



Conducted by
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“ASSUMING that conscience is a God-given propensity, what is the scriptural definition of conscience and what use should be made of it as far as the Christian is concerned?”

Conscience : What it is

We can indeed assume that conscience is a God-given attribute or, at the very least, a by-product of other God-given attributes. Man was not made as some kind of mechanical robot or machine, a prisoner of his own destiny, but was given the capacity of free will, and thus able to choose his way of life – to follow after good or to pursue evil. Conscience derives its existence from man's ability either to do that which is good or that which he *knows* to be evil. Having said that, it follows that *knowledge* has a very important role to play.

I don't know that the word "conscience" is ever given a *defination* in God's word, but the word itself is used several times and is used in such a way that we can readily grasp its meaning. The Greek word used for "conscience" in the N.T. is *suneidesis* which means "A knowing with oneself". This accords with our own derivation of the word when we remember that the prefix "*con*" means "with" or "together", and "*science*" means "knowledge". Thus conscience means "according to knowledge". We do not always act in accordance with our knowledge, and then we become aware of the fact that we have a conscience. Conscience has been described as a "still small voice" which comments upon our actions. I read somewhere that Milton in *Paradise Lost* puts into the mouth of the Creator these words: "I will put mine umpire, Conscience, in his breast". This is perhaps the shortest and best definition of conscience – the Umpire who calls the play whether it be fair or foul. Conscience appraises our thoughts and actions and either commends or condemns; either accuses us or excuses (Rom. 2:15). We cannot bribe or threaten conscience, nor can our tears suspend its verdict nor revoke its sentence. Nor is conscience always a "still" or "small voice". Remorse of conscience resulted in Judas taking his own life, as have many before and since. I recall reading of a recent train disaster

which resulted in many deaths, that the Court of Enquiry found the driver guilty of gross negligence, and he died the following year, a broken man. Shakespeare rightly said in Hamlet's famous soliloquy that "conscience doth make cowards of us all". Men may try to drown themselves in work, pleasure or business, but can never quite smother the "still small voice" of conscience.

Conscience is according to knowledge

By far the most important limitation of conscience is that it is entirely dependent upon knowledge. Conscience of itself can never tell us what is right and what is wrong; it can only assure us that we are doing *what we believe* to be right, or censure us for doing *what we know* to be wrong. I am sure the cannibal suffered no qualms of conscience as he boiled the pot in readiness for the next passing missionary, just as I am sure that the African chief with five wives is not troubled by his conscience either! The apostle Paul said that he persecuted the followers of Christ in all good conscience. His conscience did not tell him that he was doing evil in God's sight — *Jesus* had to point this out to him. Conscience is thus not a source of information but merely a kind of moral monitor which bears witness with us that we do or don't do that which we believe to be proper and true. Conscience is therefore of most service to those who are well informed of God's word, and conversely is of little consequence to those who are in entire ignorance of it. We have all heard the saying, "Let conscience be thy guide", as if this was a quotation from the Bible. To such we would have to reply, "Let the Word of God be our guide", and let the promptings of conscience be measured and assayed by the writings of the New Testament. When God guided the apostles into all truth it was not by the tugging strings of conscience but by the directings of the Holy Spirit in person.

I have made reference to Paul having said that he lived in "all good conscience before God" while he persecuted the church (Acts 23:1) because I believe it to be a classical example of an instance highlighting the limitations of conscience. We must read our New Testament to find out what is well-pleasing to God, and our consciences must take their cue from what we read in the pages of that book. We can never subscribe to the commonly held idea that conscience can be our guide except with the full proviso that, at the same time, we are very well informed concerning the teachings of Christ and His apostles.

Functions of conscience

Perhaps a definition of conscience could emerge from what has already been said. The word means, "a knowing with oneself" or "according to knowledge". In essence it is a "still small voice" within us which functions as a "critic", or as an "umpire", appraises all that we say and do, or intend to say or do. It approves or disapproves, commends or condemns; and it does so, it should be emphasised, only *within the framework of knowledge* possessed by the owner of the conscience. Its judgements are limited by limitations of knowledge. At the extreme end of the scale we could say that the man without knowledge at all would have no conscience at all.

Uses of conscience

The questioner also asks what use should be made of conscience. I personally don't think that it is a question of making use of our consciences at all, for conscience will assert itself within us whether or not we decide to *make use* of it. It will influence us in spite of ourselves. Perhaps it would have been better to have asked concerning *the function* of conscience, I suppose the main function of conscience is that of control and persuasion. It can modify our actions and even persuade us, based upon our knowledge, along a certain path of action. On Pentecost (Acts 2) those listening to Peter were cut to the heart (or, I suggest, pricked by their consciences) and this triggered them into action so that they called out "What shall

we do?" Similarly, in the case of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:9) we find that when the men were invited to stone the woman to death (provided of course that they themselves were sinless) they all quickly dispersed. The reason given is that they were all *convicted by their consciences*. Our consciences can therefore serve the purpose of putting things in perspective for us, and putting us in our place. Actions are continually modified by the quiet workings of conscience. We read of a *good* conscience (Heb. 13:18, etc.); of an *evil* conscience (Heb. 10:22); a *weak* conscience (1 Cor. 8:27); a *pure* conscience (1 Tim 3:9); a *defiled* conscience (Titus 1:5) and a *wounded* conscience (1 Cor. 8:12). Paul often called upon his conscience to bear him witness (Rom 2:15) and wrote of *the testimony* of our conscience. He has a lot to say in 1 Cor. 8 about offending the consciences of others and the need to avoid this where possible. He also informs us that it is possible to sear the conscience as with a hot iron. If we violate our conscience often enough it then ceases to function as a sensitive instrument and becomes dull and unresponsive. To tell the first lie is to bring a quick reaction from the conscience — the tenth lie brings perhaps little response. It is said that after the mass murderer has killed his first and second victim the rest are relatively easy, conscience-wise. As Paul says, we must not violate conscience, for then it will become as cauterised flesh — without feeling or reaction. We notice to the credit of those who brought the woman to Jesus (the adultery case), that their consciences were keenly sensitive and especially so in the case of the oldest of them, for they filed out, beginning with the eldest. Such are some of the functions of the human conscience, be it sharp or be it dull.

Conscience as a guide

Is there merit, then, in the adage, "Let conscience be thy guide"? The word of God must be our guide, Conscience is but the witness of our lives, aloof, dispassionate and blunt, Divinely arranged, its work is but to comment on our thoughts and deeds; the umpire in the game of life. It doesn't tell us what to do but merely watches how we do it. It can tell us how close we come to the Word of God, or how far we may fall short of it.

The compass is of untold worth to the mariner, but no mariner would ever set sail with but a compass. He requires a *chart* to show the route, the quicksands and the dangers. The chart reveals the route but does not tell him if he is taking it. The compass alone tells the mariner if he is following the charted route. The analogy may be relevant here. The Bible is our chart and reveals our route to heaven. Conscience, like the compass, tells us when we are holding a steady course, or when we are departing from it.

I do hope these remarks may have been helpful.