

REFEREE OF THE SOUL

THE GOOD CONSCIENCE 1

Here is the place of values, priorities, default choices, and will.



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Referee of the Soul

Strong Souls 19
Referee of the Soul
The Good Conscience 1
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Welcome to *Referee of the Soul*

We begin an 8-part study of the conscience, and the role it plays in our souls and lives. We will not have a strong soul without a good and clean conscience, and we'll need to work at realizing that goal.

The mind receives and processes information, while the heart stores and deploys affections. In the soul, these overlap and interact, but they require the conscience to help them process ideas and feelings into actions.

Understanding the role of conscience, and how to keep our consciences clean and good, is an important part of growing in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the 8 installments in this series, we'll gain a better understanding of how to nurture our conscience, so that our values, priorities, default choices, and will function in accord with the good purposes of God.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 The Function of Conscience

...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them... Romans 2.14, 15

More than matter

Secular and naturalistic thinkers are determined to reduce everything in life, and especially human life, to some form of mathematical formula or electro-chemical explanation. Their approach to making sense of things is to reduce everything in life to matter and the interactions of matter.

They need to be able to see it, in some fashion, and to be able to analyze, measure, and manipulate it, whatever “it” might be. If they can’t see it, it doesn’t exist.

Because secularists deny the existence of a *spiritual* realm, they do not accept the reality of such notions as *mind, heart, conscience, or soul*, except as convenient ways of referencing what are, from their perspective, only material processes or things. All our actions, materialists insist, are the result of physical stimuli and responses, issuing from the brain, as part of a grand deterministic scheme in which human life has no ultimate meaning.

It should not surprise us, therefore, to see the extent to which American culture and society reflect a growing confusion of *conscience* concerning matters of right and wrong. The goal posts for living with a good conscience have become eminently movable. We kick the ball where we will – we do whatever we like – and then move the goal posts – adjust our conscience – to validate our choices. Thus, when children in public schools are taught, implicitly and explicitly, that there’s no such thing as the soul, and that conscience is simply a handy way of describing certain electro-chemical processes in the brain that govern our preferences, why should they feel responsible for anything but self-gratification?

And they expect deference from everyone around them. Nothing should be permitted that prevents me from knowing maximum gratification, however I define that. The narcissism which increasingly describes this generation’s manner of being-in-the-world bears witness to a steep decline in the sense of personal responsibility and accountability to some *ultimate* and *unchanging* measure of truth. Conscience has become unmoored from truth and set adrift in a sea of mere personal preference.

When everything in life is nothing more than some form of matter, all sense of responsibility, meaning, or hope ultimately dissolves. What matters is my matter, no matter what.

The spiritual reality of the soul

The Bible does not hesitate to discuss the soul and its three constituent and interconnected spiritual facets – the mind, the heart, and the conscience. Each of these is a *spiritual* reality which functions in and through the soul or spirit of every human being. As these three components of the soul work together, they determine our conduct in the world. Thus, for the proper care and feeding of our souls – for achieving and maintaining a strong soul – it’s important that we understand each of these spiritual components, so that we make sure they are operating as God intends in our own lives.

A strong soul requires a well-kept heart, a sound mind, and a good conscience.

The Scriptures teach that people are responsible for what they allow into their mind, heart, and conscience, and for the extent to which they develop and use these as God intends. The Biblical view of human life makes sense because it accurately describes what we observe in and expect of others, and it holds out the

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hope of personal growth and improvement to all who seek it. The secular, naturalistic view of the human being cannot do so, except as it *borrow*s from the Christian view of human life and denies its own most foundational assumptions.

In the soul, as we shall see, the conscience functions as the repository of priorities, values, default choices, and the will. These are all *spiritual* phenomena, in every person, but they are no less *real* for being such. A good conscience serves to engage thinking and feeling – the mind and the heart – with eternal values and convictions, to bring harmony in the soul in line with divine purposes, and to move the will to act for righteousness. Our desire is to have a *good* conscience, one rooted in the abiding and unchanging truths of God's Word; but, as with a well-kept heart and a sound mind, having a good conscience requires understanding and work.

If we do not understand the conscience, or fail to nurture and care for it as we should, the conscience remains active, and will absorb whatever values we allow to settle there. We do not want to leave the conscience vulnerable to being shaped by the spirit of the age, so that our priorities and values will be determined, not by the Word of God, but by the secular, naturalistic, materialistic, and narcissistic agenda of the day. Rather, we want to understand and work for a good conscience, one grounded in the Law and Word of God and reflecting the values of Jesus Christ.

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We are responsible for what harbors in our conscience and for how we bring our conscience to bear on the decisions and actions we take each day. If we ignore the conscience or act as though “conscience” is just a place-marker for whatever values and priorities our deterministic world foists upon us, we will never realize the full benefit of the power of conscience to aid us in loving God and our neighbors.

The conscience is the referee of the soul, maintaining vigilance over our thoughts and affections, and helping the mind and the heart work together with maximum benefit for the progress of Christ's Kingdom in our lives. Understand the conscience, and care for it accordingly, and you will discover more of the power of faith working by love in your life.

And a *good* conscience referees the soul from the sure and reliable foundation of the Word of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ, exalted in glory.

For reflection

1. What do you think people typically mean when they refer to “conscience”? Is this anything like what the Bible teaches?
2. The conscience is the repository of settled values, priorities, convictions, and default choices. Where do these come from?
3. In what sense are people responsible for the content of their conscience? Responsible to whom?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about their understanding of the conscience. What's the source of these views? How do they nurture their consciences in the things of the Lord?

2 Conscience Off Course

Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron... 1 Timothy 4.1, 2

The universality of conscience

Everyone experiences the reality of the conscience, the third component of the soul, together with the heart and the mind. We've all felt shame, self-justification, remorse, or guilt for some failure or wrongdoing, or, on the contrary, satisfaction over a job well done or vindication for some decision or choice. Secular thinkers may ascribe such feelings only to chemicals and reactions in the brain, but the Christian knows that these are the workings of the conscience, as it brings heart and mind into harmony or discord, according to the situation.

God has given human beings a leg-up on getting their souls into proper working order. He has *written*, by some spiritual means, the works of His Law on the souls of every person, so that there exists in everyone a sense of things holy and righteous and good (Rom. 2.14, 15; 7.12). That sense is more or less true and complete, depending on the extent to which our mind, heart, and conscience are submitted to God's Law.

In those who believe in Jesus, God's Spirit has come to dwell within them and to rewrite God's Law on their heart, so that love for God and neighbor might flourish (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Matt. 22.34-40).

People do not define such ideas as holiness, righteousness, and goodness the way God does; but they cannot get away from these concepts, from the notion that some things are permissible and valuable, and some things are not. This is part of what it means that human beings are made in the image of God. They have a conscience, and their conscience, regardless of their view of God, harbors a sense of what is good and true and even holy, to which people defer in making decisions and choices in life, even if those terms are filtered through a narcissistic view of the world.

Everyone has a conscience. And everyone's conscience referees the soul for each person's view of what is good and true. But not everyone's conscience functions alike, much less in the way God intends. This is because in many people, their consciences have become seared by the hot iron of unbelief and lies.

The role of the conscience

It is clear from Scripture that God intends the human conscience to harmonize thinking (mind) and desiring (heart) so that the will determines actions of beauty, goodness, and truth as God defines these. But He has also made human beings the responsible caretakers of their souls, those working priorities and values that inform the will and guide thinking and affections into words and deeds.

All of us must take responsibility to receive God's leg-up on values and priorities – His Law – and direct our souls and lives in accord with His good and perfect will. But people do not, in the main, respond this way. In fact, only as they come to redemption through faith in Jesus Christ do they have the power at work within them to make them willing and able to do what God approves (Phil. 2.13).

People who do not believe in God, or who refuse to submit to His Law, can expect that the inherent ideas of goodness and righteousness, which God has written on their hearts, will be hijacked, redefined, and turned to self-centered purposes in an increasingly narcissistic age. The conscience, apart from saving grace, has *no resources to resist the spirit of the age*, however that spirit may be blowing. Exposed, over the whole of one's life, to influences and inputs that blow contrary to the Spirit of God, people's minds become absorbed in the lie of unbelief, their hearts are hardened against God, and their consciences become seared and calloused against the truth.

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And this happens to different people in different ways, thus creating the moral confusion which characterizes our day.

Set of the saw

The conscience is like the set of a saw: If you intend to cut a right angle, you must set the saw to do so. Once that cutting angle has begun to be compromised, the saw will not cut as it should – the soul will never be able to cut a straight path to goodness, beauty, and truth, apart from divine intervention. Left to themselves, without God's truth and the reinforcement and accountability of a loving spiritual community, people today will experience their consciences going off course, taking them in directions not always to their liking, and leading them to cherish and choose things which, at other times, they may have regarded with less pleasure or importance.

Over time, the conscience, seared with lies and encrusted with false values, will rewrite the meaning of beauty, goodness and truth as many times as is necessary to soothe the conscience and avoid feelings of guilt and shame. The conscience thus seared with the hot iron of lies will drag the mind and heart into the black hole of the spirit of the age, so that the soul functions in harmony with the temper of the times rather than the intentions of God.

Christians are not immune to this tendency. As Paul explains, the conscience can go off course in Christians who refuse to take seriously their responsibility to nurture and guard their conscience as they should, causing them to depart from the faith, if not intentionally, then certainly practically and really.

Which makes it all the more important that we understand the proper workings of the conscience, this referee of the soul, so that we nurture and maintain our consciences in the best working order.

God intends for us to nurture a *good* conscience, one that functions in accord with His *good* Law to shape the soul for divine goodness in all our words and deeds. And since this is what God intends for us, it should be what we intend as well.

For reflection

1. How is it evident that God has “written the works of the Law” on the souls of all people?
2. Meditate on Romans 1.18-32. What happens, over time, to people who resist God and His Law? How does this affect their consciences?
3. What can Christians do to keep their consciences from being drawn off course?

Next steps – Preparation: What would you say are the most influential outside sources for shaping a person's conscience? How can you make sure those sources are not shaping your conscience in a way other than what God intends?

3 The Good Conscience

“This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men.” Acts 24.16

God’s purpose for the conscience

God’s purpose for the conscience is that it should be *good*, or, as Paul puts it here, “without offense” – clear of sin or mere self-interest in its orientation to God and men. *Good* is not an idea susceptible to a wide range of relativistic interpretations. *Good* is what God says it is, because *good* reflects the very character of God Himself.

Thus, a good conscience is essential for a well-kept heart, a sound mind, and a strong soul. The strength of the soul, in large part, derives from the goodness of the conscience.

Whenever we read the word *good* in Scripture we must think in terms of that which is pleasing to God, Who *is* good. A good conscience is a conscience that pleases God because it is untainted with and unhindered by sin. That is, a good conscience does not entertain or dally with anything that is contrary to the holy and righteous and good Law of God, which the Spirit of God is writing on the heart of every believer (Rom. 7.12; Ezek. 36.26, 27). We want our soul to be saturated and suffused with the goodness of God – in heart, mind, and conscience. And it is the role of conscience, as referee of the soul, to maintain that good foundation.

Peter says the way to a good conscience is through the water of baptism, that is, new birth in Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 3.21). The writer of Hebrews agrees, saying that Jesus Christ can “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9.14). The conscience cannot be tuned for goodness apart from the grace of God and the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3.12-18). We cannot pass enough laws to make people value the right things and harbor good priorities in their souls. We cannot educate them enough or control them by rules and regulations of any kind to keep their souls from going off course apart from the grace of God. We cannot pay them enough to seek only the goodness of the Lord.

If a person’s conscience is to be *good* and *clear* and *clean*, God Himself must be at work within, willing and doing of His good pleasure (Phil. 2.13).

Starting-point for a good conscience

Thus the Gospel of the Kingdom is the point of the spear for renewing and purifying the conscience. We who have come to believe that Good News understand and have experienced its power to make all things new in our lives. We must not suppose that we can help our neighbors break free of the searing of their consciences and the encrustation of wrong priorities and self-centered values apart from the Gospel of Christ.

But the way we must appeal to them with the Gospel will begin with how we live before them. We who have been redeemed, who have passed through the waters of baptism into a new conscience and a new life, must now labor to maintain, like the apostle Paul, a clean or good conscience before God and men, so that our witness to them will carry more power to persuade.

The Gospel is that starting-point for good conscience, for a set of values and priorities that always directs the will to choose that which is pleasing to God.

So let’s consider two more characteristics of a good or a clean conscience, just to make sure we have the right objectives in mind as we take up the challenge of beefing-up this referee of our souls.

Toward a good conscience

First, the writer of Hebrews says that a good conscience has as a high priority “to live honorably” (Heb. 13:18). The Greek word for “honorably” is *καλῶς*, *kalos*, and it is related to both beauty and goodness, two divine attributes. It signifies moral uprightness and health. Acting honorably means acting in a way that allows the glory of God – His Presence and character – to show through “in all things” (cf. 1 Cor.10:31).

Thus, we need to examine and monitor every aspect of our lives, both in how we relate to God and how we relate to our neighbors, to learn what is honorable and God-glorifying, so that we value and cherish those ideas, attitudes, plans, and practices more consistently, day-in and day-out. As we do, we will find that our witness to Christ becomes more consistent and credible.

Second, Paul says that a clean or good conscience engenders works of love toward God and men (1 Tim. 1:5). Our conscience won't be strengthened for goodness until we are loving God and the people around us more intently, purposefully, and consistently. We need to learn what it means to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves; and then, through prayer and practice, work to make these the default values and priorities of our will.

And to do this, we need to immerse ourselves in any teaching from God which can show us the way to love Him and our neighbors as He intends. This will mean spending more time meditating and walking in His Law (Matt. 22:34-40; 1 Jn. 2:1-6; 5:1-3).

You will know that your conscience is being exercised and strengthened for goodness when you think about the day ahead, praying and planning for ways to show the goodness of God in the land of the living (Ps. 27:13), and as you are continuously mindful of a desire to show the beauty and goodness of God in every situation.

God directs us to have a good conscience, one free of any adverse effects of sin or selfishness and grounded firmly in His Law and all His Word. But this doesn't just happen. We must look to Christ in faith, seek the counsel of His Word, and draw on the power of God's indwelling Spirit, praying without ceasing, until, in His time, He begins to shape our conscience for good, and to make it pleasing to Him in all things.

And this, in turn, will see us bring the beauty and goodness and uprightness of Christ more consistently into our everyday lives, making our witness for Christ more credible and effective.

For reflection

1. What do we mean by a “good” or “clean” conscience? What can keep us from this?
2. Meditate on 1 Timothy 1:5. In this context Paul is teaching about the importance of sound doctrine (how we think and live). How can you see in this passage that the three facets of the soul – mind, heart, and conscience – work together to engender love for God and neighbor?
3. In any situation where we are faced with making a choice or taking an action, our heart (affections) will be feeling one way and our mind (thoughts) will be processing information. It's possible that the two of these may be working against one another – we *feel* one way but we *think* we should do something else. How does conscience function as “referee of the soul” in such situations?

Next steps – Demonstration: What does it look like when someone is living out a clean or good conscience? How would you be able to recognize that? How do you expect to see this in your life today?

4 Conscience and the Law

...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)... Romans 2.14, 15

The Law of love

One of the factors most destructive of a good or clean conscience is the current neglect of the Law of God on the part of the followers of Jesus Christ. I will have much more to say in later sections of this concluding part of our study on “Strong Souls” about how God intends His Law to work in our lives and communities. For now, I want to introduce the role of the Law in shaping the conscience, and the crucial role of the Law in helping us learn to love as God intends.

Jesus taught that all the Law of God and all the teaching of the prophets – who mainly interpreted God’s Law into their own situations – are summed up in the commands to love God and our neighbors (Matt. 22.34-40). Love, the apostle John explained, is nothing other than keeping the commandments of God (1 Jn. 5.1-3). Keeping the commandments of God is not burdensome, John insisted. And Jesus said that greatness in the Kingdom of God is directly tied to learning, keeping, and teaching others to learn and keep the commandments of the Lord (Matt. 5.17-19).

If we think we can love God and our neighbors as our calling to God’s Kingdom and glory requires, without keeping God’s Law, we are tragically wrong. The Law of God is the key to understanding what it means to love God and our neighbors, and this is because the Law, as Paul explained, is holy and righteous and good (Rom. 7.12). The Law of God is the Law of liberty precisely because it frees us from the grip of mere *self*-love so that the power of God’s Spirit can shape us for love as He intends (Jms. 2.12; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

As we have seen, God has given each human being a push in the direction of His Law by writing the works of the Law on their hearts, so that the commandments of God are there for the conscience to employ in seeking to love God and neighbors. This explains why we still see so much deference to God’s commandments in the world today – proscriptions, for example, against adultery, murdering, stealing, lying, and so forth.

Law and grace

But people who turn away from God and His Law, and prefer instead to create their own morality, betray their consciences to lies and wickedness, and cannot – *will* not – seek the good conscience God intends for them.

Once saving grace begins to operate in our souls, however, we find anew the power of God to lead us to a good conscience. That is, we become able to harmonize soul and body for loving God and neighbor. But we must also get back on course with God’s original design for our consciences and take up the study of His Law. The Spirit of God, sent to us for salvation, also calls us to class for the study of God’s Law (Ezek. 36.26, 27). For only as we study and obey and teach others to study and obey the Law of God, will we be nurturing our soul in the same way God intended when He wrote the works of the Law on our heart in the first place.

It is the consistent teaching of Scripture that those who know and love God, know and love His Law as well. The Law does not save us; rather, the Law – and here I mean the Ten Commandments and the various attending laws which illustrate those commandments – convicts us of sin, teaches us the will of God, and guides us into the path that Jesus walked, so that we may walk it as His disciples (Rom. 7.7; 1 Jn. 2.1-6). If we want a good and clear conscience, one exercised to love God and neighbor, we must devote ourselves to regular reading and meditation in God’s Law, and to living in that Law as the Holy Spirit instructs and enables

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us to do so (Ps. 1; Ezek. 36.26, 27; Phil. 2.12, 13).

No opposition exists between grace and Law in the life of faith. The Law convicts us of sin and leads us to lean on the grace of God. The grace of God causes thanksgiving to rise within us, so that we seek the Law of God as the measure of that which best suits us as His image-bearers and is most in line with His purposes and plans.

I am persuaded that one reason the Church's witness to our secular age has become so ineffectual in recent years is because the world does not see the kind of honor, glory, holiness, and love we might expect from souls refereed by good consciences. And the reason our consciences are not functioning for good is because we have neglected – and in some cases, scorned – the Law of God. The prophets taught and lived by the Law of God (Ezra 7.10). The psalmist extolled the many virtues of the Law of God (Ps. 119). Jesus lived and taught and even deepened and extended the Law of God. And all the apostles drew on the Law of God for one or another aspect of their teaching about the life of faith.

Can we consider ourselves to be Biblical Christians as long as we neglect to study, obey, and teach the Law of God? Paul would say, “No!” (cf. Rom. 8.5-9)

We cannot nurture our consciences to become clean and good unless that nurture is grounded in the holy and righteous and good Law of God. Each of us needs to make daily meditation in the Law of God part of his devotional life in following the Lord. For only thus will we be able to hide the Law of God in our minds, hearts, and consciences, so that we do not sin against Him but, instead, love Him and our neighbors as we should.

The Law of God, written on our hearts by His Spirit, is the *rule book* to which the conscience, the referee of our souls, must turn in leading us to love God and our neighbors.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose many Christians these days seem to have a negative view of the Law of God? Is this justified? Explain.
2. Why does it make sense to think that the Law of God should be the primary source for our values, convictions, priorities, and default choices?
3. Do you think your own conscience would be strengthened by including reading, study, and meditation in God's Law as part of your daily discipline? Why or why not?

Next steps – Preparation: How could you incorporate regular reading and meditating in God's Law as part of your daily discipline for growing in the Lord?

5 Conscience and the Spirit

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit... Romans 9.1

The work of the Spirit

We have mentioned the Spirit of God in conjunction with the conscience. Let's elaborate on that a bit more.

The Spirit, we said, renews the works of the Law of God on our heart by teaching and enabling us to obey the commandments of the Lord. What years of neglect and sinful works had obscured, the Spirit, Who comes to us at the moment of salvation and strives to renew us, taking up the work of God again and writing the Law on our soul so that we might live honorably and in love to God and man (Ezek. 36.26, 27). As He sets the Law in its proper place in our heart, as the *rule book* for loving God and neighbors, He provides the means whereby the conscience can referee between thoughts and feelings for obedience to God's Word.

If we understand Paul aright, it is the work of God's Spirit to *confirm* to the conscience that it is functioning in line with the good and clean purposes of God. When we are loving God and our neighbors, when heart and mind are properly aligned, and when we are acting in such a way as to glorify God in all things, we should expect to know some *confirming word* from the Holy Spirit, assuring us that we have chosen correctly and acted according to the requirements of a good and clean conscience. As with Paul, we expect our conscience to bear witness to the choices, decisions, and actions we have taken, that they are either wanting according to God's will or properly aligned with Him.

The work of the Spirit is, first, a work of *conviction* – that is, of establishing the best priorities and values – and, second, a work of *transformation*, of putting those values and priorities into action via a good and clean will (Jn. 16.8-11; 2 Cor. 3.12-18; Phil. 2.13). But it is also a work of *confirmation*, which is what Paul mentions in our verse.

A work of confirmation

Keep in mind that we are talking about spiritual essences which ultimately remain mysteries to us. All we can do is consider them according to what is revealed in God's Word, and make sure we are nurturing our soul for a well-kept heart, a sound mind, and a good conscience.

As the conscience operates in line with the convicting and transforming work of the Spirit, we may expect the Spirit to *confirm* – or as Paul has it, *bear witness* – that all is well in our soul and that we are conducting ourselves in a manner expressive of God's love.

For example, whenever we feel convicted of sin so that we confess, repent, and turn our feet back to the paths of God's Word, we can know that the Spirit has been moving to pique, stir, and move our conscience back into line with God's will (Jn. 16.8-11; Ps. 119.59-61). As we confess our sin, repent, and return to the Lord's path, the Spirit will confirm us by an inward assurance.

It behooves us, therefore, to make time in our lives to listen for this work of the Spirit as He moves to shape and mold our soul, including our conscience, toward goodness (Ps. 139.23, 24).

We should expect some sort of spiritual affirmation from the Holy Spirit whenever our natural, self-centered bent gives way for the fruit of the Spirit to come to expression (Gal.5.22, 23). Bringing forth such fruit in us is a work of the Spirit of God, which we seek, and which we achieve in conjunction with His working in our lives (Phil. 2.12, 13). We will only show good spiritual fruit in our lives as we *value* and *nurture* such fruit, and as the desire to live this way provides the bit and bridle for our thoughts and affections.

And when that happens, we can know that the Spirit has made His indwelling presence known, and we can expect Him to bear witness to our choice for confirmation.

Gifts, witness, worship

The same is true with the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12.7-11). As we make ourselves available to serve, using the gifts God's Spirit brings with Him, we show that our values and priorities are what they should be, that the Spirit of God is working in us in specific ways, and that our conscience is good and clean before the Lord and men. The Lord wants us to receive, develop, and use His gifts to serve others in love. The Spirit will bear witness with our conscience as we stir up those gifts and put them to work, assuring us that our conscience is clean and we are functioning according to the Lord's agenda.

Bearing witness to Christ is also a priority and work of the Spirit (Acts 1.8) We will only choose such a work when the Spirit has made it a priority in our lives. When it is, our conscience will be good and clean before God and men, and we will act accordingly.

Finally, when we are filled with the Spirit, so that we overflow with thanksgiving and worship, and make ourselves the servants of others for their good, then we can know that God's Spirit is shaping our soul – mind, heart, and conscience – to reflect and practice the true spiritual values of the Lord.

Thus, in all these ways – our daily walk, bearing spiritual fruit, exercising spiritual gifts, and bearing witness for the Lord – the Spirit bears witness that our conscience is either straying from the Lord's path (conviction) or hewing to it assiduously (confirmation). The more He bears confirming witness to us, the stronger our soul becomes in heart, mind, and conscience before the Lord.

The nurture of our conscience depends on our ability to follow the lead of the Spirit as He convicts and teaches us the things of Christ, transforming us increasingly into His image, beginning in our soul.

Let us therefore seek the Spirit diligently in all our ways, that we may know His transforming and confirming Presence and power within us.

For reflection or discussion

1. Meditate on Ezekiel 36.26, 27 and John 16.8-11. Why do we need the Law of God in our souls for the Spirit to do His best work in us?
2. What do we mean by saying that the Spirit *affirms* or *confirms* or *bears witness in* our conscience? Why does this matter?
3. Meditate on Psalm 139.23, 24. Suggest some ways you might practice the teaching of this passage throughout the day.

Next steps – Transformation: Review each of the ways the Spirit of God works with your conscience, as we have seen in this article. In each area, indicate one way you'd like to see more growth in your walk with and work for the Lord. What can you do to help that become a reality?

6 Guarding the Conscience

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3.17, 18

The tendency to drift

Being grounded in God's Word and Spirit are the keys to nurturing a good and clear conscience; thus, failing to guard our conscience against all that is contrary to those good influences is a sure way to begin drifting off course (Heb. 2.1).

Paul saw his colleague, Demas, fall into the snare of loving this world more than Christ (2 Tim. 4.9). He failed to guard his conscience, and lost sight of the priority of the Kingdom of God for all of life. Instead, he began to value the things of this world more than the things of Christ, and, soon enough, he abandoned the Lord's work for the "good life" in Thessalonica.

The same happened to Judas Iscariot. Over time, the allure of money became the dominant value in his conscience, and that value ruled his thinking and affections, not only to drift, but to destruction (Jn. 12.4-6; Matt. 26.14-16).

Why should we consider that we are immune from such betrayals and tragedies? We are not. But if we want to keep from going off course in our conscience, we shall have to be diligent to guard our consciences against every influence of lawlessness.

What does this require?

Recognize contrary influences

First, as Peter suggests, we need to recognize those influences, contrary to the Law and Spirit of God, which are seeking to achieve a beachhead in our values and priorities. As we increase in knowledge of the Law and the mind of the Spirit, we'll be better able to recognize contrary influences and guard our conscience against them.

These contrary influences come at us from all directions, both from contemporary culture and from within the Church. Paul wrote that we are not our own; we have been bought with a price and we belong to King Jesus (1 Cor. 6.19, 20). Our time is not our own. Our possessions are not our own. Our work, wealth, relationships, roles, responsibilities – none of this belongs to us. It belongs to Jesus, Who purchased us out of sin with His own Body.

Of course, we are to love ourselves, and to seek earnestly to discern and pursue the calling God has for each of us. However, the guiding value and priority of our conscience must remain seeking Christ and His Kingdom above all else (Matt. 6.33). Anything which suggests that you *are* your own, or you ought to do a little more for *you*, or pay more attention to *your* needs than to those of the people around you – any such voice or influence can alter your values and compromise your good conscience, infesting your soul with mixed motives grounded in self rather than Christ.

Learn to recognize all such influences, so that you are not carried away with them and lose your stability.

Keep on the growing edge

Second, continue growing in the Word of God, including God's Law. The psalmist writes, "I thought about my ways, and turned my feet to Your testimonies. I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments. The cords of the wicked have bound me, but I have not forgotten Your law" (Ps. 119.59-

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61). The more we learn of the Law of God, letting it serve as a mirror, both of our condition and of God's glory (Jms. 1.23, 24; 2 Cor. 3.12-18), the better we will know the holiness, righteousness, and goodness that God, by His Spirit, is seeking to write on our heart. We can never plumb the depths of the Law of God, so it is to our advantage to make the study of God's Law an ongoing and regular part of our devotional lives.

Remember, the Law of God is holy and righteous and good. Who doesn't want more of that? The Law of God is the key to loving God and our neighbors. And the Law of God is the cornerstone of all Scripture. You cannot understand the Bible if you don't understand the Law of God.

Third, keep in mind the conscience of your fellow Christians (1 Cor. 8.10-12). Being considerate of others is an important component in Christian growth. Just as we would want others to keep in mind the influence they may have on our choices, we need to be careful not to cause others to compromise in their consciences (Mk. 9.42). And we need people in our lives who will help us guard our conscience by living positive, wholesome lives before us.

Finally, as David demonstrated in 1 Chronicles 29.10-18, we need an ever-expanding vision of the living God to keep us moving in the direction of goodness and uprightness in our lives, beginning in our soul – mind, heart, and conscience. Only the beauty, loveliness, majesty, splendor, glory, and righteousness of God, embodied in Jesus Christ (Jn. 12.45), can reset, maintain, and continually improve our desires, priorities, and values. The more we gaze upon His beauty, the more we will sense our own values and priorities coming into line with His. Remember that David said this was the defining priority of his own life (Ps. 27.4). Surely it should be so for us as well.

Guard your conscience! The conscience is the referee of the soul, helping our thoughts and affections work together to produce godly actions in our lives. If we fail to guard our consciences, we will thwart the proper working of our souls and find ourselves compromised in our walk with the Lord.

For reflection

1. What are some ways the “spirit of the age” tries to undermine your conscience? How do you guard against this?
2. How can believers help one another to work hard for a good or clear conscience?
3. What is the relationship between a growing *vision* of God and a clear conscience? Suggest some ways of improving your vision of God.

Next steps – Transformation: Do you have an accountability partner? Someone who knows where you're trying to grow, and can pray for and encourage you? See if you can find someone to help you in this regard, and begin meeting together for mutual encouragement and prayer.

7 Reaching the Conscience

Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Acts 2.37

Challenge settled convictions

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is for every believer in Jesus Christ to work diligently and faithfully to nurture their own soul in the things of the Lord. We need a strong soul to serve Jesus in these increasingly secular days – a well-kept heart, a sound mind, and a good conscience. Our focus in this part of our study is on the conscience, the referee between the mind and the heart, to bring them into harmony for loving God and neighbor.

But the mind and heart are frequently written and preached about, while, in my experience, little attention has been given to the conscience and its care and nurture.

Our text shows us what happens when the Word of God penetrates a conscience, throwing all previously-held values and priorities into confusion: "Men and brothers, what shall we do?" People will not come to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ until they see the *value*, indeed, the *necessity* of salvation, so that they desire Him more than whatever false gods they've been clinging to heretofore. In our witness for Christ, as well as in our ongoing work of disciple-making, we must strive to reach the consciences of people, to challenge their settled convictions and values, and to spread out the demands and priorities of the Kingdom of God in clear and compelling ways.

The conscience is the key to the will, and no one will be saved or will grow in salvation whose conscience has not been invaded by the Good News of Jesus.

A two-edged sword

This is a two-edged sword. First, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 10.23-29, we must at all times take care to guard our own conscience and to resist the temptation of denying our conscience, either because we don't want to offend someone, or we simply fear what others might think. At the same time, we must have regard for the consciences of others, lest by negligence or compromise we reinforce false values in the soul of our neighbor.

We will never reach the consciences of others if we don't keep our own conscience good and clean, or if we are reluctant to let our good and clean conscience assert itself when appropriate (v. 29).

We must be straightforward, bold, and emphatic about proclaiming the truth to others and living it before them. The truth of God will reach the consciences of others when it has first reached and transformed our own values, priorities, and convictions. Paul wrote, concerning his own witness, "But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth *commending ourselves to every man's conscience* in the sight of God." (2 Cor. 4.2, emphasis added).

There is nothing like the truth of God, plainly and unequivocally lived and declared, to penetrate the changeable conscience of our narcissistic age (Prov 28.4).

But which aspects of the truth, in particular?

The truth that sets them free

First, the truth about sin. We must speak openly and confidently about the sinful issues and trends of our day.

And we must not fear to say to the people in our Personal Mission Field that, like us, they are sinners in God's sight. We must explain why that is so, that God has revealed His will and we have flouted it, and there's a price to pay. Here again is why it's so important for us to be grounded in the Law of God, since, as Paul explained, by the Law of God comes the knowledge of sin (Rom. 7.7). God intends His Law to convict sinners of sin. When we include the commandments of God in our witness, the Holy Spirit may pry open a door of conviction into a sinner's conscience. Admitting we are sinners is the first step toward breaking the bondage of sin.

Second, we must explain the Gospel of the Kingdom. We call people to see and receive a Kingdom – a whole new realm and way of life – over which Jesus Christ reigns as King. Jesus has dealt with our sins and forgives us when we turn to Him. He has paid the price we owed. Now we are no longer our own, as Paul explained (1 Cor. 6.19, 20); we have been bought with a price, and we belong to Jesus. He intends to own them like He owns us, and to fill their lives with purpose, peace, righteousness, love, and joy as well, so that we may glorify God in even the most everyday details of our lives (1 Cor. 10.31). But this will not happen unless, hearing the Good News, they give themselves freely and fully to our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel strikes like an arrow to open the conscience by its convicting power, creating a hunger for relief from sin and the desire for newness of life.

But this arrow cauterizes as it wounds, setting people free from sin into everlasting life with Jesus (Jn. 8.32).

Finally, the need for repentance. No one can come to Jesus, nor enter His Kingdom, unless they repent of their sins and turn to walk a new path. The call to repentance is an essential component of our Gospel witness (Acts 17.30, 31). It is a challenge to face up to our values, priorities, convictions – the stuff of the conscience – and the practices that those values permit and encourage. As the Word exposes false values and priorities, and the new and more glorious values and priorities of the Kingdom are explained, people will feel their hearts pierced and their consciences quickened in what can be life-changing ways.

But for this to happen, we who know the truth that is in Jesus must *live* that truth before the people to whom God sends us, keeping guard over our own conscience and life; and we must be ready, as opportunities arise, to *proclaim* the truth and the hope that we have in Jesus (1 Pet. 3.15), as we explain, like Peter, what is necessary for coming to faith in Him.

That is, we need the truth of God to reach our conscience every day, exposing our sins, leading us to repent, and pointing us to Jesus, that we might be made more like Him (Ps. 119.59, 60; 2 Cor. 3.12-18).

If we are faithful in telling people the truth – of sin, Jesus, and repentance – we can expect that God will do through our witness what He did through Peter's and Paul's – reach and pierce the consciences of many of our contemporaries, upset their settled values and priorities, and leave them seeking a way to the new life in Jesus Christ that is freely offered to them in His Kingdom.

For reflection

1. How can you tell when something has reached your conscience?
2. How do you think the good conscience of a believer affects the consciences of others?
3. Why is it important, in sharing the Gospel, to try to reach the conscience of the person to whom you are witnessing?

Next steps – Preparation: Pray for the people in your Personal Mission Field, that the Lord will give you an opportunity to speak to each one about the Good News of Jesus and His Kingdom.

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Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What is the conscience? Why do we say that the conscience is the *referee* of the soul?
2. What kinds of influences shape a person's conscience? How conscious are you of the influences that are shaping your conscience?
3. How do the Law and Spirit of God contribute to having a good or clean conscience?
4. What do we mean by *guarding* the conscience? What are the best ways to do this?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

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