

DOCTRINE FOR THE YOUNG

CONSCIENCE

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What is it?

Does your conscience bother you? Did “the little voice of conscience” call out to you telling you not to do something that you knew was disorderly or wrong?

These are familiar expressions we often hear or use. But what do they mean? The Word of the Lord tells us many things concerning conscience. “Conscience is the new will and the new understanding from the Lord: thus it is the Lord’s presence in a person” (*Arcana Coelestia* 4299).

When we are little babies the angels draw near to us, and surround us with their love of the Lord’s truth. The presence of angels makes little babies happy, and although they don’t realize it, the angels are actually filling the child’s mind with delight. These happy delights, which come from angels and are stored up in the interior memories of infants and little children, are called “remains.”

As truths from the Word are taught to little children, such as the truths concerning the Lord, the Ten Commandments, and the life after death, these truths are planted in the memory. The remains, or affections, which have been stored up there by angels, provide a fertile ground, or soil, in which truths from the Word can be planted. As these truths grow up in the mind and become ideas about the Lord, and ideas about the Ten Commandments and how we should obey them, the affections which the angels stored up there are felt by children as delight in the truths they have learned.

When truths grow up in the mind and are loved by children we have the beginning of *conscience*. Conscience is like a garden that grows in the mind. It is like a plain, or place into which the Lord’s love and wisdom can flow. Now do you see why the Writings say that conscience is a new will and a new understanding? Do you see that conscience is really a new understanding of the truth and a new love of it, which grows up in the garden of the mind?

Some people think that conscience is pain. But the Writings assure us that conscience is not pain, but a willingness to do according to the things which are of religion and faith. “Hence it is that those who enjoy conscience are in the tranquility of peace and in internal blessedness when they act according to it, and suffer a certain uneasiness when they act contrary to it” (*True Christian Religion* 666).

The Writings go on to say that all who have conscience speak from the heart and do from the heart whatever they do, for they have not a divided mind. They act and speak according to what

they understand and believe to be good and true. A more perfect conscience may be given with those who are in the truths of faith.

Who needs it?

Do you need conscience? Do I? Again, the Word of the Lord tells us that we all incline towards evils of every kind from birth. We are not born good. If the Lord did not give us a new will, or a conscience by means of His Word, we would become more and more selfish day by day from the day of our birth until the day of our death. To be is to receive a new will, or a new love, that is not selfish, but is unselfish, thinking about others and doing what is good and useful for their happiness. Our love of self makes us want to concentrate on our own happiness, to acquire the things that will make us happy, even if it means taking from others and making them unhappy. Conscience, on the other hand, leads us to stop and think that we should not be selfish and self-centered, but that it is right to think about others, and to work for their happiness.

Temptation is the struggle between the selfish will in us and the new will, which the Lord builds up in us by His Word and is called conscience. Without temptations, or struggles to do what is right, we could not enter heaven. Who needs conscience? Listen to what the Word teaches about conscience. "No one can undergo any spiritual temptation or trial unless he has conscience." (*Arcana Coelestia* 4299) "All they who are without conscience are in external things alone, for the internal man shows itself by means of conscience" (AC 4459). "When the restraints of conscience are relaxed there is no medium by which the Lord may enter and operate; for the Lord's influx in man is by means of charity into his conscience" (AC 1835). "The influx of the angels is especially into the conscience of a man, the plane into which they operate being there. This plane is in the interiors of man" (AC 6207).

How do we get it?

Where does conscience come from? Do we have it instinctively, or automatically? We know that we have selfishness and the love of worldly things hereditarily or automatically, but what about conscience? The Word tells us, "Conscience does not come from natural hereditary good, but from the doctrine of truth and good and a life according thereto" (AC 6208).

A true conscience is formed in a person by truths from the Lord's Word. He receives these in his understanding and remains cause him to love those truths. When so loved, a person lives according to them, and such a life is a life of conscience or true religion; but those who are in truths alone, and not in a life according to them, have no conscience. In Psalm 51, verse 10, we read, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a firm spirit within me." This is a prayer for a new life in the will and a new thought in the understanding. They who become spiritual have such a conscience (AC 1442).

Are there different kinds of conscience?

First of all, we should note that there is no conscience in hell. Evil spirits fear punishment and therefore do not do certain things. This is not conscience. It is only fear of being harmed, which is another form of selfishness. (AC 7280, 7788) People who have conscience, fear to do what is evil because it will hurt the good that they love. Therefore, if they do what is evil they feel sadness because they really love what is good, and therefore, they repent of their evils. But evil spirits fear only punishment. There is no regret when they do something evil, nor is there any desire to repent, but only the fear that they will be punished. So with people in this world who fear only punishment, in the other life they have no conscience (AC 6213).

In general there are three kinds of conscience. The first kind is a *true* kind of conscience and exists with those only who know the truth and love it enough to obey it. A *spurious conscience* is another kind of conscience that is sincere but it is not based on truth, but on falsity. Do you remember the story of Jephthah in the Word? Jephthah vowed that if the Lord would give him the victory in a certain battle, he would sacrifice to the Lord the first thing that came to meet him when he returned home. Jephthah expected to see one of his cattle in the field when he arrived home, but sadly, his only daughter came to meet him, and she was the first thing he saw. Jephthah believed that keeping one's vow was more important than saving the life of a loved one, and so he sacrificed his daughter. He did this from conscience but it was a conscience based upon false ideas—a *spurious* conscience.

So there are those who believe that it is right to give to the poor just because they are poor. From conscience such a person gives money even to lazy and evil people just because they are poor. There are others who believe the Word teaches that we should forgive seventy times seven; they will never protect themselves against attack, or fight for their country to save it, or ever punish a person who has wronged them. Such people act from conscience but it is a *spurious* conscience because the truth is not known or believed. Such people, however, if they are sincere will receive the truth when they come into the other life and then have a *true* conscience.

Finally, there is a false conscience, which is formed not from truths, but for selfish reasons. The person who has a false conscience is the one who does what is good and true in his outward dealings with others simply because he wants to get on their good side and gain something for himself. He obeys the truth and lives a good life outwardly only because he wants to gain some advantage over others by deceiving them. Such a conscience is false and condemns a person to hell. Read what is said in the *Arcana Coelestia* number 1033 about these three different kinds of conscience. Also, read *Arcana Coelestia* number 4167, which speaks of the two degrees of conscience, that which is interior, and that which is exterior.

Does it last?

If a person develops a true conscience, how long will it last? “All who in the world have lived in a state of good and have acted under the influence of conscience, appear to themselves, when let into a state of their interiors, like persons who become wide-awake after sleep, and like persons who pass out of the shade into the light.” (HH 506)

What a person *loves* he will become in the other life. If a person loves what is beautiful, good, and strong, so will he appear in the other life, and so will appear all of his surroundings. He will live with those who, like himself, have developed conscience. For while a person is living on earth, conscience is the vessel in his mind into which heaven can flow to delight him and to lead him. When a person dies and enters the world of spirits his conscience comes forth in such a way that he is led to his heavenly home according to the quality of the conscience he has made his own.

If you wish to read other interesting numbers in the Word about conscience they are: *Arcana Coelestia* 978, 608, 6208, 977, 965; *The New Jerusalem and its Heavenly Doctrine* 133-135; *Arcana Coelestia* 2053, 1033.