD'S MINISTRY TO THE CONSCIENCE

As God relates to us and communicates with us, He gives special attention to our conscience. Above all He is eager to make an impact in the very depth of our inner being, in this part of us that is involved in moral decisions and evaluation. Since His ultimate purpose is not only to rescue us from the consequences of corruption, but also to rehabilitate us into new people, it is necessary for Him to deal directly and decisively with the monitor of our behavior. Conscience serves as a link between His will and ours.

A. God Addresses the Conscience with both Law and Gospel

This is the heart of God's message whenever He communicates with us. Whatever else He might have to say, whatever else we might want to hear, He always connects it with these key elements of His revelation. We need both law and gospel. Neither can accomplish His purpose alone.

With the law, God reinforces the accusations of conscience. When we violate conscience, and conscience in turn accuses us, God's law usually supports and even intensifies that accusation. Through His law, God warns us that our disobedience is every bit as serious and threatening as conscience indicates, perhaps worse. The unsettling discovery to which He leads us through the message of the law is that we must answer not only to an angry conscience, but also to an angry God. This is, of course, very bad news. We would rather not hear it, but we must, if we are to be helped. Until the full seriousness of our condition is apparent to us and has registered clearly on our minds and feelings, we are unprepared for any positive and supportive word from God.

God speaks His accusing and condemning word of law in a variety of ways. It may reach us through a penetrating sermon, through a word of admonition or rebuke from a fellow Christian, through a passage of Scripture read or remembered. Sometimes God speaks law to us through actions as well as words. By a shattering adversity He may jolt us into the realization that we have angered Him with our sins.

Not every adversity has this significance. Frequently, God uses sorrow and trouble simply to draw us closer to Himself, to

strengthen our faith through testing. We must read the language of adversity carefully and honestly. To the question, "What have I done to deserve this?" the answer is always, "Plenty!" However, if we are already aware of our sin and guilt and sincerely sorry for it, God does not aim His law at us either in the form of word or adversity. The thoroughly awakened and terrified conscience is already responding to His law, and God does not assault it with still more law.

However, in many if not most cases, our conscience is falsely secure and insensitive, or reacting in a weak and apathetic way to the presence of sin. This means that conscience must be aroused and its accusations amplified. It is in such cases that God tries to get at our conscience with the message of His law in whatever form is most likely to be effective.

Troubling people's consciences is not God's favorite pastime. His primary purpose and chief delight is in relieving the pangs of conscience with the Good News of forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Accusing our conscience with the law is His strange and foreign work. Comforting conscience with the gospel is His proper and characteristic work. He disturbs and distresses us with the law because He must—our welfare, as well as His justice and holiness, require it. He heals and pardons with the gospel because He wants to. His dominant characteristic and most compelling impulse is to love and to help us.

Law and gospel are both authentic and essential expressions of His will, but they are not equally important. The law is there for the sake of the gospel, but not *vice versa*. The gospel is preeminent. More than anything else, God wants to minister to our conscience with the gospel, to apply His Word of pardon, acceptance, and hope when conscience accuses us.

Often we seek relief in other ways. We ventilate our guilt feelings, tell others about what is bothering us, and this can help. It is consoling to share deep feelings of any kind with other human beings and to experience their interest and acceptance. Neurotic or misplaced guilt may require psychotherapy. Or, we may try to compensate for our wrongdoing by virtuous and generous behavior. By doing something that is good and right, we hope to diminish the accusations of conscience over the wrongs that we have done. Or we may make excuses. We may try to explain to ourselves and others why what we did was really not all that bad, or why it was, in fact, unavoidable. Or we may

simply try to escape conscience by keeping our minds and time occupied with other things. In varying degrees, these and similar mechanisms may provide some temporary and superficial relief.

However, since God ultimately is the victim of every sin, we need His Word of forgiveness above all. Only He can deal effectively with the conscience that is complaining about real and condemning sins. This He does in the gospel. For Christ's sake He offers pardon for any and all sins. None is too serious or too disgusting for Him to handle. The Good News is the assurance that Jesus died for all sins and can release us from their guilt, even those sins which bother us most. Having presented our sins to Him and pleaded guilty for them, we can be confident that, as far as He is concerned, our record is clean and, because of this, our conscience can also be at rest.

There are cases in which conscience continues to accuse and condemn even after the gospel has been applied. This condition might be evidence of insincere confession, a pretense of sorrow for sin combined with a secret determination to continue in it. Or it might reflect a weak and wavering faith, lack of confidence in Christ's willingness or ability to forgive. In any case, the conscience that refuses to accept the comfort of the gospel, and continues to torment a person despite God's expressions of love and pardon, has become the voice and instrument of the devil. It is misled and misleading and should be rejected instead of heeded.

B. Correcting and Building the Moral Standard

As has already been stated, it is extremely important that the moral standard which conscience enforces be valid and accurate. Since sources other than God's Word supply input to our moral standard and help to shape it, and since our moral standard may be in error, we need God's ongoing guidance and clarification through the Word. We should review and examine our moral standard again and again in the light of Scripture in order to evaluate and correct it.

It may take time for conscience to adjust to some new or revised item in the moral standard. Intellectually, a person may accept a changed value, but emotionally he may balk at the change, at least for a while. For example, after careful study and reflection a Christian may repudiate long-standing racist at-

titudes. However, initially conscience may continue to tolerate them or fail to detect them. Only gradually does it become acquainted with and responsive to the changed standard. During this transitional period it may require special effort and attention on the part of the Christian to live by the revised standard.

For all practical purposes, the Christian responds to the moral standard as to the voice of God. The moral standard to which conscience refers contains our best understanding of God's will for our lives, our clearest conviction of what He wants us to do and to avoid. To act against our perception of God's will is, in effect, a personal revolt against God Himself. He knows when we intend to disobey, and He reacts against that rebellious spirit even in cases when our moral standard was incorrect and the action itself was not wrong.

"But if he has doubts about what he eats, God condemns him when he eats it, because his action is not based on faith. And anything that is not based on faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23, TEV). In short, although conscience and the moral standard are fallible and have their limitations, they are authoritative and essential factors in the moral life.