

## The Roll of Conscience in One's Belief System

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I have received dozens of calls from people transitioning out of Adventism. These people know about many of the problems of SDA doctrine and have decided to leave Adventism. Yet, at the same time, they have great difficulty in making a full transition to a community Christian church. While their conscience on the one hand is driving them from Adventism, yet on the other their conscience keeps them from going all the way. Only those of us who have made this journey can fully understand the trauma involved. I have taken one chapter out of *The Recovering Adventist*, a book I am writing, and include a modification of it here. It is my prayer that the Holy Spirit will use this study of God's Word to help every reader come to grips with the very important issue of conscience. To bring some of the issues into focus, respond to the true or false questions below:

- T.  F. Our conscience is always a safe guide to lead us into truth.
- T.  F. Due to education and environment our conscience can be misinformed.
- T.  F. We should always follow our conscience.
- T.  F. It is O.K. to go against our conscience when it is misinformed.
- T.  F. It is O.K. to go against our conscience as long as one does not do it too often.
- T.  F. Refusing to look at evidence has nothing to do with our conscience.

What is the conscience? Here are some short one-liners on the lighter side.

- Conscience is what hurts when everything else feels good.
- The greatest tormentor of the human soul is a guilty conscience.
- A guilty conscience keeps more people awake than coffee.
- Nothing brings more joy, peace and satisfaction than a clear conscience.
- If a sermon is going to prick the conscience, it must have sharply defined points.

### Conscience is the moral judging faculty of the mind

I believe our conscience functions in three ways: First, it is a *judge* telling us what we have done is either good or bad. Second the conscience acts like a *starter* and causes us to take action to do something that we ought to do. Third, conscience sometimes functions as a *break* to keep us from doing what we believe to be wrong. An illustration will help.

My father died when I was ten years old and left me his carpenter hand tools. Those were the days before power tools were widely in use. I vividly remember when some years later that I decided it was time to sharpen the hand saw. My father's tools included a little triangular shaped file, a clamp-type vice to hold the saw while it was being sharpened, and a saw set, a complicated little tool which would slightly bend a saw tooth so that saw would not bind. I knew nothing about sharpening a saw, but I didn't see any reason why I could not do it. So I started. I filed and filed. Then I thought I had better set the saw. Not knowing what I was doing or even how to adjust the saw set, I started bending every other tooth.

When I got done, I envisioned a smooth, sharp, easy-cutting saw. Not so! It was worse than before I had started to sharpen it. So I did it all over again. This time it was worse yet. Not being

one to give up easily, I tried again. Now, it would not cut at all. I had filed some teeth more than others so some of them were too short and did not even touch the wood while others were too long and gouged the wood. The set of the saw was not even. In desperation I decided that I had better take the saw to a person who knew what he was doing. Down the road a few blocks from our house was a saw shop. I walked down to this shop and presented him with my saw and simply said, "would you please sharpen this saw." He looked at it inquisitively, held it up to his eye and looked down the row of teeth and said, "whoever filed this saw last sure didn't know what he was doing. Then he began telling me all the things that "this person" had done wrong.

I was not prepared for his next words. "By the way," he said, "who was the dumb idiot who tried to sharpen this saw?" I did not want to be that dumb idiot so I said, "some guy that lives down the road a few blocks!" Then, wouldn't you know it, he said, "What's his name?" I blurted out, "I don't remember." and got out of there as fast as I could!

I had my mother pick up the saw when it was ready as I never wanted to see this man again. But every day on the way to school guess what we drove by? Right. And every day on the way home from school guess what we went by? Right again. Twice every day guess what this thing called conscience was doing to this eighth grade boy? Right. Finally, I decided it would be better to confess my lie than to be stabbed twice a day!

In this illustration, we see the conscience first acting as a judge: "You told a lie and that was wrong." Then it operated as a starter. "You better go and confess you lie."

Conscience is something we get as standard equipment at birth. In Romans 2, Paul speaks about the Gentiles who don't even know the law, have the law written on their hearts and their consciences alternately accuse or else defend them. Anthropologists have found that in every culture there are prescriptions against murder, incest, untruth, sexual excess, and there are obligations of parents to their children and children to their parents.<sup>1</sup> There seems to be in every person some innate conscience based upon what we call "natural law" which tells us if we are doing right or wrong.

Our social and religious training, however, also influences conscience. In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul speaks about a "weak conscience" which is lacking in knowledge. So our conscience is a very complex thing. It is the moral judging faculty of the mind and it makes its decisions based upon a certain innate, God given sense of right and wrong *coupled with* our social and religious training. Because of its complexity we must ask ourselves some very penetrating questions.

If our social and religious training can influence the conscience, then is it possible that some people may have an incorrectly or incompletely educated conscience? Take, for example, the intense hatred of the Jews that is present in children who grow up in a radical fundamentalist Moslem home. If the conscience can be educated incorrectly, then can the conscience always be trusted to be a safe guide? Logically we have to conclude, "No." This, however, leads us to the next most difficult question. **If the conscience cannot always be trusted, should it *always* be followed?** (Call Out) Now we find ourselves in a dilemma. If the conscience is the moral judging factor of the mind, and if it is educated incorrectly, *it has no way of knowing the inadequacy and it is incapable of picking up the error.* It is like asking someone, "What is it you do *not* know?" As a computer cannot process data that it does not have access to, so the poorly or incorrectly educated conscience could guide us in the wrong way. This leads us to our first conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Tenny, *Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 1, p. 947.

## **Our moral database may be deficient.**

Most of us do not want to admit to this, but it is a truth of Scripture and it is proved in experience. We can see it in the lives of others, but we have a hard time believing it is true for us. Underline in your thinking the next sentence. ***Recognizing the possibility that our moral database may be deficient is often the first step out of spiritual bondage.***

Once we recognize that our moral database may be deficient, then we can do something about it. That is one of the many reasons for continued personal Bible reading, regular church attendance and involvement in small group Bible studies. These activities should be in settings where true *inductive* study is done and where people are *free to kindly* challenge the blind spots of erroneous thinking in one another. There should be openness to the Holy Spirit and a willingness to follow truth when it is received. (possible Call Out)

An incorrectly educated conscience may have two results. First, it may often cause false guilt. Many “Formers” who grew up on Ellen White’s writings can attest to this.<sup>2</sup> A second result of an incorrectly educated conscience is that we may be doing things with a clear conscience that are actually wrong.<sup>3</sup>

Now we come to a very important question. Should we *always* follow our conscience? Let me share with you another illustration from my personal experience. I mentioned earlier that my father died when I was 10 and my mother then supported our family as a schoolteacher. As the years went by, the school children began to get on her nerves. After my junior year in academy, my mother took a year off from school teaching to regain her health. I dropped out of school that year and worked full time to support our family. I worked at a large chicken ranch near Napa, California, which had about 18,000 laying hens. Because of my religious upbringing and my own personal Bible study, my sincere belief was that I should not work on Saturday which I *knew* to be the Sabbath. I made an arrangement with this chicken rancher to have Sabbath off and work Sundays instead. I enjoyed the work, felt I was doing a good job and this rancher liked my work. After I had been there several months, one Friday evening he called me and asked me to work the next day, which was Sabbath, to fill in for someone who was sick. I told him I could not, because it was my Sabbath and the Bible said that the seventh day was the Sabbath and on that day one should not do any work. The next Sunday, I went to work as usual. However, that evening just before I checked out, he handed me a check and said that he could not use me anymore because he had to have someone who was willing to work when he needed him. I distinctly remember my conscience telling me that I had done what was right. I had been taught that losing one’s job or even one’s life, was better than to work on the Sabbath which I viewed to be a direct violation of

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<sup>2</sup> For example Ellen White said, “It is a sin to be sick.” *Health Reformer*, 1866-08-01; “Displaying photographs of Family pictures is “a species of idolatry.” *Review and Herald*, 1907-06-13; “The many, many photographs in your houses are a dishonor to God. They bear silent witness that you have backslidden from righteousness. I look to heaven and cry, ‘Lord, how long shall this evil divert means from thy treasury?’” *Review and Herald*, 1901-11-26. “There will be no place for outward adornment in the sanctified heart...” *Testimonies for the Church*, Vol. 1, p. 162; “It is a sin to forget, a sin to be negligent.” *Bible Eco*, 1901-01-14. Anyone who has seriously read EGW can multiply this list a hundred fold.

<sup>3</sup> It is my belief that God enlightens the conscience of every person born into the world (Jn. 1:9, Rom. 2:14,15). Those who end up becoming evil (Like some of the Terrorists) have repeatedly gone against their God given conscience until it was “seared”(1 Tim. 4:2). Then, continuing in a wrong way, they came to believe they were doing right.

God's moral law. I followed my conscience. I felt no guilt. My conscience commended me for my decision.

Did I do what was right? Your answer will doubtless depend upon your *own* religious training and what is in *your* moral database! We could turn this into a discussion about correct Sabbath keeping, but that is not our topic. Coming back to the key question: Should we *always* follow our conscience? To answer this important question let us do some Bible study. Did Paul always follow his conscience?

"Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, 'Brethren, I have lived my life *with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.*'" Acts 23:1

"In view of this, I also do my best to maintain *always a blameless conscience* both before God and before men." Acts 24:16

"For our proud confidence is this: the *testimony of our conscience*, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you." 2 Cor. 1:12

"But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a *good conscience* and a sincere faith." 1 Tim. 3:9

"but holding to the mystery of the faith with a *clear conscience.*" 1 Tim. 1:5

I thank God, whom I serve with a *clear conscience* the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day," 2 Tim. 1:3

"I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my *conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit.*" Rom. 9:1

"and *keep a good conscience* so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame." 1 Pet. 3:16

From these verses we derive our second conclusion:

### **We should always follow our conscience**

We should always follow our conscience provided it has not been previously "seared" by repeatedly going against the known will of God. At this point, however, many questions arise. If the conscience may be educated incorrectly—and it can be—are we sure we should *always* follow our conscience? Could an incorrectly educated conscience lead us to do the wrong thing? What happens when we follow our conscience *wanting to do right*, thinking we are doing right, when in fact we are doing wrong because our conscience database is either incomplete or programmed with error?

It is clear from the verses listed above that Paul *always* kept a clear conscience. This was true not only after his conversion but also *before* it. Note again Acts 23:1

"Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God *up to this day.*"

But does the fact that Paul had a clear conscience mean that he always did the right thing? Absolutely not.

"I too was *convinced* that I ought to do all that was possible to *oppose* the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you

*persecute me?* It is hard for you to kick against the goads.” Then I asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ “‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ the Lord replied.” Acts 26:9–15

These verses show that Paul had a clear conscience when in fact he was going 180 degrees away from truth. Note carefully his conclusion. Here we find the answer to our question: What happens when we set out to do right, think we are doing right, when, because of an improperly educated conscience we do the wrong thing?

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, *I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.* The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.” 1 Tim. 1:12–15

God looked at Paul’s heart and there he found a man who had determined to always do what *he believed* to be right. And God said, “I can use a man like that,” so God called Paul and filled him with His Spirit which enlightened him because God knew that Paul would always be true to his conscience.<sup>4</sup>

This is not an isolated teaching. In Acts 3:17 we read, “Now, brothers, I know that you acted in *ignorance*, as did your leaders.” Like Paul, many of the Jewish leaders acted in ignorance (from an inadequately educated conscience) so God enlightened them on the day of Pentecost. Then, after they had received the Holy Spirit, we read, “and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” This principle is clearly stated in Acts 17:30. “In the past **God overlooked such ignorance**, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” We must, however, make a clear difference between those who *habitually* seek to do God’s will as they understand it and those who previously have seared their conscience by not following the known will of God. Here is our fourth conclusion.

**When we follow our conscience thinking we are doing right yet because of an inadequately educated conscience we do the wrong thing, God overlooks our ignorance and will enlighten us.**

Next, we must ask, what happens if we go contrary to the known will of God and/or violate our conscience? Scripture leaves no room for doubt here.

“keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.” 1 Tim. 1:19

“But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars *seared in their own conscience* as with a branding iron.” 1 Tim. 4:1–2

“To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their *mind and their conscience are defiled.* They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him...” Titus 1:15, 16

**Acting contrary to our conscience causes spiritual disaster.**

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<sup>4</sup> I recognize that this may be an oversimplification of a complex issue considering that God chose Paul from his birth.

To illustrate how these four principles operate in real life, contrast two Bible characters: Paul and Balaam. God spoke directly to Balaam giving him a clear indication of His will (See Numbers 22:7, 12, 17, 20; 31:16.) Balaam had no deficiency in his conscience database. However, Balaam was not satisfied to do God's will which was *clearly revealed*. He had his eye on the wages of divination so he began to compromise ever so slightly with God's will. Then little, by little, he went further and further away from God's side, until he was on the side of the enemy of God. His counsel led Israel into sin, which resulted in the loss of at least 24,000 lives.

Paul, on the other hand, did have a deficiency in his conscience database. However, he determined to always have a clear conscience and do what he believed to be right. He started out as a persecutor of the church, 180 degrees away from God's intrinsic will. However, God saw his heart, realized Paul was acting in ignorance, and in grace and mercy, God enlightened Paul with His Holy Spirit. Paul repented of his error, and God revealed to him truths, which completed his conscience database. Paul continued to follow his conscience and his life influenced many millions to trust in Christ as their Savior.

God does not judge from outward appearance, but He looks on the heart, the conscience. And today He is looking for people who will *always* do what they believe to be right. If he finds them, he will overlook their ignorance, enlighten them with His Spirit and expand their ministry for Him.

But what happens to those who have a deficient moral database and refuse opportunities to correct this deficiency?

Notice how the religious leaders who listened to Stephen in Acts 7:54–58 responded.

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the quick, and they began gnashing their teeth at him... But they cried out with a loud voice, and covered their ears and rushed at him with one impulse. When they had driven him out of the city, they began stoning him..."

We concluded earlier that if our moral database is deficient causing us to do the wrong thing when we believe we are doing right, then God would overlook our ignorance and enlighten us. However—and this is an important however—if we refuse to look at the evidence that is within our reach and purposely close our mind to the facts, then this *closed-minded attitude* may also cause spiritual disaster. In great sorrow Jesus said to his generation “For the heart of this people has become dull, with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes, otherwise they would see with their eyes, hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them.” (Matt. 13:15) Over and over again, Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” The closed-minded attitude expressed by the Jews cemented them into their rigid theology and they refused to look at the truth of Christianity. Later Paul described this attitude in these words: “just as it is written, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not,’ down to this very day.” (Rom. 11:8) This leads us to our fifth conclusion:

**Refusing to study and look at the facts can be as dangerous as going against our conscience causing spiritual disaster.**

I have a deep concern for two groups within Adventism. The first group can be represented by some who send letters to the Editor in *Proclamation*, and other SDAs I speak with on the phone. In essence many hundreds of the communications I have with Seventh-day Adventists can be summarized as “We have the truth of the Adventist message, you have left Adventism,

therefore we know you and the other writers for *Proclamation* are wrong and we won't waste our time looking at your deceptive materials."

By using this as an illustration I am not suggesting that *Proclamation* is the source of all truth. God and His Word alone can claim that. What concerns me, however, is that when so many *honest* SDA pastors leave Adventism, those who remain often do not want to know why they left. Rather, they are content to simply write off their former colleagues as "following the wiles of the devil." Often they impute all kinds of evil motives on those who leave. Could this attitude of unwillingness to look at the biblical facts be the same as going against one's conscience? Is this not the same spirit that was manifested by the Jews of Christ's day? Of Jesus the Jews said, "He has a demon and is insane. Why do you listen to Him?" (Jn. 9:20)

In the recent Sabbath School Quarterly entitled "The Pillars of Our Faith" there is this troubling statement:

As Adventists, we have more reason than ever to trust the prophetic message given to us to present to the world. *We must close our ears and hearts to those among us who mock or deny our end-time scenario.* (p. 97 emphasis supplied)

It is not our desire to mock any Adventist teaching but is it wrong to deny the validity of certain doctrines when there is abundant biblical evidence to do so? Is not the quote above similar to the cultic mentality expressed by Jehovah's Witnesses and other cults who will not openly and honestly study with others "because they have the truth" and therefore "know others are wrong"? We believe it is a healthy activity to probe one's beliefs to make sure they are built on the solid foundation of God's word and not on the sands of assumption and proof-text hermeneutics.

A second group within Adventism that concerns me is pastors and administrators now serving in the SDA church who know that many—if not most—of the unique teachings of Adventism are not supported by honest Bible study. I have personally spoken with dozens of them. Yet, they pretend to go along with the party line so they won't rock the boat. Many congregants have no idea that their pastor or conference administrator does not believe in a number of the "27 Fundamentals." I know from experience how difficult this situation can be and it is certainly not for me to judge. However, I do express a concern. Could this situation of pretending to believe something that one does not lead to a searing of one's conscience? When I was faced with this dilemma, I, with two of my church elders, spent five hours with a leading Adventist theologian seeking some ground of reconciliation. He counseled me to tell my Conference President "what he wanted to hear" but to carefully choose my words so that I could put my own—different—interpretation on them. I believe this type of activity could be the first step leading one down the slippery slope of seared conscience. Martin Luther was right, and biblical, when he said that it is never safe for a man to go against his conscience.

In summary:

- 1. Our moral database may be deficient.**
- 2. We should always follow our conscience.**
- 3. When we follow our conscience thinking we are doing right yet we end up doing the wrong thing because of an inadequately educated conscience, God overlooks our ignorance and will enlighten us.**
- 4. Acting contrary to our conscience causes spiritual disaster.**

**5. Refusing to study and look at the facts can be as dangerous as going against our conscience causing spiritual disaster.**

For those of us who are reevaluating our belief system I believe these are important considerations. These principles from God's word will serve us well as we seek truth—Jesus Christ Himself.

I conclude with our motto which we take very seriously. "Truth needs no other foundation than honest investigation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a willingness to follow truth when it is revealed." May God help us each to do this very thing!

The Lord willing, the next issue of *Proclamation* will have a companion article, "The Role of Conscience in Christian Freedom."