

CONSCIENCE – AN INTRODUCTION

Aim: This short article begins to explain why 'conscience' is not simply – or infallibly – the 'Voice of God' in us. Since it governs our behaviour we need to know something about it.

1. Conscience is like a compass

Our conscience behaves rather like a magnetic compass.

A compass

- is, surprisingly, NOT able to point to True North,
it points to *magnetic* north – which is elsewhere and moves around!

A compass

- can become quite unreliable if near the wrong things,
e.g. next to a magnet, or a bulk of metal.

Similarly, our consciences are

- never completely True,
- and
- can be unreliable.

Let me explain.

2. Conscience is not always ‘True’

Our consciences are never always utterly true because they are the result of different things - our society, our family, our upbringing, our personality, our body-chemistry, our choices, the example of those around us, etc., and (in theological terms) because human nature is ‘fallen’.

3. The Role of Conscience

At best our conscience

- alerts us to what is bad
- directs us to what is good

4. ‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ can differ

The snag is that both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ can differ, according to

- Era
- Knowledge
- Geography

Here are two things thought 'good' in one era, but 'bad' in another

- Slavery
- Smoking

5. Understanding can alter peoples' consciences

For example

- The ‘Green Movement’
- Women’s Lib.

Both have modified popular beliefs, so they have resulted in some changed behaviour.

6. Belief changes Conscience – for good or ill

- The introduction of Nazi beliefs introduced Nazi behaviour.
- Christian beliefs produce Christian behaviour.

7. Jesus’s approach to Belief and Conscience

A Jewish expert in the Law once questioned Jesus about God’s command that we should love our *neighbour* [Luke 10:29, but see context from v. 25].

‘...*who is my neighbour?*’ he asked Jesus. Jesus told him – and in no uncertain terms!

Because the Jews despised the Samaritans, Jesus answered by way of a very pointed story of a Samaritan as a model of goodness!! [Luke 10:30-37] Jesus did not ‘tread carefully’, as we say nowadays.

Jesus’s purpose was very clear. He wanted

- to correct his questioner’s **beliefs**,
- so that his **conscience** would become sharper and
- his **behaviour** better.

To plant the newly revealed truths more fully in the lawyer’s heart and thinking, Jesus did not just leave him to mull it over, but pressed him publicly to answer his question. Was it the *priest* in the parable, or the *Levite*, or the *Samaritan* that had been the true ‘neighbour’ to the mugged victim?

There was only one answer, of course - the *Samaritan!* The Lawyer knew that – but his racism (no new thing!) was so strong that he couldn't even *mention* a ‘Samaritan’! He evasively replied, ‘*The one who had mercy on him.*’

Jesus put pressure on the Jewish leader still further. He commanded him *Go and do likewise!* In other words “You – a good Jew – need to behave like a good Samaritan!”

It is a story that down the centuries has sharpened the conscience of millions – many of them non-Christians. No record has come down to us about whether it sharpened the conscience of the Jewish Lawyer.

8. Two Christian Experiences of Belief & Conscience

Both Peter and Saul experienced now-famous occasions when Jesus changed their beliefs and their consciences.

(a) Saul

Saul's Jewish conscience led him at first to persecute Christians [Acts 8:3, 9:1-2].

But at his conversion on the Damascus Road, the Risen Christ immediately questioned his behaviour - *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* [Acts 9:4] Jesus Christ changed Saul's conscience from saying

- I ought to persecute Christians
- to
- I ought NOT to persecute Christians.

Saul's conscience is altered by his changed belief.

Sincerity is not enough

Please note carefully that sincerity of belief does not make a belief right.

When Saul was persecuting the Christians he was probably among the most sincere of the Jewish leaders.

Jesus dramatically taught him that he had been *sincerely wrong*.

Christian sincerity does not, in itself, make our actions good. The occasional young Christian man who feels tormented by sexual sin has been known to re-apply literally the principle of Jesus's argument *if your eye offends you cut it out*.

The sincerity needed for such an act cannot be in doubt, but sincerity does not guarantee the truth or rightness of the belief that prompted it – even sincerity supposedly based on Scripture. Sincerity is not enough. Christians can be sincerely wrong.

(b) Simon Peter

Just as Paul's Jewish conscience caused him first to persecute the Christians, so Peter's Jewish conscience told him that non-Jews and other things were unclean and *ought not* to be touched.

God spoke to Peter through a vision as clearly as the Risen Jesus had spoken to Paul.

God gave Peter a vision of a blanket let down from heaven full of technically 'unclean' or 'impure' animals, and commanded Peter to eat them! [Acts 10:10ff.] For Peter that was unthinkable. He had never touched anything unclean and was appalled at the idea.

But God changed Peter's conscience (in the opposite direction to the change that Saul experienced.) God changed Peter's

- *I ought not*
- to
- *I ought!*

The existence of the worldwide Christian Church is in considerable measure due to the dramatic changes that God made to the consciences of Simon Peter and of Saul. Our consciences matter very greatly!

9. Jesus is watching you!

A number of Christians – especially younger ones – may have been advised by adult Christians always to behave as if Jesus was watching them.

On first impression this seems a good idea, but it can have some considerable drawbacks. It requires of the Christian concerned that they have a true and balanced idea of Jesus and his attitudes to us. This is by no means easy or obvious.

The 'Jesus Is Watching You' concept can quickly slip into making Jesus simply a person who is a condemning Judge of the visibly wrong. It can throw some visible acts into undue prominence, while non-visible sins – like pride, envy, etc. – pass unnoticed. This seems to me to be largely out-of-key with the ministry of Jesus who was so often eager to get behind the visible surface of things to the real attitudes that prompted them. [See the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5-7.]

(Generally speaking we tend to be much more concerned with the visible aspects of Christian living than with its less obvious or less visible ones.)

Imagining Jesus as little more than some sort of All-seeing Eye, can easily eclipse the reality and joy of Jesus being our Saviour and helper and his eagerness to meet us at our point of need, and to impart his Spirit to help us. Christ's joy is to begin to *deliver* us from our weaknesses – his aim is not to catch us out, but to *rescue* us!

Our Lord was given the name *Jesus* because he would *save his people from their sins*. It may indeed be part of that saving process to expose sin, but Jesus must not be seen primarily as a Policeman – however much some parents might find it useful to encourage the idea!

10. What then?

Our Christian consciences need to be

- Well founded
- Closely guarded
- Treated well
- Trained
- Fine-tuned
- Reviewed

Below is a brief outline of what I mean by these six things.

Well founded

What do you allow your conscience to be moulded by? Friends? Society? Wants?

A Christian's conscience should be always growing Christ-like. But Christ-likeness cannot be achieved merely by human effort, it is the result of the Spirit of Jesus invited to work moment by moment with us.

Closely Guarded

Protect your conscience. It is a very delicate instrument. Do not expose it to powerful influences which are out of harmony with the Lord Jesus whom you serve. Its needs protection

from evil, and you should recognise that the petition in the Lord's Prayer for deliverance from evil is of paramount importance as far as your conscience is concerned.

Treated Well

Compare the time and effort you spend on the things of life like beauty, wealth, status, fitness, etc. None of these are at the heart of life or at the heart of you. Your conscience is sometimes called ‘God’s Voice’ within you. You are at your most divine! Give your conscience the attention that it deserves.

Trained

Ask yourself which way is your conscience being trained? Are you exposing it to endless horror and violence via the media? Is your choice of newspaper and what you choose to read swamping you, your life and your conscience with things less-than-good – if not actually evil? The traditional Christian disciplines of fasting and tithing can help a Christian to get his/her thinking and conscience into a better balance.

Fine-Tuned

Do not assume that the conscience you had last year will do you well enough for this! Like a car – its needs servicing. As the circumstances of your life change and develop, your conscience will need to assess new things and react to situations not previously experienced. Prepare it for what lies ahead – don't get caught out.

Reviewed

Give your conscience a regular check-over – certainly not less than yearly. It should have changed. If you have allowed the Holy Spirit regularly to fine-tune your conscience it will change. In some things the Holy Spirit will probably have needed to sharpen it. But he may well work in the other direction – and in some areas give a new ease and greater freedom. In short: to strengthen it where it is weak, and to weaken it where it is over-strong.

11. A Final Word

Why not give your conscience a real holiday?

A new agenda? Rest! Refreshment! Renewal!

St. Paul tells us how -

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.