

Whatever Happened to Our Conscience?

Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. 1 Peter 3:16

I haven't heard much about having a conscience lately, much less a clear one. Maybe it's like lumbago. It's called something else nowadays, but I don't think so. I think many people try to ignore their consciences, and they want everyone else to ignore theirs too. Don't mention the word.

Actually, there has long been a misunderstanding about what the conscience is. True, it is an inner compass that helps one make moral decisions, but where does it come from? When I grew up, I thought you were born with a conscience just like you were born with a pituitary gland. It was part of your nature. Not exactly so.

The word *conscience* is from the Latin *conscientia*, which is formed by two words meaning "knowing together." Therein, conscience is not an inner voice that has received no outside input. Conscience is the ability to think and act as an individual with outside help. It's a product of both nature and nurture, lots and lots of input.

Parents, teachers, relatives, public figures, and friends may have contributed to the formation of our consciences. So may have formative events such as the deaths of loved ones or living through hard times. Books and movies can give input to the conscience. So do the teachings and example of Jesus. What we learn from the Bible, say the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount, go into the formation of conscience.

Who or what gives shape to the conscience matters. The mafia and other gangs are composed of members whose consciences rejected the input, "Thou shalt not kill." Still, there are certain behaviors that are out of bounds for even them. They seem to accept as almost sacred the guideline, "Thou shalt not rat one another out."

Paul urges Timothy to fight for a good conscience, one that accompanies a sincere faith. A caution that Paul gives is this: "By rejecting conscience, certain persons have suffered shipwreck in the faith." 1 Timothy 1:19. Conscience is faith's compass.

Paul himself says that he worships God with a clear conscience as did his ancestors. Weekly worship, alongside other believers, is a good way to help repair damaged consciences as hearts and minds are renewed in Christ. And it's worth the effort. Robert Solomon says in his book, *The Conscience: Rediscovering the Inner Compass*, that a good conscience is like a soft pillow, whereas an unclean conscience is like sleeping on thorns of worry and restlessness.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr viewed the awakening of conscience as critical to a broken world. We need a few voices on the national scene like his today. He was a powerhouse. Were he still with us, he'd argue that whether political leaders have much of a conscience or not, it's time for citizens to renew our own consciences by asking the right questions.

And all questions boil down to one. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it like this: "Cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right?" – DJ