

# Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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## The Growth Environment For Love: A Good Conscience

by Dan Trygg

“...the focal point of the instruction is love out from a clean heart, and a good conscience, and ‘unphony’ faith, ...concerning which some people, having lost this aim, have turned off toward empty talk...” I Timothy 1:5,6  
“And Paul said, ‘...in all good conscience I have lived as a citizen toward God until this day.’” Acts 23:1  
“This charge I commit to you, ...in order that you may fight the commendable warfare, holding faith and good conscience, ...which some, having pushed away from themselves, have shipwrecked concerning the faith.” I Tim. 1:18,19

### What is “Conscience”?

The word translated as “conscience” is a compound word in Greek, deriving from two words meaning “to know by observation” (i.e., having seen, therefore I am aware of), and “together with” (usually referring to a joint, simultaneous action, i.e., two things happening at once). **The Greek word suneidesis, then, means to have seen things together at the same time, and being aware of what you saw.** There is a perceptive awareness within oneself which is the result of this “joint viewing”. Sometimes the word refers to **consciousness** in general, i.e., being aware (I Cor. 4:4). The word also refers to the experience of an inner awareness that something is morally right, or wrong, ...what we have come to refer to as our “**conscience**”.

The word picture brings to mind the fundamental idea of comparison. We are “viewing together” a course of action at the same time as we look at our inner moral code. If there is agreement, we feel good about what we choose to do. If there are discrepancies, we feel an inward uncomfortableness, and we are aware that the proposed course of action is wrong, ...at least wrong for me. It does not fit my inner moral grid. *It* (the action) doesn't "sit right *with me*" (my inner information).

### Limitations of Conscience

Most of what you read about conscience emphasizes **the comparison of life choices with the inner moral code**, which has been established from our upbringing, our religious and moral education, and from past experiences. It is important to see that **this source of comparison is incomplete, fallible, and changeable**. It is like a computer. It records the information which comes into our experience from numerous sources. The information becomes the moral baseline by which other choices are evaluated. Like the information on computer files, our inner moral code is able to grow and develop as we experience more of life, and we are also capable of editing the information which we have obtained up to now. It is possible to have **gaps**, or stunted areas, where we have simply not had any instruction about something, or our moral instruction was faulty or immature. Again, like the computer, **if we put garbage in, we will get garbage out**. In Rom. 2:15, Paul says that God will judge those who have no other moral code by the inner awareness of right and wrong in their hearts. In some cases they will be excused for otherwise unacceptable behavior, because they knew no better (cf. Prov. 24:12).

In I Cor. 8:7-12, the apostle also describes someone who has a “**weak conscience**”, ...weak in that the person does not maintain firm boundaries, i.e., they operate from a power-less, wimpy self-awareness. They go against their own principles in order to get along with, or impress, others, ...or to avoid confrontation. Even though this person's self-perception of morality may be poorly instructed, and may be offended by things that are not even really wrong, at all, ...nevertheless, we are to respect their self-awareness enough to not encourage them to do something that would feel wrong to them. As faulty as their perception of reality may be, they respond to that inner moral code *as if* it were a moral absolute from God Himself. To disregard that, and choose to do something in violation of their inner sense of morality, would be the same as choosing to disobey God. Paul says that the person who doubts is condemned if he proceeds anyway, in violation of his inner consciousness, because his action “does not proceed from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23 -- Note how this entire chapter is about the phenomenon which we call “conscience”, and yet Paul never mentions this word in the chapter!)

### God Wants Us To Respect and Develop Our Conscience

I have tried to **distinguish between the inner moral code**, which is programmable and fallible, **and the phenomenon of inner awareness**. The reason for this distinction is that *it is essential that we clarify the valuable and important faculty of inner comparison* from the problematic “information source” which we often use to make our comparisons. **God desires that we respect this ability** to notice the confirmations and/or discrepancies that become

evident within ourselves, **and develop our sensitivity to it.** He desires that we learn to sharpen and heighten that faculty, and our response to it. **At the same time, however, we must learn to use a different source of information for our comparison,** because our inner moral code gained through life experiences has been defective. Does God simply want us to educate our inner moral code, to “revamp it”? I do not think that is what He had in mind, at least not entirely. There certainly is benefit in establishing a sound, healthy, accurate moral baseline from which to make comparisons. That would help to eliminate a lot of the lies and deception that we are currently stuck in, or susceptible to. This is part of “being renewed in our worldview”, ...part of our maturation process as a believer (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23). Having a better road map, so to speak, would definitely be an asset to making our way through life. There is more beyond that, however, or we would be living life according to the law.

## **Let Your Conscience Be Your Guide?**

Some scholars have proposed that “being led by the Spirit” is simply the same as “listening to the conscience”. We have established that the inner moral code we brought into our Christian life is warped, incomplete, and fallible. If “listening to the conscience” meant responding to *this* inner moral code, the results would be much different than “being led by the Spirit”. Other scholars, having seen this obvious reality, have dismissed conscience as only an “after-the-fact signal that we have done wrong”. If, however, we focus on the faculty of inner awareness as our definition of conscience, we can begin to see how the leading of the Spirit may, indeed, have an influence. Instead of using our old moral code, which we were taught in our life experiences, we can utilize the same ability of “having seen together and being aware” in conjunction with other new sources of information, i.e., the established truth of who we are in Christ and the immediate leading of the Holy Spirit. In other words, **conscience**, instead of being only a reactive signal indicating that we are inconsistent with our belief system, **can also be a proactive tool for discerning God’s will, a place where the Holy Spirit meets us to guide us.**

**The apostle Paul paid close attention to his conscience.** In Rom. 9:1, in an attempt to describe his inner motives and to show he is not false or phony, he appeals to the confirming testimony of his conscience “in the Holy Spirit”. In other words, he is not just making a claim “off the cuff”. This is an issue he has been introspective about, and he listened to his inner awareness, prayerfully asking for the guidance of the Spirit. It is interesting to note that the focus of the query was not about some past event, but concerning the present state of his emotions (vs. 2). In Acts 23:1 and 24:16, he indicates that **maintaining a clear conscience toward God and men was, indeed, a principle he lived by.** He knew there were limits to the accuracy of his self-awareness (I Cor. 4:3,4), but keeping integrity between his inner source of information and his thinking or outward actions was critical to him. **He also advocated this as a guiding light to others** (I Tim. 3:9). Tuning in to one's inner self, to listen to our feelings and to evaluate our thoughts, keeps us sensitive and “in touch with” the inner signals God intends for us to live by. To “push away from” the uncomfortableness of those inner warning signals leads to error, and ultimately to such painful and disastrous spiritual consequences that the apostle likens it to running one’s ship aground. **A continual disregard of conscience will eventually make you insensitive,** ultimately becoming like one seared with a hot iron (I Tim. 4:2).

## **Conscience and Our Identity**

**Conscience can be faulty in regard to our self-awareness of our identity.** In a comparison and contrast of the old and new covenant, the author of Hebrews mentions in 9:9 that the sacrifices were not capable to complete those offering them concerning the matter of their conscience. When Christ came, He established a new and better covenant, one able to not only cleanse the conscience from the dead works of self-effort (5:1; 9:14), and establish the believer in the freedom of forgiveness, but one intended to remove a consciousness of sins. This consciousness of sins, called an “**evil conscience**” in 10:22, is equivalent to **an ongoing feeling of uncleanness, unworthiness, and shame for one’s past mistakes.** This “shame grid”, or negative self-image, was to be removed in Christ. How so? Under the old covenant, the repeated offering of inferior sacrifices was a continual reminder of sin. Animal sacrifices could never remove sin, nor complete the ones offering them. Christ offered Himself, a better sacrifice, one of infinite worth and value, to forever remove the uncleanness of sin, to purchase redemption, and forgiveness, ...and to actually make us new in our union with Him through the death and resurrection of “birth from above” (Jn. 3:3-8; Tit. 3:4,5). This truly *does* remove us from old sin. Consequently, “we can now draw near to God in the full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (10:22). We are not only *forgiven*, we are *made new and righteous* inside. Sin, guilt, and any judgments of shame or condemnation we may internalize from them, have no place in us, as we abide in Christ and our new nature (Rom. 8:1). An evil conscience would pull us back to the old tapes of our perception of our former sinful selves. **God’s transforming work in us through Christ is truly**

**intended to remove condemnation and *any* consciousness of sin**, so that we can enjoy the freedom of a good conscience before God.

## **Awareness of a Good Conscience is a Conclusion Drawn From Evidence**

Like many aspects of our faith-walk, there seems to be a battle for the mind, here. Often, **we struggle with the immediacy of what we feel and experience that apparently contradicts what God says He has established in and for us.** It is not surprising to find the writer to the Hebrews alluding to this mental wrestling in 13:18, “Pray on behalf of us, for *we are* (for ourselves) *persuaded that we possess a good conscience*, in all things desiring to habitually conduct ourselves well.” He does not simply say that he *has* a good conscience, as though he were describing a simple fact that resulted from his conversion. Rather, he states that there was a process of persuasion required to arrive at a confirmed, established positive self-awareness, ...a self-concept that was confident that he had a good heart, i.e., that his motives were godly and honorable. It was the conclusion drawn from supporting evidence. **The primary confirmation for this belief**, as mentioned by the writer, **was that the writer saw that “in all things [he desires] to habitually conduct [himself] well.” This inner motivation, which he could observe, was evidence of a good heart.**

## **A Good Conscience Is Both Sound and Effective**

**What is a “good conscience”?** When we hear the phrase “good conscience”, I think most of us think of a morally upright and sound conscience, i.e., a righteous self-evaluator. **The Greek word for “good” in this verse not only includes the idea of moral uprightness, but also the notion of what is beneficial, helpful, or profitable.** In other words, what benefit is a well-instructed databank of moral information, if the connection is not made to one's moment-by-moment decisions? Here is one of the weaknesses of the over-simplistic emphasis on Bible study and scripture memory as the panacea of spiritual growth. Someone can develop an impressive memory, and still be very stunted in the area of self-awareness and application.

**A beneficial or profitable conscience would be *an effective self-awareness* that**

**(1.) causes you to recognize inner dissonance** (an uneasiness, a “check in your spirit”);

**(2.) motivates you to search out its meaning; and**

**(3.) responds appropriately to what you come to understand about yourself, or what God is prompting you to do.**

If a *weak conscience* is one that easily goes along with the pressure of others outside, even when you feel uncomfortable, ...then a good conscience would motivate you to maintain honesty and integrity within yourself, and not go along with outside influence.

If an *evil conscience* is the result of having disregarded self-awareness in the past, and not having found resolution and forgiveness, ...then a good conscience would motivate you to see that such thinking and behavior is not consistent with who you are in Christ, and would motivate you to confess your faults, set things right, and walk consistent with your new-creature status.

If disregarding one's self-awareness of inner disharmony leads to shipwreck, then the function of a beneficial self-awareness will lead us to take action to resolve inner uncomfortableness, and walk consistent with who we are.

## **Conscience and Agapē**

**How does a good conscience relate to agapē?**

For agapē to be real, it must come from the fullness of our hearts as we are abiding in Christ. The relationship with God is primary. Without the ability and the direction given to us by the Holy Spirit, our

attempts at agapē will be misguided, at best. Certainly, without God's power, we will not be able to sustain what agapē would require. **Keeping our conscience clear is simply another way of directing us to keep current with God.**

Secondly, however, God is in the business of growing us up, of making us healthy and mature, so that we can more fully enjoy our relationship with Him, and more effectively do His work. **This ability to monitor ourselves in light of our moral databank and the leading of the Holy Spirit is another tool God has built into us which He intends for us to learn to utilize.** It helps us not only to monitor ourselves, but also to become open to the Spirit's leading. It is a valuable signal for us to begin to pay attention to in order to deal with recovery issues, and "renewing the mind", so that we can grow out of past hurts and scarring to find our healing and wholeness in Christ. As we do this, our capacity to give to others will increase, our skill at discerning God's leading will be sharpened, and we will be strengthened to both carry out His will and to resist the enemy's attacks.

**Finally, a sound, healthy-functioning conscience will preserve us from unhealthy manipulations and codependent dynamics when working with others.** We will "sense" and discern that we are being compromised, or pressured, and will be able to stand firm with what we know God has for us to do.

## **Kingdom Living From the Inside-Out**

For too long the church has directed us to outward things to keep us within certain moral boundaries. That whole approach of attempting to conform our behavior to some exterior moral standard tends to produce legalism, and actually draws us away from developing our relationship with God. In contrast to that methodology, I believe what the New Testament is teaching us is that God has given us an entirely different way to live.

**Instead of an outside-in approach,** where we try to squelch behaviors that are inconsistent with an outside standard, **God has radically changed us on the *inside*, at the very core of our being, so that we can live consistent with who we are deep down.**

Moreover, **He has directed us to pay attention to our inner selves, because He intends to work in our lives from the inside-out.**

**There are tools and signals which He has built into our very human make-up, which are like additional senses to help us tune in to that inner reality, and to His leadings** and movings within us. Unfortunately, we have often been unaware of them, or how to utilize them, so they have not been well employed in helping us grow, spiritually.

**Learning to walk with integrity brings wholeness, clarity, and confidence from the inside-out.** There is a whole toolbox of tools to use in order to grow and be mature. Conscience is one of them.