

# The Role Of Conscience In Religion

by Walton Weaver

Every thinking person is aware of the existence of conscience. He may not have applied this term to it, and he may not have thought enough about it to come up with a right understanding of its meaning and role. But he has some conception of what the Bible refers to when it speaks of conscience. We need not then be detained by attempting to prove its existence; we may go directly to the task of defining it. What is conscience?

## ***SOME DEFINITIONS***

The word itself is a Bible term. It is defined in the *Analytical Greek Lexicon* “as an inward moral impression of one's actions and principles.... as the inward faculty of moral judgment, . . . as the inward moral and spiritual frame” (p. 391). Several examples are cited in Scripture where each of these meanings is intended. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich define conscience as “moral awareness” (A Greek-English Lexicon of the N. T., p. 794). Henry Thayer says, “Lit., ‘joint knowledge;’ the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending the one, condemning the other” (*Greek-English Lexicon of the N. T.*, p. 602).

Joseph Cook defined conscience as a sense including both perception and feeling: “. . . a perception of right and wrong in motives, and a feeling that right ought, and wrong ought not, to be chosen by the will. Every motive has two sides—rightness or its opposite, and oughtness or its opposite. The former distinction is perceived, the latter felt” (*Cook's Monday Lectures*, 2nd Series, p. 142). Cook then brings these two sides of conscience together to form this definition: “Conscience is that which perceives and feels rightness and oughtness in motives.”

The feelings involved in the function of the conscience may come before the act is performed, or they may come after the act is performed. When the feelings come before the act they will either urge one to do the right thing or they will urge him to forego the wrong. When they come after the act is performed they will be aroused by self-approval or self-condemnation. They will be feelings of complacency, regret or remorse, or satisfaction and approval (see Harvey W. Everest, *Science and Pedagogy of Ethics*, pp. 30-31). As long as one does what he believes is right he will have the approval of his conscience, but if he does what he believes is wrong then his conscience will condemn him and he will feel badly about it.

## ***SOME TYPES***

According to the Bible conscience may be classified by types. This fact should impress on our minds the importance of our having a right understanding of the meaning, as well as the role of conscience, in our lives.

1. *A good conscience.* In Paul's charge to Timothy to fight the good warfare, he urged him to

hold faith, “and a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1:18-19). Of himself, Paul said, “I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day” (Acts 23:1). A good conscience is one that is pure (Acts 24:16) and void of offense (2 Tim. 1:3). It is a conscience that is not violated, or one that is respected.

2. *An evil or defiled conscience.* The opposite of good is bad, or evil. Since a good conscience is one that is respected, an evil conscience is one that is not respected. The failure to conform our will to the will of God, or to act contrary to the known will of God, defiles our conscience; it makes it bad or evil. So Scripture speaks of an evil conscience (Heb. 9:14; 10:22) and a defiled conscience (1 Cor. 8:7). Whenever an accepted standard is violated, whether that standard *is God's* standard or not, as in the case of eating meats which is right in itself, but judged to be wrong by some, one's conscience is defiled.

3. *A weak conscience.* When Paul spoke of some whose conscience was defiled by eating meat offered to idols, he gave as the reason for it the fact that their conscience was weak (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12). In this case, the weak conscience was a conscience that did not have the strength required to cause one to act according to knowledge (vss. 10, 12), or the conscience that cannot make proper distinctions and judgements because of a defect in knowledge or perception (vs. 7).

4. *A seared conscience.* The seared conscience which Paul refers to in 1 Tim. 4:1-2 is the conscience that has become insensible to moral and spiritual discernment through persistent violations of it.

It is clear from our discussion thus far that conscience is a function of both the intellect and the emotions. It acts with the amount of knowledge at its disposal and functions both before and after an act is performed. To have a good conscience (one void of offense) one must live consistently with the knowledge he possesses. The fact that one's conscience may be represented by any of the types that Scripture mentions points to the fact that conscience may be educated. Since it can be educated it may be either informed or misinformed; it may be educated with truth or with error. This being the case, even though one may have the approval of his conscience on a given matter, that in itself does not mean that his action in relation to that matter is approved of God (Acts 22:4; 23:1; 24:16).

### ***THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE***

The role or function of conscience has been variously defined.

(1) Modern behaviorists *deny that conscience is a mental faculty at all.* To them conscience is nothing more than a learned reaction to stimuli. This would necessarily rule out a legitimate sphere of right or wrong which the Bible affirms, and in the rejection of the Bible as the objective standard in religion we would not expect the materialist to properly define the function of conscience.

(2) Others would say that *conscience has only a punitive function.* Conscience is God given, according to this view, but it is given solely for the purpose of keeping man within the confines of his nature. Conscience is the reaction of man's nature to his past attempts to transgress the bounds of his nature. The emphasis here is on conscience being a response, a reaction. Conscience is

operative only after man has transgressed the bounds of his nature. It is only punitive and does not have preventive power. But surely one who is conscious or aware of penalties imposed for wrongdoing is just as aware that these penalties are designed to prevent him from engaging in that particular act. The fact that Paul urged Timothy to “hold ... a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1: 18-19) shows that conscience has a preventive as well as a punitive role. Thayer's definition of conscience cited earlier includes the preventive function of conscience: “the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, *prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending the one, condemning the other*” (emphasis mine, ww)

(3) A third view of the function of conscience is that *conscience is supreme in the moral and spiritual realm*. Joseph Butler was the foremost proponent of this view of conscience. Those who hold this view believe that moral questions are determined *a priori* without the necessity of considering their consequences. Butler affirmed that this is accomplished by the “moral faculty” of conscience.