

Conscience

It is important to understand the inner workings of our value system. Then, we should implant biblical principles in the conscience and purge wrong ideas from the conscience. As one lives according to these biblical principles, self-esteem will rise correspondingly.

Conscience Is Essential

Professional people have maligned conscience within the last few decades. Surprisingly, some theologians have a low view of conscience:

Conscience accomplishes very little, say some theologians. Notoriously unreliable, conscience must be fed the correct information from a higher source. It can be seared, mishandled, or misinformed until, like a compass thrown out of kilter by a proximate magnet, it gives an unreliable reading. Consequently, conscience is an interesting but indefinite and fickle function of human personality [Note that this is not Dr. Drakeford's view].

Drakeford 1967, 14

Some psychiatrists and psychologists take a similar position:

It achieves too much, say some of the students of the psyche. Some psychologists claim that the conscience with archaic and perfectionistic standards makes the *ego* a prisoner within the confines of the individuals' own personality, exercising a tyrannical reign, frequently escaped only by a leap into neurosis or psychosis. For these experts, conscience is comparable to the relationship of the appendix to the body and, like it, needs to be neutralized to prevent psychic disruption far more dangerous than a burst appendix and peritonitis.

Drakeford 1967, 14

It is astonishing that these two disciplines should unite in such a low view of *absolute vital* human equipment.

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However, not all professionals hold this erroneous view of conscience. The Apostle Paul, a well-educated man, speaks highly of conscience:

Keeping fast hold on faith [that leaning of the entire human personality on God in absolute trust and confidence] and a good (clear) conscience. By rejecting and thrusting from them [their conscience], some individuals have made shipwreck of their faith.

1 Timothy 1:19, AMP

Paul speaks of the conscience (translated from the *Koinē* Greek word, *suneidesis*, literally, "a knowing with oneself") about twenty times. New Testament writers mention conscience about thirty times. New Testament writers teach us to obey our conscience and to respect the consciences of other people:

So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.
1 Corinthians 8:11-12, NIV

Koehler says that "Conscience is a precious gift of God" (Koehler 1941, 19). He further says that without conscience, knowledge of right and wrong would fail to influence conduct. As a result, the "moral structure of society would break down and communal life would become an impossibility" (Koehler 1941, 19).

Definition of Conscience

Most people place the conscience in the mind or soul. The conscience does function on all levels of consciousness, but the conscience is actually a part of the heart, which is a part of the human spirit. "David's heart smote him" when he violated his conscience (1 Samuel 24:5, KJV; 2 Samuel 24:10, KJV).

Hagin defines conscience as the voice of the human spirit (Hagin 1974, 27).

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A more complete definition is:

Conscience is that part of the human spirit that acts as a self-contained moral guidance system.

There are two major aspects of conscience: *function* and *content*.

Conscience Function

The function of conscience is its *universal* or *supercultural* aspect. Conscience works the same in all human beings.

Conscience has at least four functions:

1. To provide moral guidance.
2. To urge one to make the right decision.
3. To reward for compliance.
4. To punish for disobedience.

Concerning conscience guidance:

Everyone makes moral decisions. Further, one's conscience tells one which choice is right and then pressures him to make the right choice. If one makes the right decision, the conscience rewards him with a conscious feeling of warmth, increased self-worth and wholeness. If one makes a wrong decision, the conscience corrects him with intense guilt.

Psychiatrist Rodriguez of Osawatomie State Hospital said that psychic pain resulting from a violated conscience is the worst pain we can experience (Dr. Rodriguez, at a clinical training

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program at Osawatomie State Hospital, Osawatomie, Kansas, about 1964). The pain does not go away until one makes things right.

Also very important: when we do something morally questionable, *The conscience acts as if that were wrong for us* (Koehler 1941, 27-28). Paul writes:

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. But the man who has *doubts* [my italics] is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

Romans 14:22-23, NIV

Another important aspect of conscience is that values (*conscience content*) can be suppressed and rationalized away on the conscious level. (

Suppression is the voluntary process

of pressing information back into the unconscious.

Repression is the automatic process

of placing information into the unconscious without one being aware of it (Drakeford 1964, 91).

Since the conscience also works on the preconscious and unconscious levels, doing wrong produces interpsychic conflict. In this case, one can become ill and not know why.

Three steps to moral self-destruction are:

1. The initial violation of one's conscience that results in guilt;
2. Continuing in the violation of one's conscience that results in mental and/or physical illness and
3. Persisting in the violation of one's conscience over a longer period that results in a seared conscience or *psychopathic* personality.

Various delusions and other mental illnesses as well as physical illnesses can result from a violated conscience. Psychologist John Drakeford provides an excellent explanation of mental illness in his book, *Integrity Therapy*, 1967. Also, S. I. McMillen, MD, provides documented evidence of psychosomatic illness in his book, *None of These Diseases*

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, 1963

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Our conscience function can be *desensitized* i.e., *modified negatively*. The threshold can be lowered to the point where one degenerates into a psychopathic personality. The Biblical equivalent to the psychological term,

psychopathic personality

is a

seared conscience

or

reprobate mind

:

The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron.

1 Timothy 4:1-2, NIV

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient;

Romans 1:28, KJV

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Romans 1:28-32, NIV

These people have sinned against their conscience so long that their conscience does not function properly. They can do evil things without feeling guilt and remorse.

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Some theorists erroneously believe that our conscience can be *oversensitive*. Drakeford gave the "bird-with-the-crippled-wing" story to illustrate what is actually happening in the mind of one who appears to have an oversensitive conscience: The hen feigns a broken wing to draw the predator away from her nest. This parallels a human mechanism that people use in giving a *presenting problem* to divert the therapist's attention away from the real problem. The presenting problem may be the confession of some trivial irresponsibility in order to keep an irresponsibility hidden that is too painful to acknowledge.

What apparently happens in the *over scrupulous* person is that he has previously suppressed or repressed a very bad sin. This produces a *floating guilt* that rises from the unconscious to the conscious level and attaches itself to a relatively minor sin. (For a comprehensive treatment of guilt and theory of conscience, see the works of John Drakeford).

It is both surprising and alarming that some psychiatrists and psychologists would advocate lowering conscience sensitivity to reduce guilt. The result may be the lowering of guilt, but at the expense of driving the patient toward the psychopathic end of the continuum. This contributes to the destruction of the individual and to the society in which he lives. Dr. O. Hobart Mowrer, a research psychologist, said, "Those who treat patients this way deserved to be fined, rather than paid for their services!"

Although Freud added much to the field of psychiatry, much of this improper treatment stems back to his erroneous theory of mental illness:

Freud's Theory of Neurosis

. . . . A "hypertrophied" *superego*, or conscience, supposedly lays siege to the *ego* and takes it captive. Then the superego forces the *ego* to reject the claims of the *id* for any expression or satisfaction of its "instinctual demands." The result is that a sort of "iron curtain" is constructed between *ego* and *id*

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.; and dissociation or "repression" is said to be in force. Neurosis proper ("anxiety") consists of the "unconscious danger" that the force of the id will succeed in breaking through this "wall" and overwhelming the

ego

; and a constant, devitalizing expenditure of energy by the

ego

is necessary to keep up its "defenses."

O. Hobart Mowrer, *New Group Therapy*, 184-185; As quoted by Drakeford 1967, 29

Mowrer's Theory of Neurosis

A modified interpretation of the state called neurosis: Here it is assumed that the *ego* is taken captive, not by the

superego

, but by the

id

, and that it is now the "voice of conscience" that is rejected and dissociated. "Anxiety" thus arises, not because of a threatened return of repressed energies of the

id

, but because of the unheeded railings and anger of conscience. Here it is not assumed that there is any difference in the "size" or strength of these three aspects of personality, unless it is that the

ego

is somewhat weak and undeveloped.

O. Hobart Mowrer, 184-185; As quoted by Drakeford 1967, 29

To explain *intrapersonal* relationships (internal relationships within one's own mind), Freud made some logical constructs. The primitive, pushing, unregulated urges from the unconscious he called the *id* (Latin, "it"). These urges include sex drive, aggression

and hunger. The *ego* (Greek and Latin, "I") is the

decision-making self. The

supereg

o

(Latin

super

, "above" + (Greek,

ego

, "I") is the conscience.

One can see that, based on Freud's theory, the proper way to treat anxiety is to give vent to

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primitive urges. Then a problem of guilt arises. Weakening the superego reduces guilt. However, this treatment produces a more serious problem: the individual becomes *psychopathic*, which results in *sociopathic* behavior toward others. Just as the psychopath has won the internal battle with his conscience function by weakening it, he now declares war (persecutes) other people who would side with his conscience content. He has become *sociopathic*.

Mowrer's theory, however, corresponds more with Judeo-Christian teaching and science. Proper treatment, in this case, would be to strengthen the ego. There are at least three ways that one can strengthen his ego:

1. By yielding to the Holy Spirit. One of the fruits of the human spirit, which is formed by the Holy Spirit, is self-control (a strong ego):

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and *self-control* [Italics Mine]. . . .|
Galatians 5:22-23, NIV

2. By continually exercising the will in making the right moral choices.

3. By internalizing good group values. We internalize the values of the group with which we associate. Fellowshiping with people who hold and practice proper moral values will strengthen our egos by providing *positive pressure* alongside our conscience.

What is needed today is the *full restoration of our conscience function*—it must be *completely modified positively*

Could it be that some confuse conscience function with conscience content?

Conscience Content

Whereas conscience function is universal, conscience content is variable. One's conscience is educated (receives content) from various sources such as the Bible, church, school, parents, peer groups, mass media and reason. These constitute *a posteriori* knowledge—knowledge resulting from personal experiences. The writer believes that one is born with

a priori

knowledge—content similar to Jung's archetypes, which inheres in the collective unconscious of the human race and is passed on genetically.

Two examples of *a priori* conscience content are:

1. Belief that God exists. God should be respected, worshipped and obeyed.

2. Respect for people, who are made in God's image.
 - 2.1 Respect for life. Other people should be respected and not harmed or murdered. (This includes oneself.)

 - 2.2 Respect for liberty. People should not be enslaved.

 - 2.3 Respect for property. Others' property should not be stolen or damaged.

Too often in American society, conscience content is a *curious mixture* that needs to be revised according to the standard of God's Word. Conscience content is important because without it, the conscience does not function (Koehler 1941, 7). On the other hand, conscience will function

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based on the best material it has, whether or not that material is accurate.

Paul teaches that the Law of God is necessary for conscience content:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."

Romans 7:7, NIV

Conscience content is not mere facts in the human mind. We must accept facts as moral principles that are binding on ourselves (Koehler 1941, 7). This decision internalizes the values and they become part of the conscience content.

This point is vital: The conscience will act as though specific material is binding on us if we are not sure whether it is right or wrong (Koehler 1941, 27-28). For instance, if we watched a questionable movie, our conscience would act as though it were definitely wrong to watch that movie. According to Koehler,

The proper treatment of persons with a "doubting conscience" is not to cajole them to override their scruples but to remove the scruples [or to affirm or correct them!] by patient instruction, which must be very clear and well-authenticated from Scriptures.

Koehler 1941, 27

The criterion for conscience content is the Bible. Even conservative Christian groups do not fully experience this ideal. However, this does not lessen the vital need for this *Universal Moral Language*. Because of this lack of knowledge—and of course, violated values—*intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* conflicts abound.

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The Bible commands two groups to teach children:

1. Parents:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.
Deuteronomy 6:4-7, NIV

2. Jesus commanded the church to *evangelize* and *teach* in the Great Commission:

Then Jesus come to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."
Matthew 28:18-20, NIV

Therefore, *part of the Great Commission is to instill proper conscience content.*

God did not command the government to teach. The government's role is to protect each citizen's

1. Life
2. Liberty
3. Property.

If government usurps parental and Church authority to teach, then it should be corrected. On the other hand, we are to obey just laws, which the government has a mandate to enforce.

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Paul comments:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

Romans 13:1-5, NIV

According to Drakeford, the *idealized society* and *reason* are two sources of conscience content (Drakeford 1967, 16-19). Although society forms some values on the anvil of human experience, the values tend to be unreliable, especially as a culture begins to degenerate. Human reason is suspect, with its inherent selfishness, its irrational goals and its many rationalizations.

Rationalization is the mental process through which one attempts to justify his behavior through *logical*

argument. This process can be an operation to justify behavior in line with the conscience ideal or to attempt to justify behavior against the conscience ideal. However, the term *rationalization*

is used primarily to describe the attempt to justify irresponsible behavior. The common word for rationalization is

lying

. The process can be so convincing that one deceives himself on the conscious level:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

Proverb 14:12, NIV

Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word

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planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it—he will be blessed in what he does.

James 1:21-25, NIV

There are several mirrors we can use in an attempt to discover who we are:

1. The *Bible* mirror that reveals our *objective* spiritual, mental physical and moral condition.
2. The *physical* mirror that reflects our *objective* physical appearance.
3. The *human* mirror: other people who reflect back how they *subjectively* perceive us.
4. The defective *subjective* mirror of human reason.

Many problems arise from one's trust in reason. Bill Gothard, in his 1972 Dallas Seminar, stated that if natural human thinking were reversed 180 degrees, then it would be more in line with God's thinking! Some of the Church's problem in trusting in reason goes back to Thomas Aquinas' work in philosophy:

In Thomas Aquinas' view the will of man was fallen, but the intellect was not. From this incomplete view of the Biblical fall flowed all the subsequent difficulties. Man's intellect became autonomous.

Schaeffer 1971, 11

Therefore, we conclude that the *only criterion* for conscience content is the Bible.

Modification of Conscience Content

Is it ever permissible to reduce guilt by lowering the ideal? *The difference between the conscience ideal and the lived-out experience generates guilt.*

(Adapted from Professor James McGraw's lecture at Nazarene Theological Seminary, ca. 1966.) In other words, when we fail to live up to our beliefs, guilt results.

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Guilt resulting from proper conscience content is good in that it causes one to treat others properly. However, if one educates his conscience by a man-made system of *dos* and *don'ts*, the ideal may be humanly impossible to keep, therefore generating debilitating guilt. The Apostle Paul writes,

Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: "Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!"? These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Colossians 2:20-22, NIV

In this case, one should patiently instruct the *overscrupulous* person from the scriptures until he accepts God's values. This will lower guilt in the Christian. However, in the United States culture, guilt could rise because the normal ideal is far below the standard of the Bible.

The amazing thing is that God's ideal is easy to keep, because, "With the commandment comes the enablement" (Dr. Mendell Taylor, "History and Methods of Great Revivals" class, Nazarene Theological Seminary, ca. 1965). The Holy Spirit gives us power to obey God. Jesus said,

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. *for my yoke is easy and my burden is light*" [Italics Mine]. Matthew 11:28-30, NIV

God also places within us a desire to obey him: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13, NIV).

Conversely, the way of the rebel is hard: "Good understanding wins favor, but the way of the unfaithful is hard" (Proverb 13:15, NIV).

Temptation and sin are not the same.

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We must distinguish between the temptation to sin and sin itself. We cannot always keep bad thoughts from entering our conscious mind. Psychiatrist Paul Tournier clarifies:

I do not forget the accurate distinction made by the theologians between temptation and sin. I am the first to expound it to the over-scrupulous patient. Temptation is not sin. The proof of this is that Christ himself was tempted (Luke 4:1-13). Any idea, even the most impious and the most criminal, can surge up in our minds without our being able to do anything about it. The only fault lies in our accepting it, cultivating it and taking pleasure in it. I quote Luther's saying that we cannot prevent the birds from flying over our head, but we can prevent them from building their nests in our hair.

Tournier 1962, 15

The sources of our temptation are our own nature (*Id*), other people and Satan. James states,

When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers.

James 1:13-16, NIV

John gives three categories of temptation:

Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the *lust of the flesh* and the *lust of the eyes* and *the boastful pride of life*

, is not from the Father, but is from the world [italics mine].

1 John 2:15-16, NASB

Jesus' temptation in Matthew illustrates how Satan tempts using human desires as a basis:

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Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." [*desire of the flesh*]

Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" [*the boastful pride of life*]

Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." [*desire of the eyes*

]

Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Matthew 4:1-11, NIV

Adam and Eve were tempted in these three areas, but failed. Jesus overcame, praise the Lord!

The temptation becomes sin only if we choose to commit the sin in our minds, or adopt the attitude, "I would if I could" (Dr. Richard Taylor, lecture in "Doctrine of Holiness" class, Nazarene Theological Seminary, 1965).

Conclusion

Conscience is vitally important for both the individual and society. One can make his conscience *less sensitive*, but it cannot be made *oversensitive*. It is unethical to modify conscience function or content, by

1. Violating the conscience (thereby weakening function).
2. Yielding to sinful group pressure (thereby weakening function).
3. Electrical or chemical shock treatments (information is lost by brain damage).

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The proper way to modify the conscience is by

1. Allowing the Holy Spirit to strengthen the ego.
2. Changing to proper content.
3. Strengthening the ego through continual right choices.
4. Associating with moral and ethical people.

As one

1. Restores his conscience function to the proper level of function,
2. Corrects his conscience content by the standard of Biblical content and
3. Lives up to his ideals,

Then, self esteem will rise correspondingly.

Chapter 3 of my eBook, *How to Raise Your Self-Esteem Using Proven Biblical Principles*.

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