

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *A Biblical Theology of the Human Conscience*

The term “conscience” is not found in the Old Testament. Perhaps the closest OT term to conscience is “heart” (e.g., 1 Samuel 24:5). In the New Testament “conscience” is used 31 times, mostly by Paul. The key passage is Romans 2:14-15. Scripture teaches that humans, made in the image of God, have an innate sense of right and wrong, a moral monitor that either “approves or accuses” (see Romans 2:14-15). Conscience serves as an umpire, which disposes the human to view life situations in a moral/ethical light, thus judging/determining that some actions are “right” and some are “wrong.” The Fall has drastically affected conscience but has clearly not destroyed it. Evidence of this innate sense of right and wrong is a general agreement in all cultures about certain basic ethical issues (e.g., murder, incest, pedophilia, lying, stealing, etc.).

How Conscience is developed in the NT: A human being may actually be sincerely following a wrong moral standard that deepens convictions about the “rightness” of certain actions. Consider Paul before his conversion: Saul (as he was then known) persecuted Christians with a “**good conscience**” (Acts 23:1). His deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) told him “do right” and his ethical standard was “it is right to persecute Christians.” Thus he followed his conscience but what he did was wrong, because his deep-seated conviction (i.e., his conscience) was ill-informed. God needed to change his convictions, which He did--beginning at the Damascus Road with his salvation.

1. When a person becomes a Christian, his/her conscience is heightened, as it were, by being informed both by Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. This is in many ways a lifelong process. When we then violate personal, societal or biblical standards, we experience guilt. This is one of the blessings of the conscience for the believer. This “thermostat” keeps us from doing what might prove injurious to ourselves and to others and ultimately to our relationship with God. When we willfully sin, conscience in conjunction with the Holy Spirit causes us to experience guilt. We are then prompted to confess our sins (1 John 1:9) and experience the love and forgiveness of God. This is now the ongoing process of how we deal with guilt in our lives—via confession (i.e., agreeing with God about our sin).
2. For you as a believer, conscience may accuse you of something [or you may have convictions about something] when in actuality the action you are contemplating may either be morally neutral or even right. This is essentially what Paul is discussing in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14. Here the believer’s conscience is “**weak**,” (i.e., his/her convictions are not in conformity with the truth—the correct theological “knowledge” about idolatry and food). So, at that point the mature believer must decide to either press his/her freedom or,

because of the undeveloped conscience of the weaker brother/sister, choose not to exercise that freedom. This “weaker” believer then must be open to the liberating teaching of the Holy Spirit who uses God’s Word to teach the truth about all things, including how to look at cultural standards, traditions and practices.

3. For the believer, there is such a thing as a “**seared conscience**” (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:2). If conscience is disobeyed repeatedly or if a believer refuses to develop the deep-seated convictions about issues of life and the maturing process is then halted, one’s sensitivity to moral issues soon becomes dulled. If this continues, then the result is a seared conscience: Convictions about a particular issue are developed that the believer knows are wrong **or** those convictions have not been fully informed by God’s Word. In this case, conscience is then “seared.” This is what I believe occurs with some genuine believers when it comes to homosexuality, for example. Convictions are developed that to practice homosexuality is not wrong ethically. Continued sin then desensitizes the conscience and the conscience has been seared—either by conscious disobedience to the clarity of God’s Word, or by convictions developed without the clear teaching of God’s Word. Moreover, Scripture teaches that unconfessed sin and ongoing unbelief can also lead to a desensitized conscience (see Hebrews 3:12-13). As Postmodernism is intersecting with evangelical Christianity, this is occurring with greater frequency.
4. Conscience can also “**malfunction**” in the sense that it becomes overly sensitive or hypersensitive. Here the conscience “over-functions,” condemning and accusing the Christian for small errors, forgiven actions and normal human failures. This constant self-criticism and self-reproach rob the Christian of joy and any sense of progress in growth toward Christ-likeness. The result is often a performance-based Christianity that focuses on actions, not God’s grace, as the basis for acceptance. Performance-based Christianity is what produces legalism and so much defeat in the Christian life. [“If I am not performing the way I think I should, the way my pastor thinks I should, or the way my friends think I should” can produce the over-sensitive conscience, and thereby false guilt.] False guilt is one of the lethal results of performance-based spirituality.

The goal of the Christian believer, then, is to develop a **mature conscience**. The Holy Spirit teaches the believer most clearly what is right and wrong from the objective Word of God. That Word informs us of the truth; the Spirit then enables us to “welcome, embrace” that truth (see 1 Corinthians 2:6-16), so that it transforms us from the inside out; and then we begin to develop those deep-seated convictions in the nonmoral areas of life that can guide and direct us. The Bible teaches that it is wrong to go against “conscience” but it also clearly teaches that we must be careful to have our conscience informed by God’s Word.

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### ***The Church and Love for Animals: Is It Biblical?***

Christine Gutleben, the Humane Society’s first director of faith outreach, has stated that “Animal ministries are in every state, and they do everything, including pet food in traditional food drives, to donating to local shelters, designating church grounds as animal sanctuaries, hosting adoption

events, printing animals for adoption in church bulletins.” She also reveals that many churches include pets in their antipoverty work: “They will host an event for the surrounding community, and provide medical and dental care for people, but also have a veterinarian who will provide free vaccines on church grounds.” In St. Louis, there is a pet ministry, which is a part of Grace Church, a large non-denominational Protestant congregation, call Noah’s Ark. It runs a pet-food drive, supports no-kill rescue of animals, brings pets to visit the sick and infirm and hosts a grief group for those who have lost a pet. The Church of the King in New Orleans holds monthly events for pets, and when they do, hundreds of people line up to get vaccines. Indeed, Laura Hobgood-Oster, of Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and the author of *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the History of the Christian Tradition*, argues that, “Animals have always been central to Christianity, as well as all the world’s major religions.” Further, many Roman Catholics are taught that St. Francis of Assisi communed with the birds and spoke with a wolf; thus, on his feast day, 4 October, many churches host events in which animals are blessed by a priests or other church officials.

What are we to think about all of this? As Christians, how are we to treat the physical world, including animals? What is the value of non-human life? How much care do we as Christians need to take in relation to nature? How does God look at non-human creation? This was especially brought home to me several years ago when my daughter, then about age six, was outside systematically killing ants on the sidewalk in front of our home. I asked her what she was doing. She responded, “Daddy, mommy does not like ants, so I am killing them.” Sensing that this was a teachable moment, I asked her, “Joanna, do you think God is pleased with killing ants like this? Are they in mommy’s cupboards? Are they hurting us here on the walk?” She did not know how to respond at first. Our subsequent talk focused on treating God’s creatures with respect because God holds us accountable for managing His creation well. I doubt she understood all we discussed but it began a process of teaching her about stewardship of God’s creation, the subject of the rest of this *Perspective*.

- **Inadequate Views on Human Responsibility toward Creation:**

Theology is the major issue in the current debate about how to view the physical environment. There are at least three inadequate theological perspectives in the culture today.

1. First is the Christian view, often associated with St. Francis of Assisi, that all aspects of God’s physical creation are equal, that there is no difference between the birds and humans. Legends about Francis have him preaching to the birds, and giving counsel to a wolf threatening a small town in Italy. But the particulars of God’s creation are not equal. Genesis 1 and 2 make it clear that humans are the crown of God’s creation. Humans are the only ones who bear His image. Jesus did not die for birds; He died for human beings.
2. Second is pantheism, the view that all reality is one; All is God and God is all. The reason we do not want to cut down California Redwoods is because they are god. The reason we save the whales is because they are god. Such is the pantheistic position reflected in the views of Shirley MacLaine, the Gaia hypothesis and the entire New Age worldview. But the Bible will have none of this. The Bible does teach the presence of God everywhere (e.g., Psalm 139) but rejects that all is God. He created all things and is

above and beyond His physical creation. Therefore, pantheism is simply an unacceptable position.

3. Third is a commitment to a platonic dichotomy, i.e., that the spiritual world is all that is important; the material world has no value to God or to us as His disciples. The world is passing away so it does not matter whether we treat it well or abuse it. The Bible will have none of this either. Scripture details the goodness of God's creation (e.g., Genesis 1 and 2; 1 Timothy 4:4). It is simply wrong to reject God's physical creation as evil. Furthermore, the physical body is of such importance to God that He will one day resurrect it. Nothing speaks more powerfully about its goodness than that.

- **Biblical Principles for a Proper View of Animal Life:**

1. A proper biblical view of the physical creation begins with a proper view of God. The challenge is to keep in balance God's transcendence and His immanence. God's transcendence focuses on his radical separateness from creation; He is both above and beyond His physical world. God's immanence focuses on His presence in His physical world. To stress His immanence at the expense of His transcendence is to land in pantheism where everything is god. To stress His transcendence at the expense of his immanence is to see the physical world as insignificant and a tool for exploitation. Neither is satisfactory nor God-honoring. There needs to be a balance between both God's transcendence and His immanence, between His intimate involvement in all aspects of his physical creation (see Psalm 139) and His radical distinction from creation. Where it is finite, limited, dependent; He is infinite, unlimited and self-sufficient (Sider, 28).
2. Second is a proper view of humans. Human beings are both interdependent with the rest of creation and unique within it, because we alone bear His image and have stewardship over the Earth. Christians frequently forget our interdependence with the rest of God's world. Our daily existence depends on water, sun and air. There is indeed a global ecosystem. It matters how we treat the water, the trees and the other animals. If they are harmed so are we. There is this vital, interdependent relationship that comes from the creative hand of God.

But the Bible also declares human uniqueness—humans are image-bearers of God. No other physical part of God's world, including animals, can claim this. Humans also have dominion status. God declares in Genesis 1:26-30 that humans have the responsibility to rule (have dominion) over the nonhuman creation. Tragically, this dominion has frequently turned to exploitation. Humans are to serve and watch lovingly, almost worshipfully, over God's creation. We are God's stewards over His creation. He has the sovereignty; we have the dominion. Francis Schaeffer argues that humans have two relationships—one upward and one downward. The upward relationship accentuates the personal relationship humans might have with God, a relationship not enjoyed by the rest of the created order. The downward relationship accentuates the "creaturely" relationship that humans share with the rest of the created order (see Genesis 2:7 and Job 34:14,15). As in most issues, the struggle is to keep the two in balance. We tend to so highlight the upward relationship to the virtual exclusion of the downward. This leads to horrific neglect or ruthless exploitation of the physical world. Or we tend to highlight the

downward to the virtual exclusion of the upward. This is the gross error of the evolutionary hypothesis, which sees humans as the product of the impersonal force of natural selection, not of God's purposeful design.

3. Third, the non-human creation is of great significance to God. He created the physical world as a deliberate act. God also takes pleasure in His physical world. This is clear from the creation ordinance in Genesis 1 and 2 and from 1 Timothy 4:4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude." See also Psalm 104:31 where we see God rejoicing in His works. The point is that if the physical world is of importance to God, then it must be to us—His creatures—as well (see also Job 39:1-2, Colossians 1:16 and Psalms 19:1-4).

It is likewise imperative that we note that God has a covenant, not only with humans but also with nonhuman creation. After the flood, God made a covenant with the physical creation: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Genesis 9:9-10). The physical world has dignity, worth and value quite apart from its service to humanity. Incredibly, God's plan for redemption has a cosmic quality to it. The biblical hope that the whole created order, including the material world of bodies and rivers and trees, will be part of the kingdom confirms that the created order is good and important. Romans 8:19-23 demonstrates that at Christ's return the groaning of creation will cease, for the creation will be transformed: "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21, NIV).

See Mark Oppenheimer in the *New York Times* (15 October 2011) and James P. Eckman, *Biblical Ethics*, pp. 89-95.