

## **CONSCIENCE: THE VOICE OF GOD WITHIN**

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In the mid 1950's near Ashville, NC, an adult male walked into the police station and openly confessed to a murder he had committed 13 years earlier. He gave the deceased person's name and related to the authorities how he had murdered this person by shooting him in the back of the head with an arrow. The police reviewed his story from their files and found that the local coroner had ruled the deceased man's death to be from natural causes. However, when they dug up the dead man's remains, they found a hole in the base of his skull made by an arrow. The murderer was brought to justice, not by the police, but by his own conscience. Just what is this powerful voice that God has placed within man?

The word conscience comes from the Latin *conscire*, a compound of *con* (with) and *scire* (to know), meaning "to know together with," "joint knowledge with another."<sup>1</sup> Thus conscience is the faculty of man's knowing right and wrong in connection with laws made known to her, which for us Christians is the Word of God, written upon our hearts by the Spirit of God at our new birth (Heb. 8:10-11) and implemented by God-called preachers and teachers, and our personal devotions.

The Old Testament does not have the word "conscience," but the word "heart" expresses the idea. After Adam and Eve sinned, conscience give them a sense of guilt so that "they hid themselves from the presence of the LORD" (Gen. 3:8). Scripture declares, "David's heart troubled him" (2 Sam. 24:10), and surely a troubled heart was behind David's broken confessions in Psalms 32:1-5 and 51:1-19.

Conscience is innate, implanted by the breath of God that gave man his God-like personality (Gen. 2:7), spiritual understanding (Job 32:8), and conscience (Prov. 20:27).<sup>2</sup> Romans 2:14-15 declares it is both innate and universal: "For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them." Conscience works in exactly the same manner in Christians.

### **The Working of Conscience**

At the Children's Hospital seven-year-old Jimmy was a constant troublemaker. One day a weekly visitor who knew him well said to him, "Jimmy, if you are a good boy for a week, I will give you a quarter when I come back." A week later she again stood by Jimmy's bed and said, "Jimmy, I am not going to ask the nurse how you have behaved. You must tell me yourself. Do you deserve to have the quarter?" There was a moment's silence. Then from under the sheets came a small voice saying, "Gimme a penny." This illustrates that conscience speaks very clearly even in small children, and shows why God admonishes us to "train up a child [by instructing his spiritual understanding and

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<sup>1</sup> In the New Testament, conscience (*syneidesis*) means essentially the same as the Latin *conscire*.

<sup>2</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this see *Genesis: A Biblical Theology*, 50-54, at this Website: [www.bsmi.org](http://www.bsmi.org).

conscience] in the way that he should go” (Prov. 22:6a). This proper training early brings lasting results: “Even when he is old he will not depart from it” (Prov. 22:6b).

Conscience has two moral functions: antecedent (before events happen it is a guide admonishing us to do the right and avoid the evil) and sequent (a judge after the act, either rewarding our obedience to God’s voice or judging our disobedience). The operation of conscience may be as follows:

**Before we act, conscience either encourages us to continue or warns us to stop.** While our mind is still considering a course of action and before our will has made any decision to act, conscience either encourages us to go ahead or warns us of the danger of doing so. Often our mind will offer conscience logical, rational reasons why she should change her advice. However, she will never be convinced to compromise her convictions, but will uphold her viewpoint to the very end.

**While we are acting upon our decision, conscience quietly waits her turn to speak.** Once a decision has been made, our mental faculties busily operate under varying degrees of emotional stimulation. The voice of conscience will keep quiet, waiting to act after the mind slows down and emotions subside.

**When the act is completed, conscience will speak, either to reward us or to condemn us.** When our emotions and mental faculties relax after completing an action, conscience either crowns us with satisfaction, happiness and courage for what we have done or summons us to the bar of justice where she thunders judgment, which gives us a bad or guilty conscience.

Conscience has no more respect for presidents than for paupers, for the elite than for the illiterate. She caused the bloody tyrant Nero to spend many terror-filled nights wandering the halls of his opulent palace. She also moved Socrates to patiently undergo an unjust trial and to receive his undeserved death sentence with fortitude. Like a decision rendered by the Supreme Court, conscience’s verdict, once pronounced, allows no alternative view. Even though she might judge according to an imperfect standard, which may be imperfectly obeyed by the will, she still gives an absolute judgment.

**For various reasons, conscience may not speak immediately following the completion of an act.** Although conscience’s verdict is as absolute as that of the Supreme Court, yet her sentence can be suspended for a time, but not permanently. Once conscience has given her opinion, our will has a right either to accept or to reject it. If her voice is ignored repeatedly, she might retreat, but she will never give up. Whenever an opportunity presents itself, she will repeat her verdict of our past wickedness and condemn us once again. If she finds no opening to speak during our teenage years, she will try again in our youth, adulthood, or even our very old age. In the event we are able to muffle the voice of conscience throughout our entire earthly pilgrimage, she will triumph in the life beyond, as Romans 2:15-16 says, “Their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.”

### **The Need to Listen to Conscience**

Once a small boy saw a little spotted tortoise and lifted his hand intending to smash it with a rock. Suddenly, something checked his thrust and spoke to him as clearly as a

human voice, saying, "That is wrong!" Not knowing where the voice came from, he went to inquire of his mother. Having heard his story, she wiped tears from her eyes with her apron, and holding him in her arms said, "Some call it conscience. I prefer to call it the voice of God in the soul of man. If you listen to it and obey, it will continue to speak clearer and clearer and always guide your steps aright; but if you turn a deaf ear and rebel against it, its voice will fade little by little and leave you in moral and spiritual darkness. The growth of your spiritual life depends upon your hearing and obeying this little voice."

To their great loss, many contemporary Christians ignore God's voice in their conscience. They will listen to spiritual teaching and preaching every Lord's Day, read devotional books daily, pay serious attention to brotherly advice and admonitions, but rarely give full ear to their conscience. Majority rule in the church, ethical instruction in Sunday School and dogmatic preaching in the pulpit have their place, but they cannot take the place of guidance by conscience which comes straight from the Throne of Grace. The Bible passage we read in the morning for devotions may not apply to today's need. The sermon heard last Lord's Day may not help us face this week's trial. The voice of our regenerated conscience, God's heavenly radio within, will always meet our needs precisely and guide our steps aright.

Whenever anyone permits conscience to season his speech and deeds, she makes his words true and just, and his actions noble and right. Under her influence, in 1415 John Huss gave a glorious witness to the City Council of Constance and to Sigismund, King of the Germans, and later Holy Roman Emperor, "To my conscience I cannot be untrue! To the truth of the gospel, I cannot be a traitor! I would rather suffer a mill stone to be tied around my neck and thus to be thrown to the bottom of the sea, than to deny my own conscience and my Lord and Master, Jesus Christ." When Huss was bound to the stake, with straw and wood heaped up around his body to the chin, and flammable rosin sprinkled upon them, "The offer of life was reissued if he would recant. He refused and said, 'I shall die with joy today in the faith of the gospel which I have preached' . . . as the flames arose he sang twice, Christ, Thou Son of the living God, have mercy upon me."<sup>3</sup> In giving his famous speech before the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther, when asked to renounce God's truth, said, "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments . . . I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the Word of God: I can not and will not recant anything, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience."<sup>4</sup> How beautiful a clean Christian conscience is. We believers should maintain a good conscience and live daily by it as did the apostle Paul who "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). By affirming allegiance to his conscience Paul maintained fidelity to his calling, and a few years later could say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960) vi, 382.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, vii, 304-305.

## **Deadening the Voice of Conscience**

Mr. Nathaniel Heywood, a Nonconformist minister, was resigning as minister to a particular congregation due to some doctrinal differences. A poor member came to him and said, "Ah! Mr. Heywood, we would gladly have you preach still in the Church." "Yes," he said, "and I would as gladly preach as you can desire it, if I could do it with a safe conscience." "O! Sir," replied the member, "many a man nowadays makes a great gash in his conscience; cannot you make a little nick in yours?" However, Mr. Heywood was convinced that "Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he does" (Rom. 14:22b).

Conscience, as Solomon tells us, is the candle of God searching the very inside of man (Prov. 20:27). When a natural man, or a Christian, dethrones conscience by habitual disobedience, she does not abdicate her position. Whenever she gets a chance, she reasserts her claim. Even as a sinner wallows in vice like a swine in the mire, the voice of conscience frequently continues to convict of guilt and warn of judgment. Naturally, such a voice is an unpleasant interruption to the soul desiring the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the vainglory of life. In order to avoid the distress and self-accusation from conscience, man's mental faculties instinctively seek to deaden her voice. At the beginning of the revolt, conscience fights vigorously for her throne in the soul, but after continually losing the battle, she gradually withdraws and leaves the soul in a state of unrest and confusion which may cause a nervous breakdown, or even worse, drive a person insane ("Now it came about on the next day that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house . . . and a spear was in Saul's hand. And Saul hurled the spear for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall'" 1 Sam. 18:10-11) or to commit suicide ("Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse . . . saying 'I have sinned by betraying the innocent blood . . . and he went away and hanged himself" Matt. 27:3-5). Conscience caused Herod to turn pale, thinking Christ was a resurrected John the Baptist; Caius Caesar to suffer from lack of sleep; and Felix to tremble at Paul's preaching.

Moreover, repeated failure to heed the voice of conscience may cause physical illness. Years ago Dr. Lin held a series of meetings in a church. For several nights in succession, he noticed a family attend the services bringing one of their daughters, a girl about 18-20 years old, on a mat. The family placed her in the open area between the first row of pews and the pulpit where she would lie fully prone. When Dr. Lin inquired about the situation he was told that suddenly and quite mysteriously the young lady had become paralyzed, no longer able to walk or stand. After asking if he might talk to her, Dr. Lin met privately with the girl. Following some discussion, she revealed that she absolutely hated her family. Dr. Lin reminded her that such an attitude is a terrible sin before God and should be immediately confessed in order to receive forgiveness and cleansing. When the young lady did so, a wonderful thing happened! She was able to sit up, then to stand, and walked out to meet her rejoicing siblings and parents.<sup>5</sup> She had become physically ill because the law of Christian love that God had made known to her conscience was in dreadful conflict with her attitude and emotions. It cannot be overemphasized that whatever is unconfessed is beyond the reach of healing. Further,

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<sup>5</sup> This incident was related to the editor in a private conversation in the early 1980's.

you cannot confess to God what you will not admit to yourself. These painful consequences teach us to live up to the light that God has given to us in our conscience. John Calvin well said, “The torture of a bad conscience is the hell of a living soul!”

The schemes of the soul to deaden conscience may be as follows:

**By abusing oneself with alcohol and drugs.** Today some people drink for remedy and enjoyment, but most drunkards or drug abusers seek oblivion in order to hide from the normal function of their souls and thus deaden their conscience—“they drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the right of all the afflicted” (Prov. 31:5). Some years ago, crusaders against alcoholism gathered in Istanbul and sadly concluded that, with a very few exceptions, most nations of the world were faced with increasing numbers of alcoholics in their population. In France and the United States during a thirteen-year period, alcoholic addiction had increased 44%. Drug addiction, too, became increasingly prevalent. Can we not say that such a rapid increase in alcoholism and drug addiction is due to mankind’s increasing unrest and anxiety?

**By keeping oneself busy all the time.** Some people concentrate so much on their business day and night that their souls have no time to heed their conscience’s warnings. Believe it or not, some people dare not rest. They use “too busy” as a magic wand to silence all the echoes of God’s voice within. If they should ever pause and allow their stubborn will to relax its guard, conscience would slip out, make her survey in the different chambers of the soul and remind them of the events in their past and of the catalogue of their sins. The result of this would be thoughts whistling to fear, fear calling to horror, horror beckoning to despair, and saying, “Come, let us torment this sinner!” This may be one of the reasons why devils keep themselves busy since they have no other way to reduce their trembling. No wonder life in the last days is more rushed than ever before (“But as for you Daniel, conceal these words and seal up the book until the end of time; **many will go back and forth . . .**” Dan. 12:4).

**By taking a logical instead of a moral stand.** Men have been seeking logical grounds to excuse themselves for doing evil ever since Adam and Eve were created. To do away with the summons of conscience man uses a variety of ruses to create a logical alibi: complaining about circumstances, placing the blame on other people, hiding behind a superiority or inferiority complex, or excusing self as unable to do any differently. Here are some manifestations of such ruses:

Moses’ self-pity (“Then Moses answered and said, ‘What if they will not believe me, or listen to what I say? For they may say, “The LORD has not appeared to you” . . . Please Lord, I have never been eloquent . . . for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” Ex. 4:1, 10)

King Saul’s disobedience (“And Saul said, ‘They have brought them from the Amalekites for the people spared the best of the sheep and oxen, to sacrifice them to the LORD your God; but the rest we have utterly destroyed” 1 Sam. 15:15)

The Pharisee’s Corban (“Moses said honor your father and mother . . . but you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, anything of mine you might have been helped by is Corban, [that is to say, given to God],’ you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother; thus invalidating the word of God . . .” Mark 7:10-13)

Denominational prejudice among churches and Christians' indifference to the lost souls at home and abroad—all sprout from the same ground.

One who wants to puff up his denominational superiority or to avoid his share in missionary work may give hundreds of reasons to support his position, but morally, “Is Christ divided?” (1 Cor. 1:13) and “You shall be My witnesses” (Acts 1:8) destroy all these so-called logical reasons. Excuses keep us immature and underdeveloped in both our conscience and spiritual walk. Thus we remain “men of flesh . . . babes in Christ” instead of growing up to become “spiritual men,” as God desires (1 Cor. 3:1).

**By standing on good deeds.** Using merit to bribe conscience is very common among moral or religious individuals. David's desire to build God's temple, one of Jesus' disciples asking leave to bury his father, monastic life in the Middle Ages, and even those famous robbers in ancient China who used the motto “Carrying out the decree of Heaven—taking from the rich to help the poor” were all attempts to do good to appease conscience. Protestant's church membership, Roman Catholic's rosary and confession before the priests, Hindus' bathing in the Ganges, Muslims' “Allah is God and Mohammed is his prophet,” Buddhists' “Nah-mo-o-mi-do-fu,” have all been used as instruments to deaden the voice of conscience.

**By inventing cultic and heretical doctrines.** From the very beginning man has disliked God's authority and this is probably the reason for the development of many cults. In order to separate conscience from her authority—God, some people deny the existence of God, others idealize Jesus' teaching concerning heaven and hell, and yet others simply ignore the reality of sin and the authority of the Bible. Mrs. Eddy's “man is incapable of sin,” Spiritualists' “man never had a fall,” Jehovah Witnesses' “second chance for everlasting life in the Millennium,” Mormons' “the necessity of Adam's sin,” are all used for more or less the same purpose: to hush the voice of conscience. What a pity!

A seared conscience does not mean that the consciousness of sin is gone. On the contrary, there will ever be a certain fearful expectation of judgment unconsciously present in the mind until the sinner has found the truth of forgiveness: “If we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment” (Heb. 10:26-27). This expectation of judgment causes those with a bad conscience to be “like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” (Is. 57:19-20).

### **The Unbeliever's Conscience**

Adam's fall into sin did not deprive him of a conscience that is a part of man's divine likeness. Rather, “To those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15). “Defiled” is derived from a verb, “to stain,” “to color,” or “to tinge.” Every one has a conscience, even the rudest savages or headhunters, but the unbeliever's conscience is covered with a stain and has become calloused and blind (Matt. 13:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). Even God's heavenly light has a difficult time reaching it, until He “who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness’ . . . [shines] in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (1 Cor. 4:6). Conscience judges according to the law known to her. Since the

unbeliever's conscience has been separated from God, her original authority, the natural man can judge things only according to his interest, habit, parental teaching, school education, social environment, or by the law that he feels in his own inherent moral consciousness. This explains why Paul's wrongly instructed conscience was so stubborn and fanatical: "I thought to myself that I had to do many things hostile to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). This also explains why some primitive tribes can regard their headhunters as great heroes.

The unbelievers' defiled conscience is not only the result of their sinful nature but also by failing to pay attention to conscience's voice, "They, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness" (Eph. 4:19). Unbelievers, at their worst, not only ignore the voice of conscience, but positively hate and oppose every means which would recover sensitivity to sin, acting as did some of the kings of Israel to God's prophets, the Jews to Christ, and the Communists to churches today. They are like those of whom Baxter writes, "They seem to go to hell as some condemned malefactors go to the gallows, who make themselves drunk before they go, to prevent themselves from knowing whither they are going till they get there." What a sad picture!

Deadening the voice of conscience is a dangerous thing. God warns us to be "[constantly] keeping [*exon-* present participle] faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regards to their faith" (1 Tim. 1:19). Since conscience is knowledge we share with another, that means we know right and wrong in relation to some standard or law. Whenever conscience gets a chance, she will immediately stand up for truth, even though her voice may have lost much of its strength and clarity. Once some boys were brought to the court in Ripley, Tennessee, accused of stealing three watermelons from a farmer's patch. Judge J. R. Lewis rapped his gavel, saying, "Anybody here who never stole a single watermelon when he was a boy, let him raise his hand." The sheriff, the county attorney, three highway patrolmen, court employees, and spectators all lowered their eyes. The case was dismissed. Jesus dismissed a similar case when he was on earth (See John 8:1-11). Likewise, no matter how ignorant and brutal the heathen are, their conscience can be awakened. If ever they have the opportunity to hear God's Word and let the grace of awakening come upon them, their conscience will be awakened by God's grace, cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and recovered just the same as any genuine Christian's; but "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14).

The natural man has lost the true knowledge of God's will by sin's defilement and the continual resistance of his own will, and his conscience is now confined in the strongholds (2 Cor. 10:4). Unbelievers are incapable of perceiving spiritual things. As Scripture says, the "natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14). The truth is, even though the words "God is love" were written in large letters in the sky, it would make little difference "to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind (*nous*) and their conscience is defiled" (1 Tim. 1:15). The unsaved can be very intellectual mentally, yet totally ignorant spiritually. Others may have a great deal of culture, yet they cannot understand God's simple plan of salvation; while others with little or no education may have profound

spiritual knowledge. Mankind's spiritual understanding is an innate faculty entirely different from his intellectual capacity. No one can see a sunset with his ears, or hear a cricket chirp with his eyes. Likewise, man with his mental faculty alone cannot perceive God. It is necessary for God, through the operation of the Holy Spirit, to grant conscience the grace of awakening that she may be restored with the price paid by Christ on the cross. This divine grace always brings souls a period of distress as in, "when they heard this [that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified], they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:36-37).

Whereas the conscience condemns sinners according to their sinful state, the Holy Spirit presents to them the way of salvation accomplished by Christ on Calvary, even the cleansing power of Christ's blood which cleanses the conscience from dead works (Heb. 9:14). The unregenerate conscience says to the sinner, "All your righteousness is as filthy rags." The Holy Spirit says, "Christ will cleanse you from all unrighteousness." Conscience says, "Man himself should be responsible for his sins." The Holy Spirit says, "God's Lamb takes and bears away the sins of the world." Conscience says, "You are not worthy to be saved." The Holy Spirit says, "Jesus Christ promises that he who comes to Him will never be rejected." God's grace enables conscience's voice to pronounce all the verdicts that she had previously suspended, makes the sinner's will submit to truth, his intellect surrender to justice, and his sensibility to grief. The initial reaction of those to whom Peter preached at Pentecost must have been like that of Lazarus who was awakened from the dead by the power of God's voice, but yet found himself bound with grave clothes and surrounded with the stench of decaying flesh. This is the state to which the Holy Spirit brings a sinner's conscience, because "He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:18). Awakened to their sin by the Spirit of God, they feel much like Isaiah when he said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips" (Is. 6:5). Yet it is necessary for sinners to further seek God's grace, as did the jailor in Philippi who asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). The only remedy for man's sinful condition is for Jesus to restore the function of this spiritual understanding. As the Bible says, "We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding in order that we might know Him who is true" (1 John 5:20).

Thus the first step in restoring the broken relationship between God and man is to restore the function of man's spiritual understanding. Without such a restoration, man has no way to know God. This is why the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles, as well as Christ Himself, laid such great stress upon repentance.

### **Repentance, Conscience and Spiritual Understanding**

In the New Testament repentance (*metanoia*) is a combination of two words: the preposition *meta* meaning "change or alter" as used in metamorphosis (change in shape), and the noun *noia*, a feminine form of the word *nous*, meaning "mind." Biblical repentance is not merely sorrow for sin, but a change of spiritual insight toward God, sin, oneself and spiritual truths. Without the change wrought by repentance, no unbeliever will ever see himself as God sees him, neither will his conscience recognize sin to be sin.

Pharoah, Balaam, Achan, Saul and Judas' confession, "I have sinned" might be remorse but certainly not scriptural repentance, which is not produced by man's resolve

or effort. Repentance is God's gift as the Bible explains in Acts 5:31, "He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sin." It is the heart-opening granted by Christ, without which Lydia would not have listened intently to the gospel as preached by Paul and be saved—"Lydia . . . a worshipper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul"(Acts 16:14). For this reason Christ came not only to bear our sin, but also to give "us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true" (1 John 5:20). At the moment of salvation, Christ restored the function of our spiritual understanding and put His laws into it, fulfilling Jeremiah's prophecy, recorded in Hebrews 8:10, "I will put My laws into their mind, and I will write them upon their heart." In this manner, Christ created within us "the law of [our] mind" (Rom. 7:23), which established our conscience according to God's law—to convince us of sin committed, of righteousness impossible, of judgment impending, and thus led us to confess and forsake our sin, and to live in righteousness, which are evidences of genuine repentance.

When the demands of conscience for either condemnation or atonement are met and satisfied by Christ's substituted suffering, the sinner's bad conscience turns into a good one. This is salvation in effect, and regeneration in truth. It is not merely lifting up one's hand while others' heads are bowed and eyes closed, nor just being baptized and received as a church member, but it is having a good conscience which proceeds from a real conversion, brought about by serious confession, and true faith in Christ, by which the forgiveness of sins is obtained and the renewal by the Holy Spirit unto a new life and walk is initiated. Strictly speaking, if the Gospel has not penetrated man's conscience, that is, if he has not experienced the power of God in his moral exercises, he is still outside of Christ and is not saved, no matter how long he has been a church member. This is why the prophets and apostles in the Bible stressed the message of repentance so much. It is the spiritual labor of regeneration. Without such travail, spiritual miscarriage may take place, and the church may produce a member with a defiled conscience, having neither new birth nor spiritual life.

In the spring of 372 AD, a 31-year-old professor, Augustine, was discussing with his friend, Alypius, how to find peace for their souls. Because much of his youthful life had been spent in sexual immorality and impiety, Augustine was extremely distressed because of constant condemnation from his conscience. He left Alypius and went into another part of the garden, lay under a tree and moaned as tears rolled down his cheeks in abundance. Suddenly, he heard a chorus of children's voices saying, "*Tolle, lege; tolle, lege* [take and read, take and read]!" Augustine returned to his friend, picked up Paul's Epistle to the Romans that he had left there a short while before, and opening it he read the first passage his eyes recognized. It said, "Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts" (Rom. 13:13-14). As he was reading this, the Lord opened his spiritual understanding, as he said later, "Every doubt was banished!" From that moment until his death, Augustine lived a noble, virtuous life for Christ. God's grace performed for Augustine according to what Scripture promises, "Then He opened their minds [*nous*] to understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:45) and "We know that the Son of God has come,

and has given us understanding [*dianoia*—a renewed mind or *nous*], in order that we might know Him who is true” (1 John 5:20).

By means of our enlightened spiritual understanding, we know God and the things pertaining to Him. Our regenerated spiritual understanding perceives God’s will in personal Bible reading, biblically-based sermons, and Sunday School edification, analyzes and interprets it, and makes it known to conscience, which discerns God’s will on moral and spiritual affairs according to the knowledge received. Spiritual understanding (*nous*) and conscience (*metanoia*) are two in one; whenever one is defiled, the other is polluted, “To those who are unbelieving . . . both their mind and conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15). They are like the eyes and ears mentioned in Acts 28:26-27: Whenever the eyes are closed (spiritual understanding), the ears are dull (conscience); but whenever the eyes see, the ears hear. God put both within us at our birth, so that following our new creation they might work together as a team to make us God-like—even according to the image of Jesus Christ.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB.

For more discussion on the origin and function of our spiritual understanding and conscience, see *Genesis: A Biblical Theology*, 50-54, and *How We Know God*, 2-4, under the section, “Other Studies,” at this Website: [www.bsmi.org](http://www.bsmi.org).

For further discussion on how repentance and faith give us a renewed mind and on how to encourage growth of spiritual understanding and conscience, see *The Kingdom and What It Means to the Life of the Believer*, 35-38, and 46-48, at this Website: [www.bsmi.org](http://www.bsmi.org).

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