

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 18

Volume 18 • Number 3 • July 1994

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

Editorial

This issue of *Evangelical Review of Theology* addresses our evangelical conscience. I have been surprised at how little has been written on conscience by evangelicals in recent years. We have included in this number an interesting reflection on [Romans 2:15](#) written 20 years ago against the background of Egyptian mythology. There are, of course, a number of short articles in more recent dictionaries of theology. A Grove booklet, *Conscience*, published in 1977 has a good discussion on, among other things, Sigmund Freud's criticism of the devastating effect of guilt in his patients resulting from the tension between *super ego* (conscience socially produced) and the *ego*.

At the same time, there are good books and numerous articles on Christian ethics written from the perspective of Old Testament and New Testament theologies. Three such articles are included here. But the issue confronting us today is: how do we understand the functioning of human conscience (as reflecting our creation in the image of God) in relation to the natural law of God's general revelation? At least two-thirds of the people alive today are either secular with no knowledge of biblical ethics or are followers of other Faiths, each with their own system of ethical values. How does conscience function among these people since, as Paul tells us, all of humanity is 'without excuse'? When so many of our present ethical predicaments have no direct parallel in biblical times, we are confronted with problems of judging and reeducating conscience in conformity with God's revealed law. If we argue on the grounds of biblical principles, how are these to be applied in issues such as genetic engineering or nuclear power or in the context of 'the good of the community', such as in the traditional Melanesian tribal society? Evangelicals have hardly begun to reflect theologically on these issues.

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From Guilt to Awareness: Gospel and Culture, Conscience and Mission

John Roxborough

An animated discussion of conscience and mission on the Fidonet Mission Echo in late 1993 provided the starting point for some of these reflections. The stimulus of those contributors is gratefully acknowledged, particularly Stan Nussbaum and Richard Fairhead of Global Mapping International, Mark Brand in Paris, Steve Hayes in Pretoria and Galen Currah, Western Seminary (Division of Intercultural Studies), Portland, Oregon. I am also grateful for the comments of John Hitchen, David Crawley and Chris Marshall of the Bible College of New Zealand.

INTRODUCTION

The application of conscience to the mission of the Church is a particular application of Gospel and Culture thinking. This article is suggestive rather than an attempt at a fully

systematic analysis. It seeks to bring together Gospel and Culture, Mission and Conscience in order to raise questions about the mechanisms by which we make decisions about the mission of the Church in different times and circumstances. If in the Western theological tradition conscience has been associated primarily with guilt and carried the temptation of undue introspection, in a world Church concerned with mission, conscience needs to be also seen not simply as the accuser which tells us we need salvation, but the voice of God calling people to awareness of issues and needs of the Kingdom which we have been slow to recognize.

The common concept of conscience is that it is a personal and community sense of right and wrong. Issues surrounding conscience include where this sense of moral principle comes from, how communities handle conflicting perceptions of right and wrong by minority groups and individuals, how conscience develops personally and p. 197 socially, and how it may be better informed.

There are of course many questions. Mindful of the way in which the Evangelical conscience has changed its mind historically over issues such as slavery, alcohol, apartheid, the obligations of the Sabbath and the role of women in church leadership, what things are 'on our conscience' in terms of mission today and what things ought to be, but are not? Is ecology a matter of Christian conscience—likewise peace, abortion, and the situation of those who do not know or follow Christ? Does God speak in this sort of way? Is this the residue or the renaissance of the image of God? If conscience is the voice of God, why does God tell people such different things? Does that mean we should give up on conscience because it is unreliable, or should we learn to understand its function in a different way?

This article wishes to suggest that even if conscience is better at asking questions than answering them, it continues to be a meaningful experience which encourages Christians towards awareness of what God may be saying to them in their time and place. Although to be reliable it needs to be informed, and it can be oversensitive as easily as insensitive, it is to be respected. A better understanding of the power and limitations of conscience is essential in a world of complex decision making. We need to learn not only from our own conscience but also from the consciences of others. It is possible to do so without leaving ourselves awash in a sea of relativity.

VOICE OF GOD VOICE OF MAN?

The popular understanding of conscience as an inner voice reminding a person of standards of right and wrong and whether they have acted in accordance with those perceived standards, arises out of human experience. It is common for people to argue with themselves and sometimes do what one side of their personality suggests rather than another. Is one side of this struggle the voice of God and the other side the voice of self-interest, the flesh and the devil? If Christians with Paul and other New Testament writers say yes, they are also willing to say that people with different ideas about what conscience requires have to find ways of living together. Christians also note that others attribute the experiences of conscience to mundane sources, Freud to an internalized and frequently oppressive parent, Jung to a subconscious ideal, others to the expectations of society.

It should not be assumed these perspectives are totally contradictory. Explaining things does not explain them away. Where things come from in terms of conditioning from family and society does not tell us whether or not God is behind and in that process any more than awareness of biological sexual reproduction detracts from the proposition that we are created by God. At the same time awareness of human and social origins of conscience, or any other aspect of our physical or psychological makeup, is important for

understanding the limitations and possibilities of what we are talking about. If it is a faith perception that God is [p. 198](#) dealing with us in and through these things in a holistic way, then we take seriously that there are personal and social dimensions both to the reality of conscience and to the effects of sin. The voice of conscience, internal, external, only has to have the *possibility* of being the voice of God to take it seriously. The fact that it may not be the voice of God, or that it may be distorted is also to be recognized, but the presumption is that the operation of conscience is likely to come from God. In such a way it contributes not only to the agenda of ethics, but also our agenda of mission.

CONSCIENCE IN THE BIBLE

In terms of the actual word, it appears that ‘conscience’ appeared first in the New Testament in relation to the situation in Corinth. From Paul’s efforts at judging the abuse of appeal to conscience, he then took this essentially Greek sensitivity to an inner constraint and applied it more widely in his theology.¹ In the Old Testament the strict meaning is not used in a single word, although associated ideas exist so that the NIV refers to Abraham having a ‘clear conscience’ ([Gen. 20:5–6](#)) and where Job refers to his heart not reproaching him ([Job 27:6](#)) translates this as his conscience. David’s sense of guilt and his prayer for release is located in his heart ([Ps. 51:10](#), [1 Sam 24:6](#), [2 Sam 24:10](#)), a situation which could easily be described in terms of the operation of conscience.

Colin Brown in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, explains part of the shift in thinking between the Testaments in terms of a difference between self-consciousness and God-consciousness²—and that in the Greek understanding, it was self, rather than God which was seen as the other in internal conversation over moral behaviour. The Romans spoke of a good or a clear conscience, Greeks most often a bad conscience. These distinctions are then applied by Paul to the Christian experience of making religious and moral choices—an issue which was acute because of the changed role of law in religious life. The rules have been changed. In the confusion over what it means for non Jews to come in to the community of faith without keeping the law, and yet clearly needing principles of behaviour, conscience was bound to have a greater and at the same time less certain role. Law was no longer a principle of justification, but what law was to guide life was not clear. There were debates over this within the Christian leadership. Belief in the promised guidance of the Holy Spirit may have given confidence that some process was going to lead to greater certainty, but it did not eliminate conflict over appeals to different understanding from different consciences speaking in different ways.

On the one hand this contributed to explanations of the importance and limitations of conscience. Hence while a conscience can be ‘clear’ or ‘good’, it can also be ‘guilty’ or ‘weak’ or ‘corrupted’. Different [p. 199](#) people see things differently. Decisions have to be made about which issues can be left to individual conscience, and which are by collective or other authority regarded as matters for which there can be no acceptance of alternative standards. The Corinthian church had problems where there were conflicting consciences over food offered to idols and inadequate consciences over sexual morality. In relation to the first of these problems Paul notes how valid theological principles can support contrary practices. There are situations where one conscience cannot dictate what another person should do privately. In public and in shared situations each has a further test of their conscience—whether or not to modify their behaviour for the sake of the

¹ C. Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Paternoster, 1975, 1, p. 351f.

² C. Brown, *ibid.*, p. 348.

other. And for that there seems to be no rule except that of being prepared to do so. Other Pauline writings distinguish between things like these where Christians have to learn to accept and tolerate difference and matters about which there should be no argument whatever the differences of culture or conscience.

Both these situations have parallels in an age when the Church worldwide is seeking to do justice to both the particularity of local theology and the universality of Christian faith and belief and make judgements about what differences actually matter. The abandonment of Western philosophy and theology as the framework of all true theology is the equivalent of the loss of the Jewish law as the normative basis of behaviour for all believers in Yahweh. Like those in the New Testament involved in translation of Christian Faith out of one culture into another, we are now in a profound 'Gospel and Culture' exercise. The liberation of theology involves new rules and principles so that it is not liberation into anarchy. What Paul and others had to say about conscience applies not only to issues of ethics in brave new worlds of bewildering power and choice, it also applies to the formulations different cultures make of their understanding of Jesus, his relationship to God, the nature of church, and the scope of its mission.

In Romans Paul again deals with conflicting understandings of what conscience requires ([Rom. 14](#)), but he also tackles the role of conscience in God's dealings with Gentiles. [Romans 2:15](#) is part of an important but debated passage for considering the knowledge and responsibility of those who have never formally heard the gospel. These verses are frequently seen as carrying the meaning that there is a universal human experience of struggle with intuitively perceived standards of behaviour. How much God's law may be read into that intuition is not a factor in the universality of the type of experience. The conscience of 'Everyman' declares every person guilty from their own experience. Culture affects what elements of behaviour cause this sort of experience, and some cultures will focus more on guilt, and others on shame (being found out or exposed more than feeling bad for having done something), but the essence of the experience will remain. Do we need experience and acknowledgment of failure in order to seek God, [p. 200](#) or do we need experience and acknowledgment of guilt? It is common in the Evangelical tradition to say that awareness of guilt before a holy God is what is properly needed, yet shame and failure should be enough to point in that direction.

The Pastoral Epistles contain references to consciences which no longer function as they are meant to ([1 Tim. 4:2](#), [Tit. 1:15](#)). Paul himself knew that a clear conscience was important but it was God who would judge true innocence ([1 Corinthians 4:4](#)). Conscience was thus a necessary guide to behaviour, but not always a sufficient one. Hence just as conscience was not the only principle which Paul drew on to guide Christians in the heady freedom of the apostolic church, so it cannot afford to be the only principle which contemporary Christians draw on. In seeking to be true to our deepest and best spiritual instincts, we must be open to those who see things differently, and willing to be corrected from all sorts of directions. As a principle which focuses on what is believed to be right rather than wrong, it requires us in respecting others, to seek to understand what they are at their most principled. Other bases must always include appeal to Scripture and how it has been responsibly interpreted. Conscience is not about floating free from Scripture, it is about discovering more truly what is there to be obeyed as the fruit of a relationship with God in Christ.

In the letter to the Hebrews conscience comes into the arguments about the ways in which what Christ has done leaves behind what was possible in the old religion. The sacrifices of the Old Testament needed to be repeated in part because of their inability to deal with conscience ([Heb. 9:9-14](#)). Hebrews is relevant to mission as a constructive model of the relationship of old and partial perceptions of God compared to what is

definitive in Christ. While people are not to go back to the old, they are still to remember it and imitate the faith of those who went before. It is not just in Judaism that there were sacrifices intended to point to reconciliation, but whose effectiveness in dealing with conscience is surpassed by Christ. It should surely be a characteristic Evangelical contribution to a broader sense of mission and an awakened social conscience that Christ takes away guilt and gives the energy to work towards a more just and righteous future.

ACROSS CULTURE; ACROSS TIME AND SPACE

To examine the operation of conscience in different cultures and to examine it back through history are comparable activities. In both there are challenges of coming to terms with the way in which other Christians have responded to what they thought God wanted done in their time and place.

Conscience with respect to guilt for past activity with which mission has been associated needs to be readdressed. Two historical areas still affecting mission today are the Crusades and colonialism. While it is possible to overstate the case, it is important that Christians have no illusions about the way these events compromised mission. It is also p. 201 important that a false sense of responsibility does not produce a paternalism of guilt instead of a paternalism of conquest. The danger is not always avoided that it is the conscience of one party, the Western Church, which dominates the agenda of relationships. Whether in the past it was an absence of conscience about these events, or latterly a disturbed and guilty conscience for events over which present living people had no control, it is still a one-sided reflection of a complex interaction between more than one party. The responsibility of the beneficiaries of the injustices of history is neither to defend one's ancestors nor to disown them, but it is to find appropriate ways of creating justice in the present and future. Issues of justice with respect to land need consciences informed by history and alive to the different and conflicting perspectives involved, but guilt by association—one's own or other people's—is not going to produce the sort of partnership and respect out of which justice can arise.

What should also be learnt from history of mission is that conscience may be inert about issues which later generations judge harshly. Attention to the details of history will usually produce evidence that there were other voices saying other things. Some did speak against slavery, apartheid, the ambiguities of colonialism and the motives of the Crusades. Not all thought that abstinence and abolition were the cures for the social and personal abuse of alcohol. We may not always agree with the decisions of other generations, but it is unfair and untrue to presume that they characteristically ignored conscience and acted irresponsibly.

It is not surprising that when the conscience of a previous generation appears to have been so inadequate in recognizing injustices which are now taken much more seriously, that efforts are made to systematically inform the Christian conscience of viewpoints they need to consider. It is difficult to argue with the need to inform and shape conscience and to go on testing whether what we are concerned about is what God is concerned about. Yet the process has hazards. Forms of 'Political Correctness' can move from useful consensus positions on social ethics, to slogans which can no longer be discussed. Forcing conformity of conscience, or anything else, is not the same as training it to be more perceptive and obedient to the Spirit of God. Liberation theology speaks of 'conscientization'—of helping people to become aware of their situation and the reasons for it so that they may act to do something about it. Where this is seen as stimulating and informing Christian understanding and sensitivity, it is a model which deserves to be followed. Where it goes beyond that, caution is justified. Governments of the left and of

the right have sought in a calculated way to change the consciences of their peoples, and it is still a common human response to grab solutions which seem immediate and adequate. Yet even totalitarianism can produce a response in terms of heightened respect for conscience and in some Western countries at least the sufferings of Conscientious Objectors was not totally in vain in p. 202 alerting society to the fact that not all shared the view of the majority whatever the pressures. Roman Catholics appear to have cultivated awareness of the importance of following conscience as a way of enabling people to live with disagreement, an almost invited disobedience to the teachings of the church over birth-control. Whatever one may think on the particular issue, it has provided a model of loyalty, cohesiveness, respect for individuals and provision for diversity.

THE MISSIONARY CONSCIENCE

The cross-cultural missionary is acutely aware that while in the sense of guilt before Almighty God, or in the sense of personal failure against a known and accepted standard, conscience appears universal, when it comes to providing a guide to personal ethics there are cultural differences which are not easily resolved. One American missionary working in Paris candidly expressed some of the personal difficulties he experiences as follows.

Some of the thorniest real-life issues that I deal with as a resident foreign missionary stem from the ethical contrasts between the teachings of the church in my home culture and the teachings of the church in my target culture. As an American, I am a product of my home culture. There, the church I was raised in made applications of Biblical principles to its culture. Here in France, the church applies some of those same principles differently. Now, the question is not at all whether or not I would require converts in France to apply Biblical principles in the way that my particular church has done in America! But, rather, I wonder how obedient I personally should continue to be to the applications made by my church in my home culture while living here in my target culture. If conscience is culturally dependent, where does one draw the line between cultural adaptation and searing the conscience? The issue is complicated further by the fact that as a missionary or 'sent-one' I am sponsored by Christians and congregations from my home culture that would be highly shocked, offended, disappointed, hurt, and even angry if I were to live in conformance to the applications the French church makes of certain Biblical principles!

Perhaps this does no more than put ourselves back in the situation Paul faced at Corinth. Some would say that what is needed is to separate 'your God given conscience from your cultural conscience.' The difficulty here is that while we can distinguish the conscience that makes us aware of need of salvation from the conscience which guides our behaviour, one is no more or less cultural or more or less God-given than the other. The missionary dilemma is a real one, but the solution lies in overcoming the lack of understanding between different parts of the church. In this situation both are in need of a greater appreciation of Gospel and Culture.

CONCLUSION

The universal experience of conscience is a point of witness and is an aspect of the gospel which is widely translatable, though it may need to be thought through differently. Beyond conversion Christians individually and together need to be P. 203 taught and encouraged to do what they know to be right, to check further if something troubles their conscience, and to learn how to respect and learn from the consciences of others. Recognizing and respecting sincerity is part of this. In a multicultural world we need to

be positively seeking out what is on the consciences of Christians in different cultures if we are to apply the concerns of Gospel and Culture not only to ethics, but also to mission.

Conscience remains an important principle of Christian decision making and of analysis of Christian self-understanding. It is the nature of the case that it is involved in tensions and differences. Out of those come new possibilities. Sensitivity to our own conscience makes us alert to things we would prefer to ignore. Sensitivity to the consciences of others is the more necessary in a multicultural world where people who are different have to live together. It is also one way in which we are obliged to ask at points of tension whether a particular culture is helping or hindering the understanding and the living of the gospel. If it is better at asking questions than answering them, it is still essential those questions are asked. And if the questions keep coming back, perhaps indeed the voice of conscience, and the voice of the people, is the voice of God. Christ will have taken away our guilt, but the ongoing work of his Spirit through others and ourselves will continue to sharpen our awareness. This is the true conscientization of which we should be happy to be part.

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The Objective Witness to Conscience: An Egyptian Parallel to Romans 2:15

Ramez Atallah

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Although this article was written 20 years ago, it introduces insights on the 'heart' (conscience) of a culture outside of Hebrew religion. It raises the tantalizing question, 'Did Paul have any knowledge of the Osiris myth?' The author argues that the role of conscience in [Romans 2:15b](#) is that of an objective witness on the day of judgment rather than as an inner arbiter between conflicting thought.