

# CAN WE LET OUR CONSCIENCE BE OUR GUIDE IN RELIGION?

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Popular religious culture proclaims, “Just let your conscience be your guide.” It promotes a religion based on feelings rather than on Scripture. One passage that is given as evidence that we should let conscience be a guide in religion is Romans 14.

Romans 14:5 says, “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.” We read further, “Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves” (Romans 14:22). Does this mean that “anything goes” as long as my conscience doesn’t bother me after I do it? Are we to determine truth within a personal context—that is, “what is truth to me may not be truth to you?” (If such were the case, our “truths” may contradict each other!) Is every man a law unto himself, doing whatever is “right in his own eyes”? (Judges 21:25). No.

**“Let your conscience be your guide” is wrong because it is unbiblical.**

God is not the “author of confusion.” Confusion comes from the other direction (1 Corinthians

14:33; James 3:15–16). In religion, this philosophy has led to a very confusing cacophony of voices. Everybody’s “inner voice” says something different and may contradict what the Spirit supposedly tells someone else. In politics, following one’s conscience allows for a change of conviction if it guarantees winning a large block of voters who support abortion and gay rights. In business, it may create an atmosphere that permits CEOs to skim millions off the top, as long as they work long hours and report corporate profits.

In morals, this conscience-be-your-guide rule has been around a long time. Ernest Hemingway said, “So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after.”<sup>1</sup> It allows “consenting adults” their premarital or extramarital dalliances. It allows for strange “bedfellows” (religion and sin) in other ways, too. For example, Tai Collins, a former Miss Virginia who allegedly was involved in a tryst with a U.S. Senator and then posed nude for *Playboy*, was enthusiastic about a church she had joined. When asked if it would affect her nude modeling, she replied, “I don’t think so. I mean, there’s a lot of people in my church that have been in *Playboy*.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s will is the standard for truth in religion, politics, business, and morals. His will in these last days<sup>3</sup> (Hebrews 1:1–3) is revealed in the general revelation of New Testament Scripture. During the brief time when it was being revealed (the first fifty or sixty years after Christ’s resurrection), it was given directly to the apostles and other prophets who relayed it to churches (1 Corinthians 12–14). Since then, God has wanted us to use this objective standard as our daily guide. It thoroughly equips us to every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17) and gives us all we need to live godly in the present world (2 Peter 1:3; Titus 2:11–14).

**“Let your conscience be your guide” is wrong because the conscience can be undereducated.**

Since the conscience is a tool of education, it is possible to train it by standards other than the Scriptures. Solomon said, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs 16:25). Going by the edicts of our conscience is unsafe because the conscience can be wrong.

Jesus warned His followers that His enemies would “put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service” (John 16:2). Paul, for one, fulfilled this prophecy (cf. Acts 7–8). He spoke of his pre-conversion days: “Indeed, I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 26:9). According to his own confession, he was, “a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man” (1 Timothy 1:13). All that time, he kept a good conscience (Acts 23:1; 24:16). If Paul had continued to kill Christians, could he still have gone to heaven? No, although he was sincerely wrong, he was still wrong.

The Pharisees taught people that they did not have to care for aging parents if they gave the money earmarked for it at the temple. They made their “gift to God” an excuse for neglecting parents (Matthew 15:5–6). Many, doubtless, convinced their consciences that this was right since their rabbis told them to do it, but Jesus condemned them for it. Sincerely wrong was still wrong.

Paul said of the Jews,

They have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God (Romans 10:2–3).

Their consciences did not bother them, but they rejected Jesus Christ as Savior. Sincerely wrong was still wrong.

A conscience cannot distinguish between truth and error; it can only reflect what it has been told. It is a thermostat—it kicks in at a preset level. It is like a computer—it only beeps a warning at the lines the programmer has installed.

**“Let your conscience be your guide” is wrong because the conscience can be damaged.**

The conscience, which triggers guilt from within, is a fragile thing. Some have a defiled<sup>4</sup> conscience (Titus 1:15); others have a seared<sup>5</sup> conscience (1 Timothy 4:1–4). Perhaps some do not any longer even have a working conscience. Psychologists hypothesize that some people no longer have a conscience. Serial killers show no remorse. Young people can kill classmates with seemingly no compunction.

There is no evidence that Adolph Hitler experienced any serious feelings of guilt during his life, despite the torment he inflicted upon fifty million people. Joseph Stalin is said to have murdered between twenty and thirty million people during his long dictatorship, yet his conscience apparently remained unprovoked right up to the end. He callously said, “One death is a tragedy. A thousand is just a statistic.”

It is not just criminals who can sear their consciences. Many Christians unconsciously burn out their consciences to a particular sin. Day after day, night after night, they watch TV sitcoms, soap operas, and suggestive movies and seem unaware that as they laugh along with those who flaunt immorality and make fun of morality, they are burning tiny holes in their consciences. Some constantly read novels and magazines that oppose their value system. Others choose friends who force either confrontation or compromise (1 Corinthians 15:33). By choosing the latter, they singe away tissue that is difficult to restore.

**“Let your conscience be your guide” is wrong because the conscience can be ignored.**

We can “deceive ourselves” (Galatians 6:3; James 1:22) and can be—are prone to be—easier on ourselves than God is: “All the ways of a man are pure in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the spirits” (Proverbs 16:2). A wise man observed, “There is a generation that is pure in its own eyes, yet is not washed from its filthiness” (Proverbs 30:12). One said, “Most of us follow our conscience as we follow a wheelbarrow. We push it in front of us in the direction we want it to go.”<sup>6</sup>

Obviously, not all consciences are safe guides to behavior. The great thing about a conscience is that it is flexible. It is possible for it to be retrained. Like a thermostat, it can be reset; like a computer, it can be reprogrammed (Hebrews 5:14).

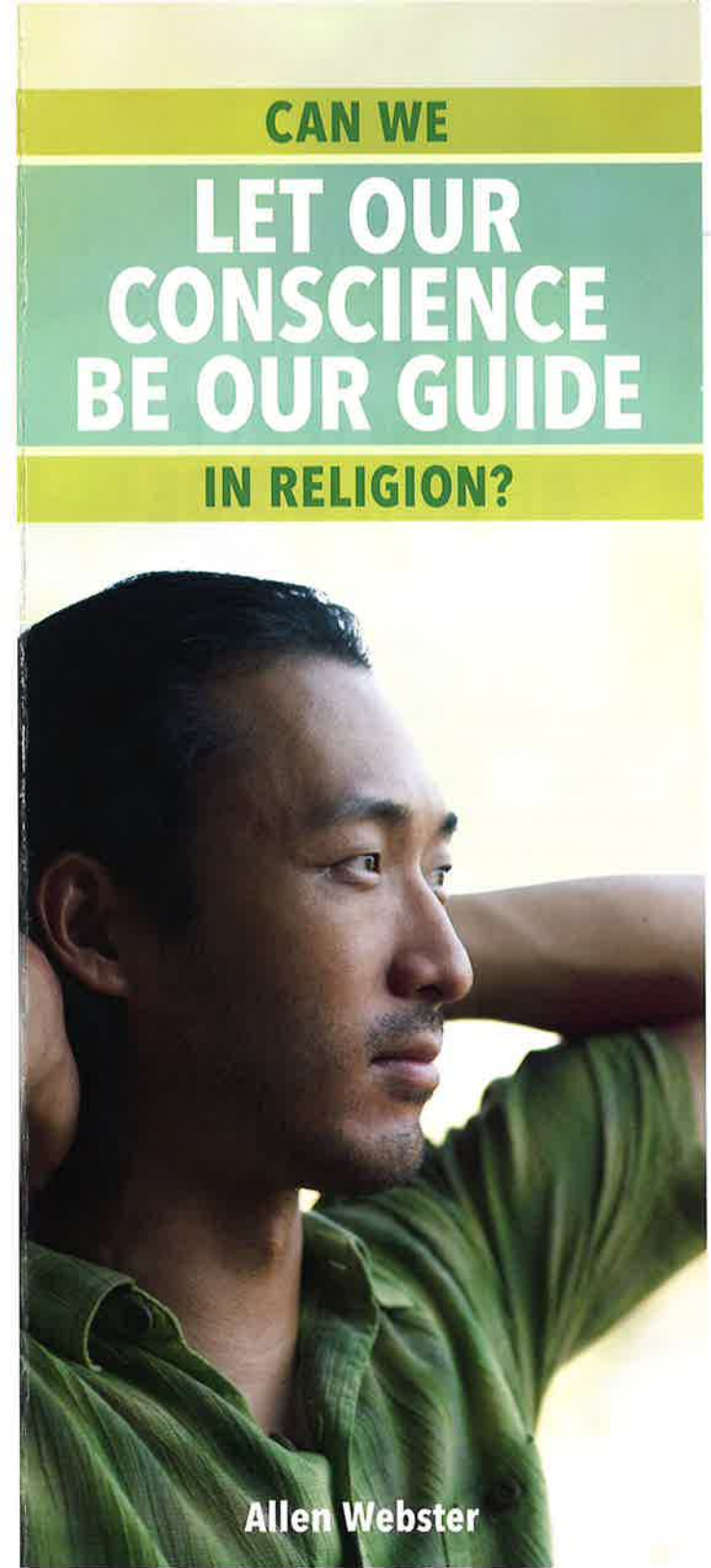
**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> *Instant Quotation Dictionary*, p. 210.
- <sup>2</sup> Colson, Charles. *The Body*. Word Publishing 1992, p. 45.
- <sup>3</sup> The Christian Dispensation.
- <sup>4</sup> *miano*, “to sully or taint, i.e. contaminate.”
- <sup>5</sup> The phrase *seared with a hot iron* can mean to be “branded.” It translates, *kauteriazō* (from the root, *kaio*, “to set on fire”), to brand (“cauterize”); by implication, “to render insensitive.” Branded animals can feel no pain in the place of branding because the nerve endings are damaged.
- <sup>6</sup> *Paul Harvey News*. Associated Press. 6-21-90.



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