

*‘Kevin DeYoung engagingly explains what the conscience is, how to have a clear one, and why it matters.’*

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*‘Kevin convincingly helps readers to understand how our consciences are intrinsically connected to our spiritual decline or flourishing. As a biblical counselor I am grateful for this resource as it is sure to be helpful for anyone who reads it.’*

**Eliza Huie**, author and counselor

*‘A simple, clear and much-needed focus on an essential element of Christian growth.’*

**Jonathan Lamb**, Minister-at-large for Keswick Ministries, Vice-President of IFES

*‘This is a wonderfully clear teaching about a joyfully clear conscience. It’s instructive and even perhaps surprising to hear all the Bible has to say on this topic we too often neglect.’*

**Kathleen Nielson**, The Gospel Coalition

*'There have not been many modern books written on the place of conscience in the Christian life. I am thrilled that Kevin has written one. Faithfulness to the Bible and clarity of expression are hallmarks of his books. This little book is no exception. I found it stimulating and helpful.'*

**Justin Mote**, Director of Training for  
The North West Gospel Partnership

*'Short enough to read in one sitting, significant enough to change your whole life.'*

**Nancy Guthrie**, Bible Teacher and author

*'This excellent short book takes us, through the lens of a proper Biblical understanding of conscience, to the heart of the Gospel. It is written for Christians, and will do us much good, but I will feel confident in handing it to those exploring the Christian faith.'*

**William Taylor**, St Helen's Bishopsgate, London

# THE ART OF TURNING

FROM SIN TO CHRIST FOR A  
JOYFULLY CLEAR CONSCIENCE

KEVIN DEYOUNG

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# WHAT EXACTLY IS OUR CONSCIENCE?

As much as the Bible talks about the conscience, it's remarkable how little we hear of it today. It's not something pastors often teach on and not something most believers consider in daily discipleship. And yet, if you read our ancestors in the faith (especially the Puritans), you'll find that they were obsessed with the conscience. In a good way. They paid careful attention to how the conscience works, the role it plays in bringing people to Christ, and how it is indispensable in leading us into holiness.

So what is the conscience? Here's my definition: *the conscience is the moral faculty*

*within human beings that assesses what is good and what is bad.* The Greek word for “conscience” is *suneidesis*. In this compound word, *sun* is the prefix for “with,” and *desis* is a form of the word “knowing.” Similarly, the Latin word root of our English word could be translated “with knowledge” (*con-scientia*). In other words, the conscience is what aids us in acquiring knowledge—in particular, knowledge and understanding in ethical and moral matters.

There is a close connection between the work of the Holy Spirit and the operation of the conscience. John Flavel, a Puritan clergyman and author, observed that the conscience “is God’s spy, and man’s overseer.” The Spirit convicts us of evil by showing the truth about sin, the truth about Christ, and the truth about his glory (John 16:8–15). When the Holy Spirit shines a light on what is bad (or good) in us, it is then the role of the conscience to appropriate the work of the Spirit (John 3:20–21). This is why Paul can say: “my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 9:1). The Holy Spirit works in tandem with the conscience to produce in us a life of godliness and peace.



The classic explanation of how the conscience works (or is supposed to work) can be found 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.” The conscience acts as both a prosecuting attorney and a defense attorney.

First, then, the conscience is to be a prosecuting attorney to convict us of sin when we violate God’s law. The conscience keeps us up at night. It gives us a pit in our stomach. It reminds us of our offenses against God. When working properly, the conscience is that sixth sense which impresses upon us a feeling of guilt for deeds misdone.

But second, on the other hand, the conscience is also to be a defense attorney. We usually think of the conscience as that little voice in our head that tells us that our mom was right or that we are bad to the bone. That can be the work of the conscience, but the conscience should also

defend us against false allegations. Notice how Paul said, “their conflicting thoughts accuse or even *excuse*” (my italics). Our conscience helps us to face the accusations of the devil, our enemies, and other slanderers. This is what Paul says, in effect, in 2 Corinthians 1:12: “My conscience is clear. You may be really cross at me for not coming to visit you, but as far as I know in my own head and heart, I have not done anything wrong.”

Having a conscience is one mark of being a sentient human being. Scripture sometimes speaks of people “who do not know their right hand from their left” (Jon. 4:11), or of “children, who . . . have no knowledge of good or evil” (Deut. 1:39). Knowing right from wrong is what makes us functioning adults. To have a malfunctioning conscience is to be less than human.

Many of you will know the story of Pinocchio. I remember the story as I learned it from the Disney cartoon version. The wood-carver Geppetto wants his puppet Pinocchio to be a real boy. Once this wish is granted, Jiminy Cricket is assigned to be Pinocchio’s conscience.

As a child, I was terrified by the movie, because, of course, Pinocchio doesn't stay a little boy for long. He falls in with the wrong crowd, and his lack of truth-telling gets him into trouble. His nose grows long as a sign that lies eventually become as plain as the nose on your face. As he continues to lie and ignore Jiminy Cricket, Pinocchio starts turning into a donkey. He blurts out a "hee-haw" in the middle of sentences. He starts braying. Donkey ears pop out of his head. A donkey tail sprouts from his backside. The boy is becoming an animal.

There is more going on in this story than we realize as children. The crux of the tale is that as Pinocchio ignores his conscience, he becomes more like a beast. He becomes something less than human. A conscience is not only indispensable to living a life pleasing to God and enjoying peace with God; it is essential for living as the human beings God made us to be.



# CONSCIENCES THAT MISFIRE

The problem is that this God-given faculty, which is meant to be instructed by the Holy Spirit and shaped by the Word of God, can misfire. The Bible gives us several examples of consciences gone bad.

## 1. AN EVIL CONSCIENCE

According to Hebrews 10:22, we must draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an *evil conscience* and our bodies washed with pure water” (my italics). The context for this verse is important. We are told to “hold fast”

to our confession of faith and to keep doing “good works” as we encourage one another to persevere (vv. 23–25). By implication, then, an evil conscience is one that accuses us of wrongdoing, but the wrongdoing is not dealt with. When that little voice in your head—whether by the light of nature or common grace or by the prompting of the Holy Spirit—keeps convicting you of sin, and yet you keep on doing the thing you know to be sin, that’s an evil conscience. It’s a conscience that is ignored and not dealt with.

As a boy, my best friend was always pushing me to do things which were two or three steps further than I really felt comfortable doing. My friend had me doing silly things that kids like to do—and think are clever. We would go and ring people’s door bells, and then we would run around the back of the house so that no one was there when the door was opened. We would make crank calls on the phone: “Hello, is your refrigerator running? Yes, well you better go catch it.” Hilarious, I know. We also used to ride our bikes to the big grocery store nearby and spend half the day floating around and filling up on all the food samples. We’d eat

cheese and cookies and little pieces of sausage until someone finally kicked us out.

I always felt bad participating in these acts of little boy naughtiness. I didn't want to seem like a loser to my friend, but I knew the things we were doing were not quite right. I'm sure we've all felt that way before—with big things and small things. We know in our gut that what we're doing is wrong, but push aside the conscience convicting us of evil.

## **2. A SEARED CONSCIENCE**

1 Timothy 4:2 speaks of “the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared.” This is going one step further than having an evil conscience. A seared conscience is one that has been cauterized so that it cannot feel anymore. At this stage, we have ignored our conscience too many times and it no longer works properly.

It's like scar tissue. I have a bit of scar on my elbow from my days as a camp counselor. We often played “capture the flag.” It did not matter if they were little students; I still wanted to get their flag. I would run to their side of the campground, find their flag, and run back. I took

it very seriously, and so did the other boys. One particular occasion, I was running back to the safe side of the camp when one of the students, trying to tag me from behind, managed to take a chunk of flesh out of my elbow. There was blood dripping down my arm. I was quite the hero as I continued to play despite such a dramatic injury! I still have a mark to commemorate my heroism. Today that spot on my elbow is nothing but scar tissue. You can poke it and scratch it, and I won't feel a thing.

A better analogy might be frostbite from the cold. In Michigan, we get lots of snow during the winter. The weather can be dreadfully cold for weeks on end. It's important to bundle up from head to toe. If you go outside without your gloves on, your hands will get cold and start to hurt. That's bad. What's worse is when they stop hurting. If you are outside long enough, the pain actually starts to go away. This is when you are really in danger, as nerve endings get damaged and frostbite sets in. Stay out long enough and you are at real risk of suffering permanent damage, perhaps even losing some of your fingers.



The same thing happens in the Christian life. We can develop spiritual frostbite. When we first do something we know we should not, we feel that twinge of conscience. We feel pain in our extremities like we do when we are outside in the cold. Yet if we persist in doing what is foolish, there comes a time when we start to feel better about engaging in such behavior. We no longer consider that it is wrong. The bad stuff doesn't feel so bad anymore, which is when we are in great spiritual peril. This is the danger of having a seared conscience.

### **3. A DEFILED CONSCIENCE**

The next category is a defiled conscience, which we see in Titus 1:15: "To the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled." A defiled conscience is one that is completely out of whack. It celebrates what is impure and denigrates what is good.

Think of the university student whose conscience is so scrambled that he or she *does not* feel guilty to go out and get wasted, and to sleep around on a weekend, but who instead *does* feel

bad about themselves if they do not go out and party, and experience college life as they think they should.

Even as Christians our conscience can become defiled. We can get all mixed up so that we fear offending others more than we fear offending God. So instead of standing up for a biblical definition of marriage, we feel guilty for insisting that sexual intimacy is reserved for the context of marriage between a man and a woman. Even though the church, in most places around the globe and for 99% of its history, has espoused the same basic principles regarding sex and marriage, we can feel that the revisionist ethic is noble and the Bible's teaching is too embarrassing to mention. This could be evidence of a defiled conscience that now calls evil "good" and good "evil."

#### **4. A WEAK CONSCIENCE**

So far we have looked at three varieties of a misfiring conscience: an evil conscience, a seared conscience, and a defiled conscience. There is one other type that is a little different. It is a weak conscience, and is mentioned by Paul in 1

Corinthians 8:7: “not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” It is a complicated argument that Paul gives here in 1 Corinthians 8 and then again in chapter 10. Here’s the gist: instead of having a conscience that allows us to get away with things we should not do, a weak conscience accuses us of things that are not really wrong.

The classic example, which Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10, is that of food sacrificed to idols. Think about the difficulties many new Christians were facing in the ancient world. People who had been worshiping idols, including sacrificing food to these idols, for their entire lives were wondering what to do with this food now that they were Christians. Was it safe to eat food sacrificed to idols? Was it no big deal? Or did it mean you were still participating in idolatry in some way to eat the food? I once heard the story of a family in an animistic culture who used to worship a tree in their backyard, but then, after becoming Christians, they began hanging laundry on the tree instead.

The situation may sound humorous to us, but they wrestled with whether it was best to stay away from the tree altogether. What do we do with objects and practices that were once associated with evil and idolatry?

When our conscience tells us not to do something even though we have complete freedom and liberty to do it, that's a weak conscience. This is what Paul has in mind when he talks about "a stumbling block" (1 Cor. 8:9). Most Christians misunderstand this term. We think of a stumbling block as something that offends someone else or tempts someone else to sin. But that's not exactly what Paul has in mind. According to the Apostle Paul, we put up a stumbling block when we encourage others, by our freedom, to do something that is against their conscience.

Take drinking alcohol, for example. There are many Christians who are happy to drink in moderation once they are of age. There are others who grew up hearing that Christians should never drink. Certainly, some people teach that in the United States. I grew up in a conservative church and often thought serious

Christians never touched alcohol. To this day, I am a teetotaler myself, mostly for reasons of health and taste. Yet I now believe that Christians have freedom to enjoy a glass of beer or wine in moderation.

Here is where the issue of alcohol can become a stumbling block if we're not careful. Let's suppose you are sure of your freedom in Christ and have a stout ale from time to time, without any twinge of conscience. One night, your teetotal friend comes over. She tries not to judge you for drinking, but you know she feels very uncomfortable around alcohol and would feel terrible to drink it herself. Knowing that Christians are free to enjoy an alcoholic beverage every once in awhile, you chastise your friend. "Come on, lighten up. Jesus turned water into wine. Let me buy you a drink." This is what Paul means by a stumbling block. The problem is not that you drink and experience freedom in Christ. The conscience should not condemn us for a glass of wine. But when the conscience does accuse us, we should not ignore the conscience. We put a stumbling block in someone else's path when we encourage them to do what they feel

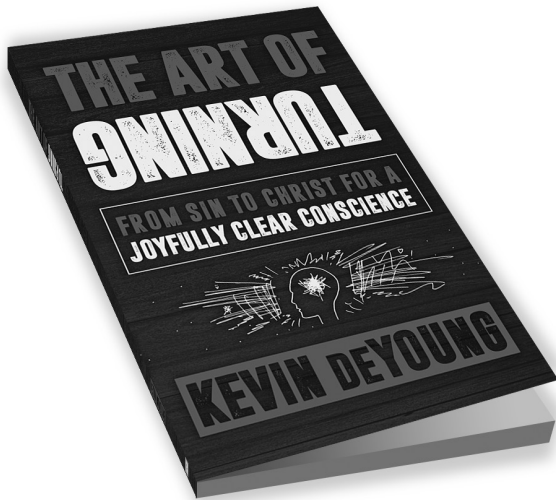
is wrong, even if we know that for others it may be right.

The same problem can arise in different scenarios. You may be happy as a Christian to go to the movies. You may think it is acceptable to see a film, even though some of those accompanying you are uncomfortable with the choice. Let's assume the movie doesn't have anything truly objectionable; it is genuinely a matter of conscience. What should you do with your friends who won't see what you feel fine to see? If they are good friends, they won't judge you (again, assuming the content is not obviously lewd). And if you are a good friend, you won't press them to do something their conscience will not allow.

Paul urges us that even when we encounter a weak conscience—even when we are being accused of doing something that is truly not wrong—we need to take heed of it. We may want to inform the other person's conscience and correct their thinking so that they no longer feel bad for doing something acceptable. There is certainly a time for this kind of teaching. But unless they are convinced by the Bible, we

should not urge other Christians to violate their consciences. In essence, Paul says, “Don’t flaunt your freedom, and don’t convince people to go against the conscience. Because when you do, you only reinforce the idea that the conscience should be ignored. And if they get in a habit of ignoring the conscience, they will end up sinning—not just in their heads, but for real and against God.” That is what Paul means when he instructs us to “take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak” (1 Cor. 8:9).

Of course, in the long run, the goal is for the weak conscience to be instructed so that it can function properly. Eating food sacrificed to idols was not objectively wrong. The Corinthians should have learned that. The weak conscience is not working the way it should. Our sense of right or wrong must be informed by the Bible, not by cultural taboos or peer pressure.



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