

Scripture and Conscience in Human Life

By Miroslav Kiš

Nature and Function of the Conscience

At the deepest level of every human soul is the conscience, an active agent which the Greeks called *syneidesis*, meaning “knowing with” or “co-knowledge.” It is the quality that distinguishes humans from the rest of the creation,¹ the seat of moral thinking and judgment, the “inner witness” or “moral compass.” Its true nature can best be known by analyzing its functions.

Extra-Biblical Views

Classical theology, epitomized in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, defines the conscience as the human mind making moral judgments. While reason discriminates between true and false, it is the domain of conscience to adjudicate questions of right and wrong. Based on Aristotle and the autonomy of natural human reason, the conscience can guide moral reasoning, actions, and decisions.

Kant calls conscience the *Categorical Imperative*, i.e., the inner impulse to do what should be done and avoid what should not be done, contending that human reason, as the source of morality, and conscience are both autonomous: “Even the holy One of the Gospels must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before we can recognize Him as such.”² According to Kant, conscience is not something we acquire. “When therefore it is said: this man has no conscience, what is meant is that he pays no heed to its dictates.”³

Sigmund Freud represents a third major non-biblical understanding of conscience, described as the “super-ego,” which develops very early as children internalize prohibitions imposed upon them by parents and educators. Freud considers the conscience “a repressive force, capable of doing great damage to the psychological health of the person” and that religious belief exacerbates the condition by giving universal validity to the deeply damaging claims of authority by significant others.⁴

As these views show, the human mind is capable of demonizing or divinizing human faculties. Our only real safety is the Word of God.

Teaching of the Bible and Ellen G. White

While the word “conscience” is not found in the Old Testament, the concept and function of it can readily be recognized. The Hebrew word *lev*, translated “heart,” often carries the idea of conscience, as in 1 Samuel 24:5: “David’s heart smote him for cutting off the skirt of Saul.” Other versions render it, “David was conscience-stricken” (NIV) and “David’s conscience bothered him” (NASB).⁵ Additionally, various Old Testament passages describe human beings experiencing remorse, sorrow for sin, and the peace which comes when forgiveness is sought and received, all of which evince an active conscience (Ps 32:1-5; 51).

The Greek word *syneidesis* occurs 30 times in the New Testament.⁶ In Romans 2:14-15, Paul indicates that the conscience is *innate* and *universal*. It is not the product of environment, training, habit, or education, even though it is affected by all of these.⁷ The conscience has several important functions:

1. It helps us *choose* beforehand right rather than wrong.⁸
2. It *obligates* us to do what is right or restrain us from doing wrong.⁹
3. It enables us to *evaluate* our past actions (John 15:17-19).
4. It *causes inner restlessness and remorse* until we consent to make things right (Ps 32:3-5). As E. Brunner says, the original experience of responsibility most often occurs “after the event; it reaches consciousness as a sense of *guilt* about something in particular and immediately forms part of the profound sense of guilt as a whole.”¹⁰

According to Wolfgang Schrage, contrary to Aquinas and Kant, “conscience is by no means itself the voice of God. The verdict of conscience may be determined by the Holy Spirit (Rom 9:1)” and “may be identical with faith, but it is *not therefore autonomous, absolute or definitive* (1 Cor 4:4).” Schrage continues:

Furthermore, Paul sees the function of the conscience as more evaluative than directive and normative, even though it may precede an act. In any event, the conscience is not so much a guiding authority, establishing in its own right the substance of what is required, as it is a critical authority, using certain criteria to judge what people do or fail to do. What is to be done is prescribed not by conscience but by the commandments, or else the community is to determine it.¹¹

Conscience in the Bible

Both Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy recognize that the human conscience is vulnerable to many provocations and pressures. Perhaps the greatest challenge is the temptation to act autonomously, that is, to be subject to no higher authority than oneself, as urged by Kant, which raises the question of what it means to be a free moral agent.

As Free

The notion of absolute autonomy is alluring not least because Scripture affirms the freedom of one’s conscience (1 Cor 6:12). No one has the right to coerce another and God Himself is described as an Authority who calls rather than coerces (Hos 11:4). Nevertheless, even those who are free in Christ will defer to God’s absolute authority, as Paul shows by affirming Christian freedom on the one hand (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23; Gal 5:1) while boldly affirming, “I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor 4:4). In other words, conscience judges our thoughts and actions (Rom 2:15), but it is not infallible.¹² It is trustworthy and truly free only when under the influence of divine grace¹³ and subject to the divine will. At the same time, no human authority can force us to act in violation of our conscience, not even the church.¹⁴ In harmony with the example and command of Jesus, the apostle Paul denies using his position to “lord it over” others (Matt 20:26): “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statements of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor 4:2). Therefore, no church leader should ever seek to marginalize those who think differently from themselves or ingratiate themselves to people prior to elections. Such practices tend to rob people of their freedom.

The potential for abuse exists not only in church leadership roles but also in the family. Strong, overpowering influences upon children produce exactly the neurotic states of mind justifiably bemoaned by Freud. However, contrary to Freud, the conscience need not be repressive—in fact, it must not be so. Parents who act as despots are not acting in a Christian way. The religion of Christ is characterized by freedom of choice within a loving, forbearing, and nurturing environment (John 10:1-20).

As Weak and Wounded

In 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, the question of Christian freedom is dealt with at length, but from a different angle. Paul calls upon his followers to relate sensibly and with care to those who are insecure in faith, weak, and impressionable (8:9-12). Some in Corinth refused to eat meat offered to idols as a matter of conviction. Others, not having the same scruples, could eat idol food without their conscience bothering them, and so Paul instructed them, “If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any questions on the ground of conscience” (1 Cor 10:27). Nevertheless, Paul adds: “But if someone says to you ‘this has been offered in sacrifice’ then out of consideration for the man who informed you, and for conscience sake...do not eat it” (vv. 28-29).

These two chapters tell us much about conscience. First, a weak person's sensitivities need not restrict the strong believer's behavior—they may exercise their freedom on matters that would disturb those with a weaker conscience provided the latter are not present and no moral principle is compromised. These chapters also show that weakness of conscience is not sin. The weak are not to be reprimanded but *nurtured* by the strong. Least of all does the weak need “shock therapy” from another believer who would want to compel them to exercise their full “freedom” in Christ despite it violating their sensitive conscience. Such an approach compounds the problem by wounding an already weak person. Worse, it sins against Christ who died for the weak and the strong.

A Moral Compass

During the years I ran my watch-making business, a gentleman brought me a compass. He complained: “Since it fell, the needle does not point North anymore.” True enough, the needle was consistently and faithfully pointing towards the North-East not true North. Immediately upon opening it my suspicions were confirmed. “There is nothing the matter with the needle,” I reassured him.” The dial was shaken loose on impact, but I can fix that right now.” With the dial adjusted so that the “N” was squarely under the needle, and with two touches of fast drying glue to fix the dial to the casing, the compass became a trustworthy guide again.

This story illustrates something peculiar about conscience. While it is God's gift to humanity to guide our moral conduct, it has a nature of its own and it is important that we listen to it at all times,¹⁵ above the decrees of potentates (as in the case of Daniel), above the voice of the crowds (as Jesus did), above the dictates of a powerful church establishment (as did Luther). Yet, we must also keep in mind that, with all its stability and firmness, the conscience is vulnerable, malleable, and impressionable. Irrespective of whether we have a weak or a strong conscience, we can move the “dial” either to the left or to the right of the truth and thus lose our moral bearings.

The good or clear (*agathos/kalos*) conscience results from living one's life in reference to God (Acts 23:1; 1 Pet 3:21), being ready to fight the good fight with courage (1 Tim 1:19), being sealed in commitment through baptism (1 Pet 3:21) and prepared to “act honorably in all things” (Heb 13:18). But such a conscience can become “evil” (Heb 10:22) through compromise, careless acts or brazen sinful behavior.

The conscience can be kept blameless by worshiping the true God, by believing everything laid down by the law and prophets, by having a hope in God, and by taking pains to have our conscience clear (*aproskopos*, Acts 24:16). No one, however, not even the great apostle Paul, can let his or her guard down because conscience can be corrupted (Titus 1:15).

The conscience can also be pure (*katharos*, 1 Tim 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3). Paul charges “certain persons not to teach any different doctrine, nor to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies, which promote speculations rather than divine training that is in faith,” but rather to aim at love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience (1 Tim 1:3-5).

Seared through Hypocrisy

Of particular significance is a “seared” conscience: “But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron”(1 Tim 4:1-2, NASB). Another unique characteristic of conscience is that the “dial,” besides becoming loose and thereby distorting the testimony of the moral compass, can also be riveted on askew. In either case, people can honestly be led to believe a lie and be lost.

In other words, those with seared consciences are not necessarily hardcore criminals, terrorists or atheists. Paul is speaking here of those who know the truth and the religious vocabulary; they have their credentials; but in practice they are unfaithful to their baptismal and leadership vows. Hypocrisy sears the conscience. We may look good and even be active and successful Christians whom no one would suspect of foul play; but the real person is behind the mask, behind the title or function in church and society. As people admire successful leaders more and more, their faith in Jesus increasingly becomes vicariously dependent on human image and outward conduct, and they become more vulnerable to bitter disillusionment should the leader fall: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm...” (Jer 17:5).

The hypocrite is more unfortunate: outwardly they look okay, so no one thinks about ministering to them. And the more people esteem them, the less likely they are to seek help for fear of scandalizing their “fans.” Thus popularity leads a person to become insensitive to his or her own sin, until the conscience becomes as hard as a branding scar.¹⁶ As the example of Judas illustrates, this condition makes it nearly impossible for anyone, even Jesus Himself, to produce change in the individual.

Hope for All

Paul proclaims hope for the worst of sinners, that Jesus is “able to save absolutely” all who still have a willingness to come to Him for healing (Heb 3:25, NEB; cf. 3:7-15). There is no depth so deep, no seclusion so secret, no destruction so complete that Jesus cannot enter and recreate the conscience in complete goodness, blamelessness and purity—if only some sensitivity remains and we choose to respond to His voice.

To his Hebrew brethren Paul presents Jesus as the Lamb of God, far superior to animal sacrifices “which cannot perfect the consciences of the worshipers” (Heb 9:9) since they are only a parable or symbol of something far greater: the substitutionary death of the perfect and innocent Sacrifice. “For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (vv. 13-14).

This is the good news, indeed, the best news, as believers now have immediate access “by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh” (Heb 10:20). Unlike the veil, which blocked access to the mercy seat, Jesus is the link for us, outside and inside the most holy place, reaching out to bring us into His and our Father’s presence. He does not veil us from God but rather *includes* us into fellowship with Him. So then “let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (vs. 22). This new way is so effective that not only are our sins and the memory of them ultimately removed, but the needle of our broken moral compass becomes reliable again.

Conclusion

God has implanted a conscience, the seat of moral discrimination, in every human heart. When disconnected from God it is vulnerable and unreliable. But even a corrupt conscience can be made pure through the blood of Jesus. God is able not only to cleanse, but also to recreate the damaged and seared conscience, when in faith and contrition we come to God through the Veil of our Savior Jesus Christ (Heb 10:20). Joseph, though a slave, with no rights and no fatherly advice to guide him, but armed with an alert conscience resisted his master’s wife, even though no one else was there (Gen 39:11). Falsely accused, relegated to the lowest and most corrupt strata of Egyptian society, Joseph endured to the end: “He had the peace that comes from conscious innocence, and he trusted his case with God.”¹⁷

We have a high calling: “The greatest want of the world is the want of men—men who will not be bought or sold, men who in their innermost souls are true and honest, men who do not fear to call sin by its right

name, men whose conscience is as true to duty as the needle to the pole, men who will stand for the right though the heavens fall.”¹⁸ Let us be faithful to it!

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¹V. Norskov Olsen, *Man, the Image of God* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1988), 69.

²Immanuel Kant, “Metaphysical Foundations of Morals,” in *The Philosophy of Kant* (ed. Carl J. Friedrich; New York: Modern Library, 1949), 193-194.

³Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason* (trans. Thomas K. Abbott; London: Longmans, 1909), 311.

⁴D. J. Atkinson, D.H. Field, A.F. Holmes, and O. O’Donovan, eds., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 251.

⁵See also Gen 20:5; 1 Sam 25:31; 2 Sam 24:10; Job 27:6.; Ps 51:10.

⁶Christian Maurer, “*Synoida, syneidēsis*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; trans. G. W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 7: 902-906.

⁷A. M. Rehwinkel, “Conscience,” in Walter A. Ellwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 267-268.

⁸Ellen G. White, *That I May Know Him* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1964), 290, par. 1.

⁹Ellen G. White, *This Day with God* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1979), 153, par. 5; idem, *Our High Calling* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1961), 328, par. 4.

¹⁰Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1937), 157.

¹¹Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 195.

¹²White, *Our High Calling*, 143, par. 2.

¹³Ellen G. White, *Mind, Character, and Personality: Guidelines to Mental and Spiritual Health* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1977), 323, par. 5.

¹⁴Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1950), 293; see also White, *Mind, Character, and Personality*, 327, par. 1; Ellen G. White, *The Story of Redemption* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1947), 352.

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (9 vols.; Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:62; White, *This Day with God*, 153, par. 5.

¹⁶Timothy Freiberg and Barbara Freiberg, “*Kausteriazō*,” in *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 226.

¹⁷Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1958), 218; see also 1 Pet 2:18-19.)

¹⁸Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1952), 57.