
Correspondence

My thanks for Gary Brady's article **What is the Conscience?** (Issue 34). We seldom (if ever) use words with their derivation in mind. 'Conscience' is for us, merely a name used to describe a part of mental activity which is common to us all. We know what we mean, but we never think in terms of 'joint knowledge' when we use it. Whilst there must have been a group of people who first coined the term it does not follow that they succeeded in accurately defining the conscience or even that they understood it. It does not even follow that they understood it. It seems to me that etymology is a poor basis for definition. Maybe it would be better to start with Romans 2:14-15, to which Gary draws our attention.

I appreciated Gary's mention of syllogisms - they are helpful in describing the relation of decision to conscience. However, conscience is not as purely rational as the Puritan syllogisms suggest. Sometimes false inferences (minor premises) can be made from valid major premises. We have all met those Christians who have a problem with assurance, and whose thinking goes something like this;

God's people know His voice and obey His commands (John 10),	<i>Major Premise</i>
I have knowingly disobeyed Him,	<i>Minor Premise</i>
Therefore, I cannot be one of God's people,	<i>Conclusion.</i>

Another area which Gary does not cover is the relationship between temperament and conscience. Why are some people more prone to the prompting of the conscience than others? And what happens to the conscience at regeneration - Christians still suffer at times from 'dormant' consciences. Thanks again for a helpful article and for the magazine as a whole.

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Response from Gary Brady

It is good to receive Tim's positive response to my article on conscience. My paper did not attempt to deal with the issues he raises. It must be borne in mind that conscience, like every other faculty in man, is marred by the fall. In Tim's example a properly formed syllogism falls down because its minor premise (corresponding to conscience proper) is in error. Conscience proper can also be variable, corrupted, intermittent or simply unable to cope with complex issues. Other problems arise when the major premise (corresponding to the moral record) is at fault, eg when a person does not know God's Word. Even when both major and minor premises are correct the sinner may fail at the third stage and draw a wrong conclusion, eg 'This does not apply in this circumstance'. Natural conscience is not useless but it is unreliable.

At regeneration every part of conscience is transformed. God's Word itself is written on the heart, conscience proper now gains an unmatched sensitivity and the renewed mind not only thinks clearly but looks to the blood of Christ for cleansing. Evangelicals today do not give enough attention to the place of conscience in conversion. Let them ponder Gurnall's words, 'If faith be a jewel, a good conscience is the cabinet in which it is kept'.