

## CONSCIENCE

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The purpose of this study is to examine certain psychological views of conscience in the light of Scripture and the writings of Ellen G. White. Our analysis will focus on certain critical dimensions out of which may emerge a particular Adventist view of conscience in harmony with Scripture. The clarification of an Adventist view of conscience is believed to be vital for the development of a systematic psychology in agreement with Scripture and Adventist principles.

A review of the psychological and theological literature suggests the following as major questions about conscience: What is conscience? What is its source? Is conscience innate in man, and does it unfold spontaneously after birth? Is man born only with the capacity for the development of conscience? Does the process of socialization determine the essence of conscience? Is conscience a transcultural phenomenon? How does a man's response to conscience affect his spiritual potential and his emotional health?

Until the 1950's, textbooks in psychology rarely, if ever, mentioned moral development or conscience. Psychology was trying to establish itself as a science, especially by using objective methods. Psychology's work was restricted to the more readily objectifiable areas of study rather than areas as elusive as conscience.

In more recent years, however, learning theorists, psychoanalysts, and developmental psychologists have developed techniques for the study of conscience and other aspects of moral development.

In 1968, the topic was considered of sufficient importance to

be made the central theme of a conference at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This conference assembled developmental psychologists, psychiatrists, theologians, and clergymen of many denominations. (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 1969).

Behavioral scientists and theologians *are agreed* that without the existence of conscience, "the human race would have bogged down in a hazardous course, and no kind of civilization would have been possible." (Knight, 1969) Such unanimous concord not only underscores the importance of our discussion, but suggests significant implications deriving from our understanding of and attitude toward conscience.

Unfortunately, while the behavioral scientists and theologians are unanimous in their agreement that the conscience is absolutely essential for the ultimate survival of the human race, they are not agreed on what the conscience is. In fact, they are not agreed on their answers to *any* of the questions posed at the beginning of this study.

### What is Conscience?

Some of the world's most influential minds have wrestled with this question: Thomas Aquinas, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, Hobart Mowrer, Jean Piaget, Lauretta Bender, Abraham Maslow, Lawrence Kohlberg, Raymond Cattell, to name a few.

How one defines conscience depends upon one's theoretical orientation, including his view concerning the nature of man and the role and purpose of God in man's behalf.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) initially defined conscience as "the internalized voice of the family," but later on as the "internalized voice of community." He saw conscience as punitive in function. Freud taught that a dominant conscience predisposes one to a neurosis. For Freud, the cure for neurosis required the weakening of conscience.

Hobart Mowrer (1971) questioned the validity of Freud's theory regarding the conscience and neurosis. The neurotic typically withdraws from people. But, if his neurosis indicates a dominant conscience and conscience is the internalization of the values of the

community, then the neurotic should be moving toward and identifying with society instead of withdrawing as he does.

Mowrer insists that neurosis is the result of blocking off the conscience from the id and the ego. Mowrer believed that only when conscience is heeded, will the neurotic be freed of his neurosis, and once again affiliate comfortably with the society whose norms it has internalized. For Mowrer, then, therapy consists of the therapist's alignment with the conscience of the individual to restore it to its normal function.

Furthermore, when Hobart Mowrer himself developed a neurosis and tried to find healing by weakening his conscience, he got worse. But when he worked at strengthening his conscience he got well! When he presented his views in an address to the American Psychological Association, they were not well received. However, he did become president of that Association!

Abraham Maslow ties conscience to the nature of man. He declares that "conscience is the voice of the inner nature of man which is basically good." For Maslow, then, therapy consists of facilitating the free expression of this inner self. If a person listens to his conscience, he will freely express his inner self, according to Maslow. (Incidentally, more and more Adventists are encouraging each other to freely express the inner self as a means of breaking loose from the bonds of legalism. Historically, however, Adventists have rejected the notion that the inner nature of man is basically good.)

Carl Jung, an early disciple of Freud, later developed his own independent theory of personality. He wrestled at great length with some of the difficulties encountered in the attempt to define conscience adequately.

He finally argued that conscience contains both *moral* and *ethical* factors. The moral factor reflects the admonitions of society. But the ethical factor is an inherited archetype and possesses a compelling authority that might be characterized as the voice of God. Note that for Jung, it is the compelling authority of conscience that characterizes it as the voice of God.

Erich Fromm considers this authoritarian nature of conscience as deriving from *parental* authority. He sees this as but a *preliminary* stage in the development of conscience. He states that

conscience can be either *authoritarian* or *humanistic*. According to Fromm, guilt feelings create dependency and form the roots of neurosis. Through humanistic conscience, an adult becomes his or her own father, mother, and child. Quoting from Erich Fromm, "*Fatherly conscience* informs us of duty and consequences based on reason and judgment. *Motherly conscience* offers loving and forgiving for self and others despite any offense" (Fromm, 1971). Finally, Fromm defines a healthy conscience as *the loving voice of care for ourselves*, as *the expression of our true selves*, and as *the expression of the essence of our moral experience in life*.

Jersild (1968) suggests that conscience may be only the voice of expediency or a sort of gadfly which merely prevents a person from enjoying what he knows he should not do, but often does not keep him from doing it.

On the other hand, Laretta Bender (1947), an expert in psychological measurement and individual differences, asserts that "conscience is formed by the deferring of the gratification of ones wishes. . . the psychopath has no conscience because he has never learned to defer immediate gratification of his wishes."

Developmental theorists like Erik Erickson emphasize that conscience development is largely dependent upon the development of trust in the infant. Erickson believes that a dependable regularity of parental caring develops trust. This dependable regularity also develops the infants sense of time. Because of this sense of time and trust, the child learns to defer the gratification of his impulses. (Note that Erickson agrees with Laretta Bender that learning to defer the gratification of ones impulses precedes the development of conscience.)

Two other developmental theories of conscience are worthy of note.

Jean Piaget has postulated two major stages in moral development, the transition between the two stages occurring about seven years of age. The first he called "heteronomous" and the second "autonomous."

According to Piaget, in the first stage the child judges the seriousness of offenses in terms of how much damage was done, regardless of the accidental nature of the event. In the second stage,

children judge the seriousness of the offense in terms of the *intent* of the offender.

For Piaget, *physical maturation* provides the *increasing capacity* for conscience development, and *learning through socialization* provides the *extent of conscience development*. If both provisions are met, it is assumed that the child will naturally develop his conscience.

Lawrence Kohlberg (1964) postulates six stages of moral development, with two stages characterizing each of three levels in the process of development. Kohlberg's theory suggests that physical maturation and learning determine the extent of conscience development according to a fixed sequence which moves from decreasing degrees of self-interest, which foster a relativistic conscience, to a selfless commitment to absolute rights, and finally to absolute principles of morality that are universal.

Many adults never achieve the higher levels of conscience development according to Kohlberg. For them, moral choice is based upon self-interest alone—the avoidance of pain, the enjoyment of pleasure, the approval of others. When the highest level is attained, Kohlberg sees the individual as being willing to die, if necessary, for the preservation of what he believes to be universal principles of right. He does what he believes to be right simply because it is right.

In summary, for Kohlberg conscience initially operates for self-interest, later for the welfare and rights of others, and finally for principle itself. According to Kohlberg many adults never achieve this final stage.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) taught that conscience is the bond between the principle of morality and the action that implements that morality—conscience is the bond between law and responsibility.

Raymond B. Cattell, probably the most cited contemporary psychologist, refers to conscience as being inner-driven rather than society-driven, and designates it as Factor G in his list of personality traits. For Cattell, the tendency to reproach oneself, to be guilt-ridden, is an entirely separate personality factor or trait, and is called Factor O, designated as primary anxiety. Anxiety neurotics are found to be high in Factor O, but low in conscience strength, designated as Factor G.

For Factor G, Cattell observes that "a core not unlike the Ten Commandments is found as a common denominator. . . ." It also brings a strong involvement in moral concerns of right and wrong. . . it best depicts the deeply rooted concern for moral standards, for persistence of effort, and, in general, that tendency to drive the ego and to restrain the id, which clinical theory has regarded as marks of the superego.

Referring to his test items that measure the strength of factor G, Cattell emphasizes "The proof of the nature of G is, in the last resort, not its item content, but the criteria with which it correlates. It correlates negatively with delinquency, sociopathic behavior, homosexuality, etc. It tends to be particularly low in psychopaths, criminals, and other groups who are characterized by low regard for conventional moral standards." (Cattell, Eber, & Tatsuoka, 1970).

Drawing upon Cattell's research findings, Delhees concludes, "Therefore, from the standpoint of practical clinical use of these measurement findings, therapy (to cure neuroticism) should aim at building up the superego (conscience) rather than attempting to reduce anxiety and guilt feelings, as is often the practice in psychoanalytic therapy." (Cattell & Dreger, 1977).

Cattell and Gorsuch (1965) presented empirical data on the moral structure in societies themselves showing that *a general morality factor does exist extending across behavior in some 52 countries of quite varied cultures*. Although it varies in some social content, and the biblical Ten Commandments are certainly not the explicit core in all the earth's religious traditions, yet the necessary moral conditions for societies to cohere and live generate a sufficiently basic similarity of prohibitions. Hence, as these investigators show, "there is a single factor across these countries loading high (negatively) on syphilis death rate, illegitimate births, death rate from alcoholism, and various basic crime incidence rates" (Cattell and Gorsuch, 1965).

Cattell accepts the Freudian theoretical labels *id*, *ego*, and *superego*. However, he has suggested a model in which the ultimate integration of the harmonious personality occurs when the ego and superego become one. This is a departure from Freud who leaves the two structures always separated.

Nicolas Berdyaev clearly departs from the notion that conscience is of social origin. He declared that conscience is the "spiritual, supernatural principle in man and it is *not of social origin* at all. . . Conscience is human nature at the depth at which it has not completely fallen away from God, but has preserved its connection with the Divine world" (Berdyaev, 1960, pp. 59, 167-168).

Note how brilliantly he argues his position. He says,

Moral life is intertwined with the social, and man's moral experience has social significance. But the first source of moral life is not social. The moral act is first and foremost a spiritual act, and has a spiritual origin. Conscience is not instilled into man by society, although society does affect conscience. Society is an *object* of moral valuations and cannot be the *source* of them. *Customs and manners have a social origin and are the result of social sanctions, but they are not moral facts.* . . Conscience is that aspect of man's inmost nature which comes into contact with God, is receptive to His message and hears His voice. . . Conscience may be repressed, hidden and perverted, but it is connected with the very essence of man, with the divine image and likeness in him. . . Conscience is the organ of perception of the religious revelation, of goodness, righteousness and truth in its entirety. It is not a special department or function of human nature, but the wholeness of man's spiritual being, its center or its heart in the ontological and not in the psychological sense of the term. . . Conscience is the spiritual, supernatural principle in man and it is not of social origin at all. It is rather the perversion and confusion of conscience that is of social origin. Conscience is human nature at the depth at which it has not completely fallen away from God but has preserved its connection with the Divine world. Repentance and remorse are only possible because man has a conscience that is not irreparably damaged. Conscience is the meeting point of freedom and grace. What theology describes as the action of grace upon the human soul is the awakening of its depths, the recollection of its depths, the recollection of the Divine source of life. Repentance is the experience of pain and horror at the disharmony between my present life and the memories of the true life for which I was created and from which man fell into this world of sin and sorrow (Knight, 1969, p. 5-6).

### The Meaning of "Conscience" in Scripture

One definition difficulty frequently encountered in the litera-

ture stems from the tendency to equate morality and conscience. The etymological definition of morality derives from *mores* or social customs of the group.

On the other hand, the expression "conscience" is derived etymologically from the Latin verb which means "to know with." It has a corresponding linguistic root in several other languages. Thus in Latin it is *conscientia*; in Greek, *suneidesis*; in Norwegian, *samvite*; and in Swedish, *savete*. All mean "to know with." It appears that by definition, at the very least, conscience is a knowing, a conscious experience.

Regarding the Greek meaning of *suneidesis*, it is interesting and informative to note that in 1 Peter 2:19, the King James version translates the phrase *suneidesis theou*, "conscience toward God": "For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully." The NIV translates the same expression with "conscious of God". Thus we read, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God." Either rendering is grammatically correct.

A review of Scripture reveals that the word "conscience" does not appear in the King James Version of the OT, though its nature and function are referred to several times. In the NT the word itself is used many times, and an examination of its usage will clarify its nature and function, its source, and how conscience is modified by one's response to it.

The NT speaks of a good conscience (Acts 23:1), a pure conscience (2 Tim 1:3), a wounded conscience (1 Cor 8:12), a weak conscience (1 Cor 8:7), a defiled conscience (Titus 1:15), a purged conscience (Heb 9:14), an evil conscience (Heb 10:22), and a seared conscience (1 Tim 4:2).

According to Scripture then, the conscience can be good, pure, wounded, weak, defiled, purged, evil, or seared. And when it is seared, it is cauterized or burned out as the Greek suggests. It is insensitive. It no longer responds.

In using these adjectives, the Scriptures are in each case focusing on one of three ways of defining conscience:

1. A physical site or cluster of nerve cells in the brain.

Such is the case in 1 Timothy 4:2 which warns against a seared conscience. This is a reference to rendering insensitive a physical



area in the brain. The Greek word for *seared* in this verse is *kauteriazō* from which we get the English word *cauterized* or charred.

Ellen White writes of the brain nerves as the only medium through which heaven can communicate to man and affect his inmost life (2T, p. 347).

Psychologist J. M. R. Delgado, while at Yale, invented a transceiver about the size of a twenty-five cent piece. He implanted it under the scalp, but on the outside of the skull of a fighting wild bull. With a remote control gadget similar to what we use to control our TV sets, Delgado would send radio signals to stimulate different centers in the brain. When the septal cells were stimulated, the bull was especially affectionate and would seek affection. When the amygdaloid cells were stimulated, the bull would go into a fighting rage. If Delgado could communicate with the brain cells of a fighting bull in an arena while sitting on the bleachers, I am sure God has no difficulty communicating with our brain cells!

Ellen White alludes to a physical set of brain nerves when she admonishes, "Keep the conscience tender, that you may hear the faintest whisper of the voice that spake as never man spake." Ellen White is here referring to keeping a set of brain cells responsive to the faintest communication of our Lord.

Some years ago, my wife and I visited with the late Dr. Wilder Penfield, world-famous brain surgeon who by stimulating different surfaces of the open brain resolved the mysteries associated with epileptic seizures. Dr. Penfield shared with us a very significant finding. He found that every time a brain cell responded when stimulated, the membrane of that brain cell became increasingly tender and responded more readily to the next stimulation!

In Romans 2:14, 15 we read "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do *by nature* the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their *conscience also bearing witness*, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another."

God speaks to that special set of nerves in the brain, even the brain of the Gentiles who have not heard a gospel preacher and do not know about the law of God! Conscience is a special area of the

brain that God has reserved for Himself! He speaks to that area. There is evidence that this special area for conscience is in the frontal lobe near the will center with which we exercise the power of choice! Let us keep the conscience area tender, so that we can hear the faintest whisper of Him that spake as never man spake!

2. Sometimes, when speaking of conscience, the Scripture refers to the *felt experience of conviction* (for good or evil, weak or strong).

Hence, 1 Corinthians 8:12 speaks of a *weak* conscience, or in 1 Timothy 1:19 of a *good* conscience, or in Hebrews 10:22 of an *evil* conscience. Ellen White admonishes, "Do not stop to argue the case with your *weak* conscience" (*CH*, p. 587).

To some people the voice of God comes in very faintly. The brain nerves don't pick up the signals very clearly. The experience of conviction is weak!

"Light comes to the soul through God's word, through his servants, or by the direct agency of His Spirit, but when one ray of light is disregarded, there is a partial numbing of the spiritual perceptions, and the second revealing of light is less clearly discerned" (*DA*, p. 322).

A good conscience is an approving conscience, a conscience that makes us feel good. When we obey our conscience we feel good! An evil conscience is a condemning conscience, a conscience that makes us feel bad. We feel sinful, wicked, evil, when we disobey our conscience.

3. And thirdly, sometimes when Scripture speaks of conscience it is referring to a *still, small voice*.

"Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, 'This is the way, walk ye in it. . .'" (Isa 30:21).

"Holding the mystery of the faith in a *pure* conscience" (1 Tim 3:9). A *pure* conscience is uncontaminated by other voices.

Ellen White writes "Conscience is the voice of God heard amid the conflict of human passions; when it is resisted the Spirit of God is grieved" (*5T*, p. 120).

What is the conscience? The Bible says the conscience bears witness (Rom 2:15), testifies (2 Cor 1:12) and convicts (John 8:9). This is the same function assigned the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-14).

Can we put all of the references to conscience in Scripture and

in the writings of Ellen White together in a comprehensive definition? Let me suggest, by way of summarizing, the following definition of conscience:

Conscience is the voice of God that brings conviction by privately addressing or sensitizing a physical site or cluster of nerves in the human brain.

Conscience is the voice of God. It is the voice of God convicting us. Conscience is God's special, private area of our brain responding to God's voice and bringing conviction to our inmost mind! When the felt conviction is strong, it can radiate throughout the entire brain and body. Current brain research is informing us that brain activity in the frontal lobe typically affects every cell throughout the body.

Rather than the internalized voice of society, the voice of inherited archetypes, or the voice of human nature, conscience is here defined as the voice of God perceived by fallen human nature. True, the perception is often faulty, but for the person who chooses to know and do the will of God (John 7:17), God promises to continue speaking until the perceptions and the character are perfected (Phil 1:6).

The universality of conscience is assured in the following Ellen White statement: "Not only intellectual but spiritual power, a perception of right, and a desire for goodness, exists in every heart" (*ED*, p. 29).

### Parenting That Strengthens the Conscience

Our generation is producing children without a conscience. The psychopathic personality is multiplying at an alarming rate. Christian families need to practice parenting styles that help our children to develop strong consciences. Here are the major ingredients of parenting that help develop strong consciences in our children:

1. Be dependable and regular in supplying the physical needs of your children, beginning in infancy. If you supply these needs on a schedule, and not on the infants' demand, you will develop their sense of time, their trust, and their ability to defer the gratification

of their impulses until a later time. This is essential for the development of conscience.

2. Practice what you teach. Modeling is the best teacher. If you are consistent with your verbal teaching, the child's mind will connect the concrete example to the abstract principle.

3. Teach them to practice self-denial. Recall that it was Laurretta Bender who said "conscience is formed by the deferring of the gratification of one's wishes. . . the psychopath has no conscience because he has never learned to defer immediate gratification of his wishes."

We have also previously noted that Erickson agrees with Laurretta Bender that learning to defer the gratification of one's impulses precedes the development of conscience. When Jesus extended the call for disciples He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me" (Matt 16:24). It seems clear that self-denial prepares one for following "the voice of one that spake as never man spake."

Ellen White states in repeated instances that by one's attitudes and habits of behavior he can either weaken or strengthen the conscience, sensitize or dull it, purify or defile it, preserve or pervert it, quicken or sear it, wound or heal it, clarify or confuse it, enlighten or deceive it!

With the intellect one learns what is right; with the will he chooses; and with the conscience his words, feelings, actions, and motives are judged. The function of conscience is to prod us to do the will of God. Often our faulty learning, weakened will, or overpowering emotions will contaminate our perception of the pure will of God.

But if we choose to know and do the will of God (John 7:17), God will teach us His will. As we walk in the light we do have, God increases the light. He enhances the clarity of the path to walk in (Prov 4:18). God will continue to speak until our perceptions and our character are perfected (Phil 1:6; Hos 6:3).

Part of our learning is culture determined. Part of it is divinely determined. Furthermore, God monitors man's learning. Our errors in learning will eventually be corrected by God's Spirit as we obey our conscience's demand that we do the will of God.

Both the Scriptures and the writings of Ellen White teach that

conscience can be strengthened or weakened by one's attitude and response to its workings. But by far the overwhelming emphasis is upon man's need to heed the conscience (as the medium through which God directly communicates to man), enjoining him to do what he knows to be right. Even when the content of conscience is in error, if it is the best light the individual has, he is to follow it (John 15:22; Jas 4:17; 1 Cor 8:7-13).

Let us note in this connection that conscience functions in the same way for everyone regardless of cultural upbringing, unless it be the psychopath who appears to have no functioning conscience whatsoever. Nevertheless, the judgments of conscience are specific to each individual. They concern the individual only, and no one else. Hence, I should not seek to compel others to accept the judgments of my conscience. Instruct, yes. Compel, no (*4T*, p. 62; *EV*, p. 216; *CG*, p. 429; *TM*, p. 477; *TM*, p. 208; *TM*, p. 295; *9T*, p. 234).

I want to appeal to all of us: **BE TRUE TO YOUR CONSCIENCE!** Be quick to obey it!

Be diligent and faithful in your study of the Bible with a mind seeking the will of God. This will sensitize your conscience. (*CT*, p. 357). Constant contact with God's Word quickens or makes alive your conscience (*7T*, p. 195). Be faithful in much praying. Prayer keeps the conscience sensitive (*3T*, p. 373). Constantly pray for the Holy Spirit's work on your conscience. The Holy Spirit sensitizes your conscience (*3BC*, p. 1150.)

When Martin Luther stood before the tribunal at the Diet of Worms he was on trial for his faith. He was pressed to recant, to renounce his convictions. If he refused, he knew he would be burned at the stake. In that momentous decision point, Martin Luther declared:

"My conscience [is] bound by the word of God. *I cannot and I will not retract*, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other; may God help me. Amen." (*GC*, p. 160).

Soon, very soon, if we live, we will all be required to renounce our faith or suffer death. God help us to stand as did Martin Luther. We can stand then, only if we have made it a practice before then to be true to conscience.

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