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R. C. SPROUL

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Chapter One

The Question of Conscience

It is vitally important for Christians to consider the issue of conscience. In the classical view, the conscience was thought to be something that God implanted within our minds. Some people even went so far as to describe the conscience as the voice of God within us. The idea was that God created us in such a way that there was a link between the sensitivities of the mind and the conscience with its built-in responsibility to God's eternal laws. For example, consider the law of nature that the Apostle Paul

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says is written on our hearts. There was a sensitivity of conscience long before Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the tablets of stone.

The famous philosopher Immanuel Kant was agnostic with respect to man's ability to reason from this world to the transcendence of God. Even so, he offered what he called a moral argument for the existence of God that was based on what he called a universal sense of oughtness implanted in the heart of every human being. Kant believed that everyone carried with them a genuine sense of what one ought to do in a given situation. He called this the categorical imperative. He believed there are two things that fill the soul with an ever-new and growing wonder and reverence: the starry heavens above and the moral law within. This is important to note because even in the realm of secular philosophy, there has historically been an awareness of conscience.

Historically and classically, the conscience was seen to be our link to the transcendent ethic that resides in God. But with the moral revolution of our culture, a different approach to conscience has emerged, and this is what is called the relativistic view. This is indeed the age of relativism, where values and principles are considered to be mere expressions of the desires and interests of a given group of

people at a given time in history. We repeatedly hear that there are no absolutes in our world today.

Yet if there are no absolute, transcendent principles, how do we explain this mechanism that we call the conscience? Within a relativistic framework, we see the conscience being defined in evolutionary terms: people's subjective inner personalities are reacting to evolutionary advantageous taboos imposed upon them by their society or by their environment. Having reached a period in our development when these taboos no longer serve to advance our evolution, they can be discarded with nary a thought of the consequences.

As a professor some years ago, I counseled a college girl who was overtaken with a sense of profound guilt because she had indulged in sexual activities with her fiancé. She explained to me that she had spoken of her guilt to a local pastor. He counseled her that the way to get over her guilt was to recognize the source of it. He reasoned that she had done nothing wrong; rather, her feelings of guilt were a result of her having been a victim of living in a society ruled by a puritan ethic. He explained that she had been conditioned by certain sexual taboos that made her feel guilty when she shouldn't and that what she had done was a mature, responsible expression of her own emerging adulthood.

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Yet she came to me weeping and exclaimed that she still felt guilty. I told her it is possible for a person to feel guilty because they have an uneasy, disquieted conscience about something that is actually not a violation of God's law, but that in this case she had broken the law of God, and she should rejoice that she felt guilty, because pain, as uncomfortable as it is to us, is an important for our health. In the physical realm, the feeling of pain signals that there is something wrong with the body. Spiritually speaking, the pain of guilt, can signal to us that something is wrong with our souls. There is a remedy for that and it's the same one that the church has always offered, namely, forgiveness. Real guilt requires real forgiveness.

This woman's problem illustrates the conflict between the traditional understanding of sin and conscience and the new concept of conscience. This new concept sees it merely as an evolutionary, societal-conditioning process that is a result of imposed taboos. How does the Christian sort all of this out? Is there a biblical view of conscience?

The Hebrew term translated into the English as "conscience" occurs in the Old Testament, but very sparsely. However in the New Testament, there seems to be a fuller awareness of the importance of the function of conscience

in the Christian life. The Greek word for conscience appears in the New Testament thirty-one times, and it seems to have a two-fold dimension, as the medieval scholars argued. It involves the idea of accusing as well as the idea of excusing. When we sin, the conscience is troubled. It accuses us. The conscience is the tool that God the Holy Spirit uses to convict us, bring us to repentance, and to receive the healing of forgiveness that flows from the gospel.

But there is also the sense in which this moral voice in our minds and hearts also tells us what is right. Remember that the Christian is always a target for criticisms that may or may not be valid. Even within the Christian community, there are wide differences of opinion regarding which behaviors are pleasing to God and which aren't. One man approves dancing; another disapproves of it. How do we know who is correct?

We see in the New Testament that the conscience is not the final ethical authority for human conduct because the conscience is capable of change. Whereas God's principles don't change, our consciences vacillate and develop. These changes can be positive or negative. For example, the prophets in the Old Testament thundered God's judgment upon the people of Israel who had grown accustomed to

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sin. One of the great indictments that came upon Israel in the days of King Ahab was that they had grown so numb and accustomed to evil that the people tolerated King Ahab's wickedness. Hardness of the heart had set in. The consciences of the Israelites were seared and calloused. Think about this reality in your life, about the ideals that you had as a child. Consider the pangs of conscience that may have intruded into your life when you first experimented with certain things that you knew were wrong. You were overwhelmed and shaken. Perhaps you even became physically ill. But the power of sin can erode the conscience to the point where it becomes a faint voice in the deepest recesses of your soul. By this, our consciences become hardened and callous, condemning what is right and excusing what is wrong.

It's interesting that we can always find someone who will give an articulate and persuasive defense for the ethical legitimacy of some of the activities that God has judged to be an outrage to Him. As humans, our ability to defend ourselves from moral culpability is quite developed and nuanced. We become a culture in trouble when we begin to call evil good and good evil. To do that, we must distort the conscience, and, in essence, make man the final authority

in life. All one has to do is to adjust his conscience to suit his ethic. Then we can live life with peace of mind, thinking that we are living in a state of righteousness.

The conscience can be sensitized in a distorted way. Remember, the relativistic and evolutionary view of conscience is built on the principle that it is a subjective response to taboos imposed upon it by society. Though I don't believe that such a view is finally compelling, I have to acknowledge that there is an element of truth in that view. We recognize that people can have highly sensitized consciences, not because they are being informed by the Word of God but because they have been informed by man-made rules and regulations. In some Christian communities, the test of one's faith, is whether or not a person dances. If one grows up in this environment and decides to dance in the future, what happens? Usually, the person is overcome with guilt for having danced. How should you respond to that? Would you tell the person that dancing isn't a sin, that his conscience has been misinformed? That might be a normal approach, but such a response may be problematic for this reason: the conscience can excuse when it ought to be accusing, and it also can accuse when it should be excusing.

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We must remember that acting against conscience is sin. Martin Luther, at the Diet of Worms, was in moral agony because he stood alone against the leaders of the church and state and they demanded that he recant of his writings. But Luther was convinced that his writings conformed to the Word of God, and so in that moment of crisis he said, “I can’t recant. My conscience is held captive by the word of God and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe.” That was not a principle that Martin Luther invented for the occasion at the Diet of Worms. It is a New Testament principle: “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23).

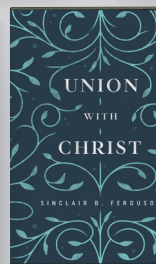
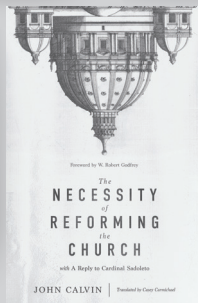
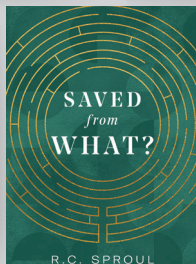
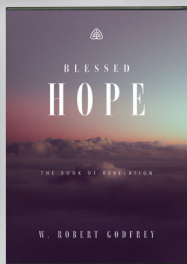
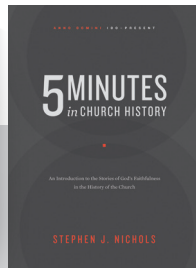
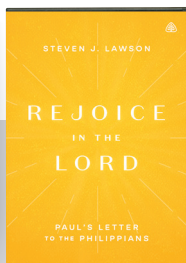
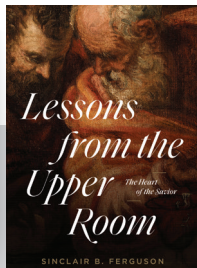
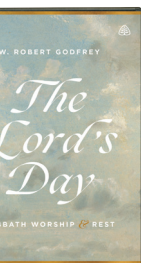
If a person is raised in an environment that has persuaded him that it’s a sin to read philosophy but he reads philosophy anyway, then he is sinning. Why? Is it because reading philosophy is a sin? No, it is because he is doing something that he believes is a sin. If we do something that we think is sin, even if we are misinformed, we are guilty of sin. We are guilty of doing something we believe to be wrong. We act against our consciences. That is a very important principle. Luther was correct in saying, “It is neither right nor safe to act against conscience.”

On the other hand, we have to remember that acting

according to conscience may sometimes be sin as well. If the conscience is misinformed, then we seek the reasons for this misinformation. Is it misinformed because the person has been negligent in studying the Word of God? God has been pleased to reveal His principles to us, and He requires that each Christian master those principles so that the conscience is informed. I may think that it's fine to indulge in a particular activity that God absolutely prohibits, and I cannot say to God on the last day, "I didn't know that you would be displeased with this form of behavior. My conscience didn't accuse me, and I acted according to my conscience." In such a case you acted according to a conscience that was ignorant of God's Word that was available to you and that you were called to study and be diligent in your understanding thereof.

We must return to the first principle. For the Christian, the conscience is not the ultimate authority in life. We are called to have the mind of Christ, to know the good, and to have our minds and hearts trained by God's truth so that when the moment of pressure comes, we will be able to stand with integrity.

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around the world connect the deep truths
of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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