

How To Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide

Introduction

What do you do when you are faced with a situation that is not mentioned in the Bible? Is there a way of deciding whether a particular course of action is pleasing to God or has He left us without any way of deciding between what is good and bad?

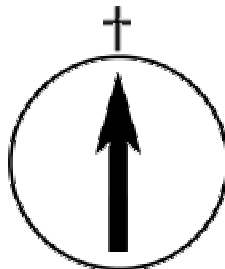
The Apostle Paul taught that there was a way in which we could determine right from wrong. He called it living according to the dictates of your conscience and considered it to be a very important principle, as two passages in Acts make clear. In Acts 23:1, Paul says: "...My brothers, I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." Later, in Chapter 24:16 he declared: "So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man." Just as Jimminy Cricket sang to Pinnochio, we as Christians are commanded to "let our conscience be our guide." In 1 Timothy 1:5 Paul lists a good conscience as an essential element of a life characterised by love: "The Goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."

What exactly is the conscience? The conscience is that part of the human spirit that acts as our moral guide, leading us to right actions as well as showing us when we have done something wrong.

1. Saving The Conscience

1.1 The Unbeliever's Conscience: Corrupted By Sin

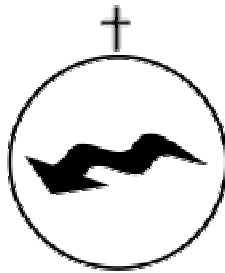
As no-one has ever seen a conscience, so for convenience we can think of it as a compass needle. The conscience is like a compass that points us to right actions. Everyone has a conscience, whether they are a Christian or not.



In Genesis 20:1-7 we read of Abraham's encounter with the pagan ruler Abimelech. When the Lord God showed Abimelech the Philistine that Sarah was Abraham's wife and not his sister (as Abraham had told him) Abimelech protested that he had taken her into his harem with a clear conscience. God agreed that his conscience is clear, showing us two things: (1) Abimelech had a conscience and (2) knew that he had done right by following it. The Lord acknowledges the truth of both these statements.

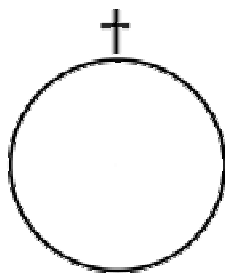
This agrees with what Paul says about the consciences' of the Gentiles in Romans 2:12-15, which is perhaps the nearest the New Testament comes to defining what the conscience is. The conscience is so important that it will form the basis of God's judgement on those who have never heard of either Christ or the Law. Paul says that even though people have a conscience they all disobey it and so sin, even when they don't have the Law to tell

them right from wrong.



So if we look at the illustration again we can see that everyone begins life with a “working” conscience, but because our spirits are separated from fellowship with God by sin a change begins to take place. Sin begins to mar and to twist our consciences so that they no longer point to ‘North’ or guide us to actions. Paul describes this process in Titus 1:15: “To the pure all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupt.” And in 1 Timothy 4:2 he says: “Such [false] teachings come through hypocritical liars whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.” (Brackets mine.)

In both passages Paul is saying the same thing: sin distorts the human conscience, which then becomes corrupted. In 1 Tim. 4:2 ‘seared’ can probably be better translated ‘branded’ .This gives the sense - supported by the context - that the consciences of the false teachers bear the mark of the Devil upon them!



A good example of a distorted conscience (though I’m sure that we can all think of personal examples) happened when I was a University. I’d been round to see my neighbour in the Hall of Residence and spent over half an hour witnessing to him about the Lord. He refused to listen to anything I said, but when I swatted a fly on the bookcase on the way out, he told me off for being cruel. Although he saw nothing wrong with getting drunk or sleeping around - he found it offensive that I should take the life of a fly!

The process doesn’t end with a simply marring the conscience. Deliberately and repeatedly ignoring your conscience will eventually result in its total failure - as if the needle feel off your compass.

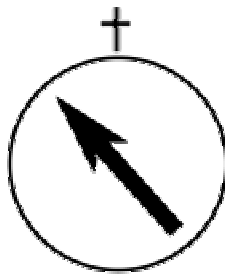
1.2 The Believer’s Conscience: Restored By Christ

So we have seen that everyone has a conscience and that although it starts off guiding us correctly, sin soon throws it “out of alignment” as it were. As you might expect a great change takes place when someone turns to Christ and everything becomes new (2 Cor. 5:17).

Hebrews 9:9-14 shows us that by his death on the cross Jesus provided the means by which our consciences could be cleansed, something that was not possible through the Old testament sacrificial system. This cleansing allows us to “...draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith *having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience* and having our bodies washed with pure water.” (Hebrews 10:22)

This happens when we are born again, when our spirit is renewed and fellowship with God begun. “All things have become new “ (2 Cor. 5:17) - which means that we don’t need to worry about the sins of our past, because they have all been dealt with on the cross.

1.3 The Renewed Conscience: Ready for Training



Looking at our illustration of the compass we can represent the conscience of the young Christian by putting back the straight needle on the compass. Note, however, that the renewed “needle” does not necessarily point to North. In 1 Cor. 4:1-6 Paul says that even as a believer he might think that his conscience is clear, but he still may not be innocent of sin. The point is that our renewed consciences need to be trained or in the case of our illustration - ‘re-calibrated’. In order to achieve this the Holy Spirit the Word of God work together .

2. Training the Conscience

2.1 Training Through The Word

When I became a Christian, the first thing that I did was to search through the New Testament and list what God required of me. Some things are obvious:

9 of the 10 Ten Commandments are repeated in the NT (except the Sabbath, cf. Col. 2:16).

“Do not get drunk...” (Eph. 5:18).

Do not marry an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14-16; 1 Cor. 7:39).

Don’t take a believer to court (1 Cor. 6:1).

Pay your taxes (Rom. 13:7).

As we read and study the Bible our consciences are trained by what we learn, so that gradually (and it is a gradual process) we sin less and grieve the Spirit less.

2.2 Training By The Spirit

If the Scripture tells you to do or not to do something then obviously you don’t need to search any further. However, as we have already mentioned briefly there are a multitude of things that we experience each day that the Scriptures do not cover directly, because if they did they would be a rule-book as large as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It is precisely because God wants to train us to trust him and grow up as his sons and daughters that He has not given us such a book. Christianity is not a religion of rules, it is a religion of relationship!

So the second way in which our consciences are trained is by the Holy Spirit, which Jesus promised us in John 16:12-15 would lead His disciples into all truth. This is, of course, more subjective than using the Scriptures and you will find that the Holy Spirit deals with us all as individuals according to what stage we are at in our relationship with God. A friend of mine who has been a Christian for a long time once told me one day that the Holy Spirit had rebuked him for wasting time looking in shop windows instead of doing something more useful. Perhaps it would be good to give a practical example of how this works. You all listen to Christian music, but how many of you have ‘tested’ that music to see if it builds you up?

You can do this by spending an hour or so in prayer and worshipping God, and then play some of the music. If you feel the presence of the Lord upon you is decreased or your spirit grieved then don't listen to it any more. Keep on testing what you listen to throughout your life, because you will probably find that although you used to find a certain group or singer edifying a few years ago, as your relationship develops, and you may not find it edifying any longer. It would be quite wrong for anyone to list the groups that he or she cannot listen to and attempt to enforce it on other people, as we shall see later.

2.3 Training The Conscience By Love for Others

Paul covers this subject in 3 passages in the New Testament (Romans 14:13-23; 1 Cor. 8:4-13; 1 Cor. 10:23-33). They speak of the problem the Corinthians had with regard to eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Corinth was a city that was full of temples and it was a fair bet that most of the meat for sale in the marketplace had been sacrificed to an idol first. Paul says that there is nothing wrong with the meat, but this does not mean that it is always right to eat it. We can draw 2 principles from these passages:

2.3.1 Think about the consequences of your actions upon others

This principle can be found in Romans 14:14-15 and 1 Cor. 8:9-13. We can bring this right up to date by asking the question "Is it right for a Christian to drink alcohol?" The New Testament says that it is wrong to *get drunk*, but nowhere does it forbid the drinking of alcoholic drinks. You may feel OK in your spirit about drinking, so you pass the second test, but what if a brother who was an alcoholic sees you drinking and is encouraged to start drinking again? You have hurt your brother in Christ by encouraging him to go against the dictates of his own conscience. I'm not saying whether or not I think that drinking alcohol is wrong. That is the point - you have to consider it for yourself.

2.3.2 If the Scripture does not forbid it, don't pass judgement upon it. Keep what you believe to yourself

This principle is found in Romans 14:22-23 and 1 Cor. 4:6; 10:25-30. Sometimes the best thing is to keep your mouth shut and let people follow their own conscience in non-essential matters. This applies mainly in areas of morality and doctrine, which should always be treated as being of vital importance (cf. 1 Tim. 4:16; Jude 3).

3 Conclusion

So we have seen that our consciences are renewed when we are born again, but need to be trained by the Word, the Spirit and by love for one another. We should therefore make it our aim to allow God to train our consciences and keep them clear.