



## The Corruption of Conscience

by Charles W. Colson

More than ever before in American history, indeed in Western history, we are witnessing the near-death of conscience. By virtue of being created in His image and likeness, all men have a conscience that is sensitive to God's Law. Paul writes: "For when the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14-15, NASB). But for many years this God-given internal moral compass has been rapidly faltering.

I regularly confront that brutal truth in prisons across the country. An incident in Indiana a few years ago brought it home to me dramatically. I had visited the prison several times before, but that day a young inmate responded to my proffered handshake by smacking my hand away—a first for me. In many years of visiting prisons, I had never before encountered such direct and immediate hostility from a complete stranger. For obvious reasons, prisoners are rarely cheerful, but I saw in those eyes that day a chilling hardness I had never encountered before. Since then, however, I have seen similar hardness reflected in the eyes of countless other inmates, particularly younger ones.

The assistant warden there was a Christian I had known for some years, and I asked him what was happening. "This place has greatly changed," he replied. "Ten years ago I could talk to these kids about right and wrong. Now they don't even know what I'm talking about." He went on to share that older prisoners were demanding protection from the newly arrived 19- or 20-year-olds, an ominous reversal. Historically, it has been younger guys who needed protection from the older cons.

The horrifying truth is that we have bred a

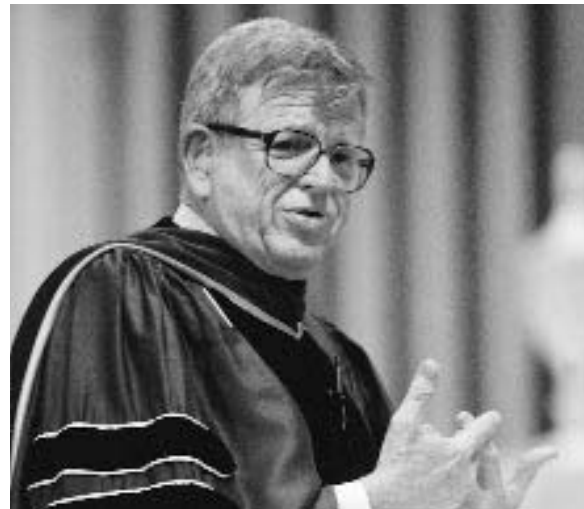
generation with unformed consciences. They are like untamed children abandoned in the wilderness, and they have unleashed an unprecedented wave of terror in our schools, our streets, and even our homes.

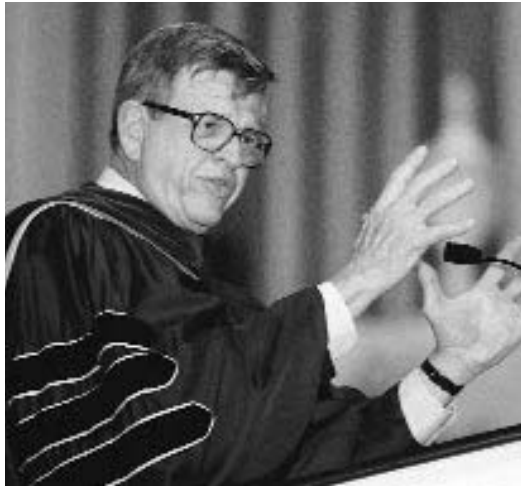
Conscience is not a matter of determining, but of acknowledging, what is good and evil. But in much of contemporary society, including most of secular academia, the very concept of conscience has been insidiously corrupted to represent its total opposite: self-will. It has changed, as it were, from a stop sign to a green light. As Princeton Professor Robert P. George puts it: "Consider how common it is for people to reason as follows: 'My conscience does not tell me that X is wrong; therefore X is not wrong for me.' Or, even more egregiously: 'My conscience does not tell me that X is wrong (or wrong for me); therefore I have a right to do X as a matter of freedom of conscience.' Every manner of evil and injustice is today rationalized, defended, and insulated from rebuke by appeal to conscience."

Traditionally, public schools have played a major role in teaching and reinforcing what have been universally accepted standards of right and wrong. But little help in that regard can be found in today's schools. The much-celebrated "values clarification" curriculum and its variations reject the very notion that such standards even exist, much less are binding on everyone. Students are merely asked to consider and discuss morally difficult problems, but are offered no objective and authoritative principles to apply to those problems. The only suggested guidelines are those of personal feelings about what seems to be right at the time or one's personal notions about "what works" or what leads to the best results, with no yardstick for defining "best." As should have

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been expected, what some children have come to “feel” is right is truly terrifying. As graphically documented in the extraordinary tapes they made before their mad rampage, Eric Harris and Dylan Kliebold dramatically “clarified” their “values”—unmitigated hate, rage, and self-obsession.

As Professor George further points out, it is an easy step from turning conscience into a reliable green light for whatever course of conduct

feels most desirable or expedient—which is quite bad enough—to the further step of claiming an actual right to engage in that conduct. And if it’s a right, such reasoning goes, why not claim it as a constitutional right?

Indeed, this new doctrine of conscience has been raised to the level of constitutional law by the Supreme Court in its dreadful 1992 abortion decision, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. In this decision the Court announced that, even though *Roe v. Wade* may have been an act of judicial overreaching, and even though there are some good arguments against abortion, abortion must nonetheless remain a constitutional right. Why? Because the Court maintained that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concepts of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.”

Going a step further, if such rights are constitutional, why not claim legal immunity even from criticism by others! So to protect a woman’s constitutional “right” to kill her unborn child, we get laws such as the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act that impose restrictions on the rights of abortion opponents even to publicly challenge that “right”—restrictions that would not be tolerated for any other cause.

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Conscience is no longer thought of as an inner moral compass, calibrated to true north. It is rather like a ouija board that points in whatever capricious direction seems desirable at the moment.

Unfortunately, even many evangelical churches have to some extent embraced the culture of subjective experience and personal feelings that such a concept of conscience reflects. God is often presented not so much as the *Bonum in se*, the Good in Himself, as merely the *Bonum mihi*, the Good for me.

In a speech titled “The Causes of Virtue,” theologian and social critic Michael Novak reminds us of one public consequence of this perverted view of conscience. He astutely observes, “This country ought to have, when it is healthy and when it is working as it was intended to work, 250 million policemen, called conscience. When there are 250 million consciences on guard, it is surprising how few police are needed on the streets.” The converse is equally true. The fewer consciences on guard, the more police required.

Our first task as Christians is to renew and revive the fundamental conscience-forming institutions of family and church. There are many obvious reasons why the survival of the family is essential to society, chief among them being its crucial role in developing reliable consciences. Whatever our calling, all of us must work to strengthen the biblical model of the family and to unapologetically defend that institution in the public square.

In addition, the Church has a crucial role to play in cultivating individual and corporate conscience. We must get past the “feel-good” model of church-building and strive to establish authentic communities of faith, in which biblically based conscience is nurtured as the “stern but wise monitor” and where spiritually strong disciples serve one another by holding each other to the objective standards of biblical righteousness.



As beneficiaries of one of the best educations available anywhere, as graduates of a school that has had long-standing leadership in the Christian world, I hope you will continually see yourselves as part of the Wheaton community, that you will care deeply about and encourage the College in its commitment to “Christ and His Kingdom,” including the derivative commitment to moral education and the cultivation of conscience. This is today one of the most crucial responsibilities of Christian schools, a responsibility it now largely carries alone in academia at large.

Because of its religious roots, the American academy historically maintained a strong commitment to moral education.

As recently as 1870, a big dust-up was caused at Yale when William Graham Sumner chose to use a book by Herbert Spencer in an upper-level sociology course. Because Spencer was a Darwinist, Yale’s President Noah Porter was alarmed that students were being taught a worldview that denied a Creator. Until the middle of the 19th century, Christian ethics were taught to Harvard undergraduates by the president himself.

Today, however, schools like Wheaton are the only institutions of higher learning that still believe in, teach, and uphold spiritual and moral absolutes. I thank God for Wheaton and schools like it where the Bible is the unequivocal basis of belief and conduct. But I would suggest that even Wheaton might ask itself periodically how carefully and consistently it makes moral education a priority in curriculum and campus life. Like society in general, Christian institutions face a vastly different challenge today than they did even a generation ago. Christian young people cannot escape being buffeted by the nihilism, degradation, and corruption of conscience that surrounds them. Many, perhaps most, come from high schools in which moral education, such as it is, has been thoroughly relativized. Because of that influence, moral education must be woven with special

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determination into every aspect of the college experience.

As I have argued in my latest book [*How Now Shall We Live?*], because it is from the Creator Himself, the biblical worldview is rationally sustainable and livable as is no other. As God’s people, we need to be firmly

grounded in that divine and comprehensive framework for understanding how the world works, for answering the questions of where we came from, why there is sin and suffering, and how the unsaved can be redeemed.

Moreover, we are both able and obligated to establish clear parameters for behavior, which is to say, rules. I know Wheaton

already does this, so I’m not preaching to this choir, but rather suggesting a challenge for all Christian colleges and other institutions. Rules per se, even the most biblical, cannot ensure sanctification, or even good behavior. But godly rules—whether to guide personal lives, family relations, or professional conduct—communicate the conviction that there are divine absolutes of right and wrong to which the Lord holds us accountable.

While living in a world that exalts the momentary and temporal, Christians must always keep in mind the eternal and permanent. As servants of the Lord in society, the Christian academy is uniquely equipped to raise up men and women passionately committed to living for God in the light of His truth in every field of endeavor, passionately committed to the development of personal character and conscience that are pleasing to Him.

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