

# LIVING WATERS NEWSLETTER

HARRY BOWERS, EDITOR

7844 GRIMSBY CIRCLE, HARRISBURG, N.C. 28075

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## THE CONSCIENCE

“The tabernacle is a symbol for the time then present, according to which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience...for if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:9, 13, 14).

In modern religion the basic appeal of some self-termed Christians is to the purity of their conscience as proof of favor with God. Such an appeal many times, although honest and sincere, can be void of knowledge of the human conscience and its relationship to conversion and righteousness. In as much as conscience is important to salvation, however, it is not a substitute for other human commitments. A sincere study of the part the human conscience plays in conversion becomes of vital importance. The word “conscience” is found only one time in the Old Testament (I Sam. 24:5 NASV), but is found over thirty times in the New Testament. W.T. Davison states in *The Christian Conscience*: “Only in the New Testament can we find full light cast upon this word and all it implies...only in Christianity was this mysterious ‘consciousness’ fully explained.” It comes from Greek philosophy and literally means in the New Testament “co-knowledge” or “joint-knowledge” (from *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T.*) It is used and developed in the N.T., primarily by the Apostle Paul, nevertheless, a similar idea is expressed in the O.T. with reference to the human heart. Conscience being co-knowledge indicates it functions not within the realm of knowledge itself, but rather along with it. Conscience is inward testimony expressed by pain or pleasure concerning personal judgments or ideas or experiences that have come within the consciousness of the human senses. The mind determines whether or not a position or happening is right or wrong. Paul shows this relationship when he says in Romans 2:15: “The Gentiles show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or excusing one another.” When the Gentiles obeyed the moral aspects of the law, they declared its existence in their minds. Their inward testimony told whether or not they were sincerely following the law that was in their mind. Their thoughts were weighing their mode of living as to whether it was right or wrong according to the law in their minds and thereby either accusing or excusing each other according to their thoughts. The mind with its thoughts justified the course of action they were taking, the conscience was witnessing whether or not they were doing what they had judged to be right or wrong. George Eldon Ladd on this passage in *A Theology of the New Testament* states: “Unbelievers, as well as Christians, have a conscience. Paul does not intimate that conscience is a guide that can lead to salvation; he only says that because the Gentiles have conscience, they know the difference between right and wrong.”

As frequently as it is stated in the religious world that all one has to do to be saved is to live a good life by the conscience, it seems

strange that the Bible never once mentions this. In his many appeals Paul never once points to the purity of conscience as evidence of his salvation, but rather to his acceptance of Christ and obedience to him. He refers to the purity of his conscience in Acts 23:1 even at a time when he was in ignorant rebellion to God. A scripture bearing this out is Acts 26:9: “I verily thought within myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth.” The reason Paul was wrong was not because his conscience was evil but rather because he was sincerely ignorant. When knowledge is lacking about whether a position is right or wrong, a person can be following wrong in ignorance and still have a good conscience. In such a case the conscience is pure but the person is in soul-damning error. Justification, forgiveness and freedom is by the truth according to Jesus in John 8:32 where he states “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” and John 17:17: “Sanctify them through Thy truth, Thy word is truth.” When Paul refers to the conscience he presents it as his self witness to inward truthfulness and faithfulness in the things his mind has perceived to be true. With his mind he chose the right course of life based on the information from God. His conscience was his witness to whether he had followed the way he deemed correct.

No person in the Bible is told to follow his conscience in order to be saved. Perhaps this is because the conscience can be good and pure, as we read in I Timothy 1:19: “Keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith,” or the conscience can be evil and defiled as Titus 1:15 states: “both their mind and their conscience are defiled.” Both the conscience and mind become defiled when the thinking of a person becomes so wicked and warped that they pervert sound reasoning and are commended rather than condemned by the conscience. These people are so corrupt that they change pure ideas into impure thoughts, making evil out of everything that is good according to Isaiah 5:20: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter.” A class similar to those who have defiled both mind and conscience are those who have seared their conscience. We read in I Timothy 4:2: “Having their conscience seared with a hot iron, speaking lies in hypocrisy.” They have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong but have so deadened their conscience that it no longer testifies against evil actions which they know to be wrong. This happens to a person who knows what their Lord wants them to do, but has so quenched the fire of the spirit that the word of God will not cut through the iron crust of his heart. They have become as a car with the gears stripped out. No matter how the motor is raced or the shift maneuvered there is nothing to catch hold in order to move the car. This can also happen to one who has been cold to the heart lifting truths he once loved and followed as seen in Hebrews 6:4-6. Carl F. H. Henry states in *Christian Personal Ethics*: “Scripture leaves no doubt that conscience can be debased. It may be stained by sin (I Cor. 8:7), seared so as to be insensible to certain claims of the good (I Tim. 4:2), insensible to the pangs of reproof and remorse, and at last perverted so that it ceased almost entirely to point upward to God and the good. Hence, conscience in the life of man in rebellion against God is

capable of progressive defilement.” Conscience cannot tell man the way to God nor what is true or false because the way to God and truth come from God, not the conscience of man. Paul’s life illustrates this fact. He was practicing error which could never save or justify him, yet during this time he was living with a good conscience before God according to Acts 23:1. The guide in Christianity does not come from within man, but rather from the God of heaven. A man may think that his way is right, but Proverbs 14:12 states: “there is a way that seems right to a man but its end is the way of death.” If a person trusts “in his own heart” God says in Proverbs 28:26 “he is a fool” which is why Jeremiah says in Jer. 10:23: “a man’s way is not in himself; nor is in man who walks to direct his steps.” Since the conscience of man is within a man and of man, it cannot be man’s guide to the way of life. The sufficiency of the soul comes not from within a man, but rather from God. If forgiveness were in the heart of man rather than in the mind of God, then man would be able to know when his sins were forgiven by the testimony of his conscience. But since forgiveness is in the mind of God according to Hebrews 8:12 one cannot know that his sins are forgiven unless he receives evidence of this fact from God’s revelation. The revelation of when sins are forgiven is committed to men by the gospel, so that men can know when they are forgiven by judging their lives by the word of justification that was committed to Paul and the other Apostles. When a man hears the word of reconciliation and obeys it from the heart, then his conscience can bear witness that he is right in the sight of God, having completed the commands given in the word of God. From the beginning to the end of the Christian life this testimony can take place when a man honestly and sincerely directs his life by the testimony that God has given. In this way both the spirit of God and the spirit of man are testifying to the sonship of man as seen in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The conscience is important in justification. Through a good conscience one diligently seeks for the truth in God’s word, rightly handling it as God demands. Upon learning the truth, the good conscience will not rest until it is satisfied by obedience to the truth. A person with a defiled conscience will neglect God’s word, pervert it, and spurn obedience to it rather than accept it as it is and obey it. There can be three existing conditions in which one can have a satisfied conscience. Two of these conditions come from a dangerously satisfied conscience: that is a conscience based upon ignorance or a seared conscience based upon either ignorance, incorrect information, perversion or a lie. The other condition is a satisfied conscience based upon their obedience to the Word of God.

So far we have pointed out the relation of the conscience to salvation. Now we note the relation of the conscience to the fact that one has obeyed God’s eternal truth as revealed. The passage from Hebrews 9, quoted at the beginning of this article, shows how all the sacrifices in the Old Testament could not “make the worshipper perfect in conscience.” Then it is stated that the sacrifice of Christ “who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God” would cleanse our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. The “perfect conscience” the writer is referring to is a conscience cleansed of sin. If the Old Testament offerings could never bring perfection to the conscience because “the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins” (Heb. 10:2). This teaches that sacrifices under the law could not so perfect a

person that he could regard himself as free from guilt. The Christian, then, having no consciousness of sin is not because he never sins, but because God has cleansed the conscience from dead works (of the flesh) so that he might serve the Living God (Heb. 9:14). This gives us “confidence to enter the holy place (Heaven itself Heb. 9:24) by the blood of Jesus” and “draw near (to God) with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed in pure water” (Heb. 10:9, 22). When a Christian has this knowledge he has a clear conscience concerning his past life. His conscience does not condemn him for the past.

It is the Apostle Paul that has the most to say about the conscience. More than twenty times the word “conscience” appears in his epistles. He declares his conscience has nothing against him (I Cor. 4:4), and he invokes conscience to attest his truthfulness (Rom. 9:1) and his sincere life (II Cor. 1:12). Therefore he could stand before the Jewish Council and declare “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day” (Acts 23:1). However, he states in I Cor. 4:4: “I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted...” and he further states in II Cor. 4:2 that it is by “the manifestation of the truth that he commended himself to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” This means the conscience must judge our conduct in the light of the revelation God has given. Our conscience cannot be an absolute guide. When Christians depart from the faith of God’s word their conscience becomes “seared as with a branding iron” (I Tim. 4:2), that is, hardened so that it is not a safe guide. To quote James Eldon Ladd again, “The conscience of the Christian must always be exercised in the light of divine revelation of Jesus Christ.” Perhaps the most basic teaching concerning the conscience of the Christian is found in I Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. The problem in the early church was concerning the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols. When a society such as Corinth was replete with idol worshippers and meat offered as sacrifices in idol’s temples was later sold in the markets became a question of conscience to some Christians. Paul discusses the reaction both of the Christian with a strong conscience and the one with a weak conscience. The strong realized “the earth is the Lord’s and all it contains” (I Cor. 10:26), and that “all things are clean” (Rom. 14:20). However, “not all men have this knowledge; but some being accustomed to the idol, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled” (I Cor. 8:7). The principle here is how should the Christian react toward other Christians that feel some actions are sinful, although not specifically condemned in the Scripture. Some Christian’s attitude toward dancing, movies (and in the early 50’s television), card playing, smoking, wine, wearing make-up and jewelry etc. are thought to be evil and to always and everywhere be resisted. All such things may be used in an evil way, but this does not mean that it is evil in and of itself. Yet “to him who thinks anything to be unclean (sinful) to him it is unclean” (sinful). Concerning these things that some Christian’s have scruples about we must heed Paul’s warning concerning eating of meat sacrificed to idols. “Therefore let us not judge one another, but rather do not put an obstacle of stumbling in a brother’s way...It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or do anything by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.” (Rom. 14:13,22, 23).

