

Candle
in the
Wind

Gary Brady



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Welwyn Garden City, UK, AL7 1TS

www.epbooks.org
sales@epbooks.org

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To Robert and Sarah

Fellow workers and good friends in Christ

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Preface

The subject of conscience is one that I have been studying for more than half a life time. I believe it was reading a hardback edition of Ole Hallesby's work on the subject as a young man that sparked my initial interest. It was the paradoxical paucity of material on the subject and the abundance of references to conscience elsewhere that served to further spike a desire in me to learn more.

Over the years I have been gathering material on the subject from various sources. Very little of the fruit of these studies has seen the light of day, although in 1995 and 1996 two articles did appear in *Foundations* the journal of the old BEC (now Affinity). I also spoke on the subject on some few occasions to the church here in Childs Hill and once or twice to fellow pastors.

In 2006 I completed a thesis, *A Study of Ideas of the Conscience in Puritan Writings, 1590–1640* as part of the requirements to successfully complete a ThM degree at the John Owen Centre, here in London, in conjunction with Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia.

I have taken the liberty of making extensive use of these two self-penned sources for this present work.

The half buried desire to pull the material together and produce a popular book finally rose to the surface in the summer of 2012 when I came across the excellent book on the subject by Christopher Ash, *Pure Joy*. Initially I thought there was now no need for me to publish anything, given its excellence. Having read it carefully, however, I think that there are some things to add and so I have pursued publication. It seems unlikely that we are going to be overwhelmed by a glut of books on conscience.

This is not my first book. I have hopefully learned something about how to go about writing but the task does not seem to grow any easier. The length of time this particular project has spent on the back burner (I even have handwritten notes from pre-computer days on file) has made it particularly difficult to produce a book that is both reliable and readable. I am very grateful to Graham Hind and the team at Evangelical Press for their efforts in helping me to that end.

The writing of a book always involves the help of many, many

people. Because this project has been in process for decades by now, it is difficult to remember all those to whom I am indebted for their interaction and help and to whom I should say thank you. Therefore, I simply want to thank all my friends and all my colleagues in the ministry, the church that meets in Childs Hill and, of course, my family for their patience, stimulation, contributions of books and articles and all their support. My wife and I have now been married over 25 happy years and we have become grandparents. Two of our sons currently live in Wales, two are still at home and the oldest is training for the ministry here in London.

There have been a lot of changes in my life since I first started to look at this subject. My prayer is that the things found in this book will serve to be a blessing not only to family and friends but to God's people, wherever they may be found.

Gary Brady

July 2015

Introduction

The phrase “Candle in the wind” has become very much associated in the popular mind with the late Princess Diana and, for the *cognoscenti*, with the late actress Marilyn Monroe. Matthew Henry (1662–1714) in his commentary on Romans, however, uses a similar phrase to speak of conscience. He calls it “The candle of the Lord which was not quite put out”.

Others have been much more effusive about conscience. In his now famous *Les Misérables*, the French writer Victor Hugo wrote that “there is a spectacle more grand than the sea; it is heaven; there is a spectacle more grand than heaven; it is the conscience.” The philosopher Immanuel Kant would often say that he knew of nothing more awe-inspiring than the starry heaven above us and conscience or moral law within us.

All sorts of people have things to say on the subject. I recently came across a statement made by the late Elvis Presley. He once observed that “when your intelligence don’t tell you something ain’t right, your *conscience* gives you a tap on the shoulder and says ‘Hold on.’ If it don’t, you’re a *snake*.”

- What the present volume seeks to do is to bring the subject of conscience to the bar of God’s Word so that we may be helped to understand it in the way that we ought to.
- The study begins by seeking to amass the biblical data. The Bible has a lot more to say on conscience, perhaps, than most people realise. Chapter 2 is an attempt to rescue the word conscience from the confusion that surrounds it and to properly define it.
- We then look at conscience in this fallen world in the unconverted, noting its strengths and weaknesses. Chapter 4 deals with the enlightened, convicted or awakened conscience and the need to preach the law. In Chapter 5, we come to the connections between the conscience and true faith and touch on the subject of assurance.
- Chapter 6 looks at the way that the Christian can and should develop his conscience, considering the good, ruling and clear conscience. Chapter 7 is on what can go wrong with conscience in the unbeliever. Here we look at the dead, the blind, the sleepy, the secure, the lukewarm, the large, the spandex (!) and the benumbed conscience.

- Chapters 8 and 9 both look at problems that arise with the consciences of Christians. We consider the strong and the weak conscience and how we should deal with differences among believers.
- In the final three chapters we tackle the interesting topics of conscience in children, conscience and religious and civil liberty and, finally, conscience in eternity.
- We have also included three appendices—on illustrations of conscience, its place in proving God’s existence and some of the history of thought on the subject, especially among the Puritans.
- Books like that by Christopher Ash have been few and far between in recent years. This probably points to an underlying neglect of what is a truly important subject. It is hoped that this latest exploration of conscience will do something to help address this situation. It is intended to promote both more thought on this issue and not just more thought but more thought that is biblically informed and applied.

1 **Shaking the tree**

Gathering data on conscience

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him 'Where are you?' He answered, 'I heard you in the garden; I was afraid and hid from you, because I was naked.' Genesis 3:9–10

'Paul never idealises the conscience but he does call attention to it' G C Berkouwer

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther had a great appetite for the Word of God. He once remarked that if you picture the Bible as a mighty tree and every word in it as a little branch, he had shaken every one of those branches

because he wanted to know what each one was and what each one meant.

No doubt the best way to begin a study of the conscience is to go to the tree and do some shaking. We all have an idea what conscience is, of course. Everybody appears to have one. Our consciences speak to us and we can recall, perhaps, hard times it has given us. Many writers in many different fields of study have written on many different aspects of the subject. It is important, however, that all our thinking on the subject is shaped chiefly by what God's Word actually says.

In his 1956 book *The voice of conscience*, American Lutheran Alfred Rehwinkel notes how mysterious conscience is and wisely writes that 'only revelation can give us the key to this mystery'. We want to begin exploring the subject by looking at what the Bible says about conscience.

Old Testament

The Old Testament makes no direct reference to *conscience*. The Hebrews, it seems, never needed the term. This was probably because, as God's chosen people, they received direct revelation and so were, in some ways, less directly dependent on and less aware of conscience. Believing Hebrews spoke more readily of their *hearts* reflecting on revelation. 'I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me' says David in Psalm 16:7. (See also Psalm 40:8, 19:11 and Ecclesiastes 7:21–22).

Adam

The *idea* of conscience certainly comes up in several places and in fact some modern translations introduce the word. The opening chapters of Genesis tell us how Adam and Eve, after they had sinned, hid in fear at the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8, 10). What is this but the earliest example of conscience at work? The Puritan William Bates wrote of Adam how after his fall ‘conscience began an early hell within him.’ ‘Paradise with all its pleasures’ he says ‘could not secure him from that sting in his breast, and that sharpened by the hand of God.’ He says that a consciousness of his crimes ‘racked his soul with the certain and fearful expectation of judgement.’

The first instinct in all of us when sin is discovered is, like our first parents, to try and cover it up. ‘For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed’ (John 3:20).

Joseph and his brothers

The story of Joseph and his brothers has been singled out by several writers as one where conscience plays an important role. In Genesis 37:21–27 first Reuben, then Judah appeal to the consciences of the brothers. Reuben argues against killing Joseph. Instead of murder or any shedding of blood, he advocates throwing him into a cistern there in the desert. Judah says that they will gain nothing by killing their brother and hiding the fact and so suggests selling him to the Ishmaelites instead. He adds a direct appeal to conscience, ‘for he is our brother, our own flesh.’

In the nineteenth century, Anglican theologian John King wrote of Joseph's brothers that they acted on the common fallacy that if they took suitable precautions they could effectively guard against future discovery of their crime. What they had forgotten, however, was that there was 'one witness whose eyes they could not blind, one informant whose voice they could not silence, one judge whom they were unable to bribe.' This, of course, was conscience.

Generally speaking, people tend to make no 'careful provision against the subsequent remonstrances of this monitor'. Even though they may find it difficult to overcome conscience at the beginning, they do not expect it to come haunting them after the event but very often it does.

Despite all the brothers' efforts to hide their sin, the truth eventually came out, as is so often the case. The story is quite a striking one and reminds us of how time after time God's providence can be quite remarkable. Their guilty consciences seem to have slept for many a long year (like a time bomb waiting to explode suggests Christopher Ash). It was only when at last they were forced to travel into the very land they had sold Joseph into and to stand before their, at first unrecognised, younger brother that their consciences began to speak at a volume that could not be ignored and with an authority that could not be resisted.

Genesis 42:21 reveals how the mere mention of their youngest brother Benjamin stirs their consciences and makes them say to each other 'we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw

the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us.’

Matthew Henry notes that ‘guilty consciences are apt to take good providences in a bad sense; to put wrong meanings even upon things that make for them.’

Suddenly, the brothers vividly recollect the all-but-forgotten scene, as if it were the day before. A long time has passed but suddenly this one event, an event that took but one day of their lives, looms exceedingly large and they see the replay in high definition and hear it in surround sound with the button set to replay. What King calls ‘the imperishable records of conscience’ are now unexpectedly and unwillingly brought to light. Like a bolt of lightning lighting up the whole sky, conscience abruptly breaks through the dark clouds of suppression and denial.

Of course, conscience is active here before any other informant, witness or judge. It is able to connect events in its own unique way. It has the power to combine things otherwise distant, dissimilar and apparently independent of each other.

When, later, a cup is found in Benjamin’s sack, they say ‘What shall we say to my lord? What shall we speak? Or how can we clear ourselves? God has found out the guilt of your servants’ (Genesis 44:16). This reaction is prompted not by guilt for having stolen anything but by guilt over Joseph.

When Joseph finally reveals himself, they are terrified, a terror borne of guilty consciences (Genesis 45:3). Even after reconciliation, when Jacob dies, they are again fearful (Genesis 50:15). Ash refers to guilty conscience casting 'a long shadow'.

Joseph himself had suffered quite a bit since they had sold him into Egypt but one burden he had never needed to carry was that of a guilty conscience. He knew he did not deserve to be suffering as he was. What peace and comfort that must have given. What condemnation his brothers must have felt even before this point.

When Joseph himself was tempted to sin at one point, he stood firm because he kept conscience on the throne. He wisely traced the likely consequences of sin and responded to Potiphar's wife with a sincere and wise 'how then could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?' (Genesis 39:9b).

King writes of how much of sin's sting lies in the recollections of awakening conscience. Suddenly the enchantment is broken, the illusion is over, as conscience wakes, 'like a giant from his slumber' and the individual is forced to hear accusations it cannot answer and reproofs it cannot repel.

Other examples

There are other places in the Old Testament where *conscience* is clearly in mind. Job says 'I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days.' (Job 27:6). Abimelech tells God 'I have done this with a clear

conscience and with innocent hands’ and God replies, ‘Yes, I know that you have done this with a clear conscience, ...’ (Genesis 20:5–6, NET Bible). In Exodus, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart relates to the matter of conscience. Moses own conscience is seen to be at work in Exodus 2 when, having killed an Egyptian, he is distraught to find that his act had been seen. Passages in Leviticus 4 and 5 about becoming aware of sin allude to conscience and it is probably a bad conscience that made the people flee and cry out that the earth was going to swallow them, when in the desert the earth split and swallowed up a number of rebels against Moses (Numbers 16).

On at least two occasions we see David’s conscience at work. We read how he was conscience-stricken both for having cut off a corner of Saul’s robe (1 Samuel 24:5) and after counting the fighting men (2 Samuel 24:10). Also see 1 Samuel 25:31.

Similarly, in Psalms 32, 38 and 51, conscience is seen to be active. Psalm 32:3–4 is highly descriptive of the pangs of a bad conscience,

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Psalm 38:3–5 is similar. Psalm 51:10 expresses David’s desire for a good conscience, ‘Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.’

It was on the basis that every man has a conscience that the Law was given and the prophets preached. A striking example is seen in the way Nathan dealt with David following his adultery with Bathsheba (1 Samuel 12).

Some issues are debatable—such as the role of the conscience in man as originally created in God’s image. What was the significance for conscience of the knowledge of good and evil? Puritan Richard Bernard asserts that conscience was in Adam but it was not active then as it was later. His conscience witnessed to his goodness, bore sway so that he was obedient and gave him joy in God’s presence. Bernard suggests that conscience will function in a similar way in the glory of heaven.

There may be references to conscience in other places in the Old Testament such as 1 Kings 8:38, Proverbs 20:27, 28:1. The Greek translation of Ecclesiastes 10:20 uses the word but it is generally accepted that this is an unhelpful translation.

New Testament

The Gospels

Turning to the New Testament, we find that the Gospels again make no direct reference to conscience. John 8:9 is dubious for several reasons that we cannot consider here. Nevertheless, the conscience is seen to be active in the story itself in John 8:1–9 as, following Jesus’ statement that the first stone should be thrown by the one without sin, that is without sin in the area of adultery,

people began to go away one at a time, prompted no doubt by their consciences, the older ones leaving first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman herself.

In the Gospels, as with the Old Testament, there is again reason to believe that, even where the word conscience is not used, there are occasions when the Lord Jesus has it in mind. For example, when he asks, ‘And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?’ (Luke 12:57) his appeal is to conscience. Some suggest that Matthew 6:22–23, which refers to having a single or healthy eye, is talking about conscience. And what is a *pure heart* but an undefiled conscience? In Mark 3:5 Jesus rails on the stubborn hearts or hardened consciences of the Pharisees. The meaning of John 1:9 is controversial even among Reformed and Evangelical writers but Calvin and others may well be right to see conscience as at least partly the reference.

Paul and also Peter

Most New Testament references to conscience are made by Paul. In fact, of the 30 or so that exist, around 21 are in his letters (three in Romans, twelve in the Corinthian correspondence and six in the letters to Timothy), two in sermons by him found in Acts (23:1, 24:16) and five in Hebrews (9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:8), which if not by Paul certainly reflects his style. The only other person to use the word is Peter, in his first letter (1 Peter 3:16, 21).

It is very much Paul’s word, then. But where did he get it? Some suggest that it was a specialist word taken over from the

Stoic philosophers but it has been demonstrated to have been an everyday word among the Greeks, going back, in one form or another, to at least the sixth century BC. In his 1955 study *Conscience in the New Testament* C. A. Pierce suggests it was a *catchword* in the Corinthian church taken up by Paul and used not just in correspondence with them but, subsequently, as part of his Christian vocabulary. Certainly Paul and other New Testament writers took up Greek words and filled them with Christian meaning. Paul appears to have used the word *Saviour* in this way and Peter does this sort of thing more than once.

The New Testament, like the Old, is perfectly able to speak about conscience without using the actual word. In 1 John 3:19–21 the word *heart* is used where the word *conscience* would fit equally well.

By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him; for whenever our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God.

As we shall see, when we speak of conscience, we are really speaking of an aspect of the heart or soul, though the word is useful for speaking of a specific function of the soul, namely its moral workings.

Romans 2:14–15

The nearest the New Testament comes to any sort of definition of conscience is in Romans 2:14–15.

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

A number of things emerge from these verses.

Firstly, everyone has a conscience, even pagans. The conscience belongs to man as man.

Secondly, these verses help us distinguish the various elements involved in making a moral decision. Although the word *conscience* is sometimes used in a general way to refer to the whole business of making moral decisions, there are, in fact, at least three clearly identifiable strands in the process.

1. The requirements of the Law of God, which are written on every man's heart.
2. The conscience itself which makes its judgements on the basis of the preceding element.

3. A man's thoughts or opinions. These come as he makes a decision on the basis of the mediation of conscience proper.

We will need to say more about Romans 2:14,15 in the next chapter. At this point, however, we have at least begun to gather the relevant material together. There is a good deal of material; more perhaps than we might have expected. This underlines the importance of the subject that we are considering.