

The Function of Our Conscience

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- *What is our conscience?*
- *How does our conscience work?*

Defining Conscience

Conscience is “con” (within) “science” (knowledge). Formally, it’s “... a knowledge or sense of right and wrong with an urge to do right” [Webster’s, pp. 309-310]. The dictionary goes on to say it’s a “moral judgment that opposes the violation of a previously recognized ethical principle and that leads to feelings of guilt if one violates such a principle.” The word occurs 29 times in the Bible (NASB). All but one (1 Samuel 24:5) are in the New Testament. The Greek word used is the same for all 28 New Testament references—*suneidesis*, meaning “to see” (*eidesis*) “together” (sun). It’s not together, as with other people, but to mentally see all the moral issues together in making a decision. The word is always translated “conscience.” To summarize:

Conscience is an ability to make ethical judgments based on inner moral laws

Axiom #1

We should always follow our conscience and we should continually evaluate our conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16; 1 Corinthians 10:25-29; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 1 Timothy 1:19; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3). Biblically, conscience is our primary inner tool for making moral decisions. It’s how we draw and shoot morally. It’s how we make on-the-spot ethical decisions or even those we have some time to think about but not enough time to exhaustively research. For example, one cannot responsibly answer the question “What would Jesus do?” with a worldly conscience. Mature people are those ... *who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil* (Hebrews 5:14).

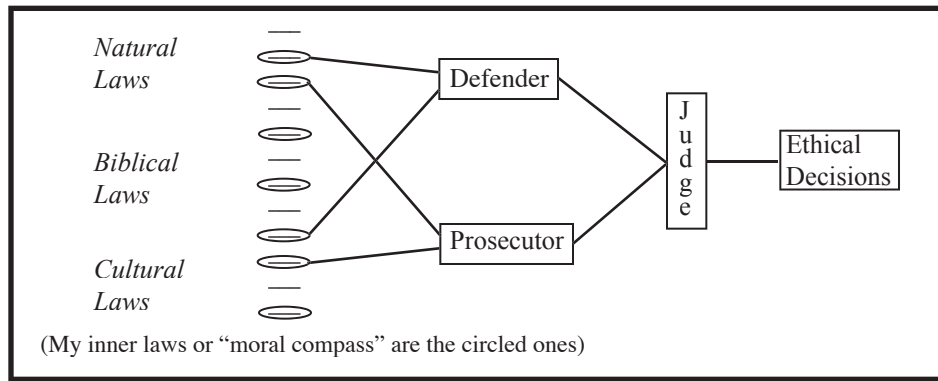
Corollaries

1. Salvation through the blood of Christ cleanses our conscience positionally (2 Corinthians 5:11; Hebrews 9:9, 14; 1 Peter 3:21).
2. Believers should follow their conscience because it reflects the input of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote, *my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit* (Romans 9:1). That does not mean our conscience is perfect because we can resist the work of the Spirit (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Nonetheless, it’s our best “shot” at making the right moral decision.
3. Our conscience is better than our circumstances in determining God’s will. 1 Samuel 24:5 says that David’s conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul’s robe. But he cut it off because he took advantage of his circumstances, which his friends told him was an opportunity from God.
4. Our conscience makes moral decisions based on inner laws. First of all, humans have a moral code (or “natural law”) written on their hearts by God (Romans 1:18-32; 2:15). We call this “general revelation.” In addition, we believers learn “special revelation” in the Scripture. For example, natural law would not dictate ark building for Noah, Sabbath keeping for Israel, or disciple-making for the church. Finally, we also learn moral laws from our culture, which may or may not be true [“things I learned from my mother’s knee and other joints ...”]. If we allow it, false cultural teaching can become the majority of our knowledge.

When we place faith in moral laws from any of these three sources, they become [what I have called] inner laws

If our inner laws (or moral compass) come from false cultural knowledge, then our conscience will be “evil” or “defiled” (Heb. 10:22; Titus 1:15).

The Conscience—Romans 2:15



Axiom #2

Conscience functions as a judge, applying law to life. ... *they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them* (Romans 2:15). Conscience is not a moral mediator, it's a moral decision maker. Its function is not to compromise or negotiate between your inner laws and your life but to offer (or suggest) an application of your laws to your life. The inner laws of your conscience function as a prosecutor and a defense attorney, each representing different inner laws. Your conscience also acts as a judge (and/or jury) to come to a decision which (if you accept it) will apply your laws to your life. For example, say you have an inner law which says, “One should always preserve life” (let this be the defense attorney). But you have another law which says, “One should never promote suffering” (let this be the prosecutor). Your conscience must now judge to decide if grandma should be taken off the ventilator.

Corollary

When moral decisions are only dictated by our inner laws, then our conscience is cut off (1 Timothy 4:2-3). When we omit this prosecutor/defender/judge process and simply keep our inner laws, our conscience is seared. This usually results in moral perversion. Hence God rejected the legalism of Israel (Isaiah 1:10-17) and the Pharisees (Matthew 23). Legalism is often evidence of a seared or neglected conscience (Mark 3:1-5).

Axiom #3

Conscience creates ethical solutions for complex situations. Whenever God gave a directive in Scripture, it was (of course) to be obeyed. But even these required application to life. For example, in Israel God provided the Mosaic Law. Israelites were not to have an executive branch of government because God was King. They needed no legislature because His laws needed no additions or adjustments. But God did set up a judicial system (Deuteronomy 1:13-18; 16:18-20). The reason is, although His laws were perfect, life is complex. Law is static. It's like a photograph or a painting. Life is in motion, and the constant movement brings several laws into play.

Law is simple—or at least straightforward. Life is complicated. It's a collage of various events. It's an intersection of many complex lives, motives, and interests. Some of those are quite straightforward and an application of God's laws can be made by our conscience with very little inner debate (such as with adultery, murder, lying, and gossip). But sometimes it's not so clear. (When does helping the poor become enabling their irresponsibility and when does a prayer request become gossip?) Whether straight forward or complex, our conscience assesses the situation, accesses its vast library of inner laws, debates the relevance of each law (prosecutor/defender) and then creates a unique solution, which is judged to be right or morally pleasing.

Corollary

When our actions violate the decision of our conscience, we feel guilty (1 Samuel 24:5; Psalm 51:1-4). Our conscience is not the same as our will. “We” are not our conscience. Unlike animals, humans have the capacity to mentally stand apart from themselves and assess their situations. This ability creates notions of morality, purpose/destiny, and creativity. So just because my conscience gives me its morally acceptable solution, that does not mean “I” will follow it. When we do not follow our conscience, we experience feelings of guilt. But feelings of guilt are not necessarily a result of actual guilt (violating the character of God). Even though we should always follow our conscience, we can be actually guilty of sin before God without our conscience making us feel guilty (Genesis 4:3-5; Judges 20:13; 1 Samuel 5:20; Acts 8:1-3). Also, we may experience feelings of false guilt when our conscience decides against things God does not condemn (1 Corinthians 8:8f; 10:25-29; Romans 14:1-2).

Ultimately, our moral responsibility before God is not determined by our conscience (that would be a relative morality). Our final responsibility is determined by the perfect character of God (Matthew 5:48; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 1 Peter 1:14-15). That's why we must continually conform our conscience to the Word of God (John 17:17; Hebrews 5:14).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is our conscience?*

A: Our conscience is a spiritual ability built into every human being by which we make ethical judgments based on inner moral principles.

Q: *How does our conscience work?*

A: When we believe certain information (place faith in knowledge), we establish inner laws. These laws may be right or wrong, depending on whether our knowledge is of the truth. As we encounter complex life situations, we apply our inner laws, as a judge deciding a case presented by a prosecutor and a defense attorney. By this, our conscience creates a solution (unique for every situation), which it considers morally right. When we act inconsistent with that judgment, we experience feelings of guilt.