

MAY 2017

Welcome

In this month's feature article of the *Executive Committee Newsletter (ECN)*, Dr. Frank Hasel, associate director of the Biblical Research Institute, addresses the important topic of one's personal conscience and freedom of choice from a Biblical point of view. Dr. Hasel explains that "A healthy Christian conscience is one that constantly listens to God's Word, is captive to the Word of God, and seeks to follow God's will in His written Word."

In this month's mission feature, you will read about a Korean pastor who received a wrong text message, but didn't press delete. Through a relationship the pastor established with the person who had mistakenly sent the text, that person eventually became a baptized Seventh-day Adventist!

We also have a news item coming from the Netherlands Union, as well as news you can use in the "Did You Know?" sidebar.

Once again, we are thankful for your commitment and service to the world church and hope that you find this newsletter to be a blessing. Please feel free to share it with your colleagues, church members, and others whom you believe would appreciate receiving it.

This issue, as well as all previous issues of the *ECN* are available to read and share on the GC Executive Committee website at <https://executivecommittee.adventist.org/newsletter/>.

If you have comments, suggestions, or prayer requests, you are welcome to send them to the *Executive Committee Newsletter* at ECN@gc.adventist.org.

May God bless you as you serve Him.

—ARTUR A. STELE,
GENERAL VICE
PRESIDENT
*Seventh-day
Adventist Church*



MY CONSCIENCE AND THE DECISIONS OF THE CHURCH

— PART 1 —

BY FRANK M. HASEL, PH.D., *Associate Director, Biblical Research Institute*

"Here I stand, I can do no other", were the famous words of Martin Luther, when he appeared before the Emperor to defend his faith. "I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience."

We rightly praise Martin Luther as a hero of the Protestant reformation and applaud him for his courage and faith

when he stood up against defying odds and was willing to follow his conscience rather than the traditions of the established church.

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COURAGE
AND FAITH

Here I stand, I can
do no other.

As staunch believers in religious liberty, Seventh-day Adventists have affirmed the freedom of conscience in matters of faith

and religion and have traditionally supported a clear separation of church and state. The conscience is also closely in-

1. We quote these famous words from Ellen Gould White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 160. The saying "I can do no other, here I stand" actually is documented only in a late printing. But respected church historian Roland H. Bainton has pointed out that "the words, though not recorded on the spot, may nevertheless be genuine, because the listeners at the moment may have been too moved to write" Roland H. Bainton in *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950, p. 185.

terwoven with our ability to freely choose, which is one of the highest human values and something that even God respects.

BEDROCK OF MORAL INTEGRITY

Conscience and freedom of choice allow human beings to have self-integrity. Thus, conscience is at the heart of our commitment to honesty, following the truth, compassion toward those who suffer unjustly, and taking responsibility to prevent harm. A conscience that is rooted in obedience to biblical truth is the bedrock of moral integrity for any person.²

While this has special ramifications for church workers such as administrators, pastors, teachers, and theologians, we have to remember that decisions made in the Seventh-day Adventist Church are decided not just by employed church leaders but also by the respective constituency, which is largely comprised of lay members who also have the right to follow their conscience.

This is particularly important since the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a believers-church—Adventists are not born and baptized into the church as infants. They join the church voluntarily and freely, making a conscientious decision in affirming that they believe what the Seventh-day Adventist Church teaches is biblically true.³ And just as we are free to join the Seventh-day Adventist Church we are free to leave it if we do not identify with it anymore. This positively distinguishes the Seventh-day Adventist Church from any sect or cult.

WHAT DO WE DO?

In the Bible, diversity among believers is presupposed. However, we all should aim at and strive for unity, which is not platitudinous uniformity. But what do we do when the beliefs we hold dear as a church and our religious conscience differ? What shall we do when our personal conscience and

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church decisions are at odds or might even be in sharp conflict?

This sensitive issue is sharpened even more when we consider the words of Ellen G. White who unequivocally stated that “God has invested His church with special authority and power which no one can be justified in disregarding and despising, for in so doing he despises the voice of God.”⁴

While Ellen White was also very clear that “no man’s judgment should be surrendered to the judgment of any one man,” she emphasized that “when the judgment of the General Conference,⁵ which is the highest authority that God has upon the earth, is exercised, private independence and private judgment must not be maintained, but be surrendered.”⁶

BEYOND THE PERSONAL SPHERE

But how shall we relate to the church—and particularly to decisions taken at annual councils or when the world church gathers at a General Conference Session—when the church makes decisions that might be in conflict with one’s personal conscientious opinion of the same issue? And even more than that: what should I do if I am a duly



elected leader of the church?

Here the challenge goes far beyond the personal sphere and has ramifications for a wider constituency for which I carry responsibility as a leader because I am expected to represent the church I love even though I might not feel comfortable with every decision that the church has taken.

BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

Let us first briefly look at the biblical understanding of conscience. While the conscience often is a power that helps us in dealing with questions of right and wrong and frequently is a tool that God uses to convict us and to speak to us,⁷ the Bible indicates that our conscience is not the final ethical authority for human conduct.

In the New Testament⁸ the conscience evaluates one’s own behavior or that of other people (cf. 2 Cor. 4:2; 5:11) according to pre-established and recognized norms. It passes judgment (approval or disapproval) upon one’s acts. But as such, it is not an indepen-

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2. This is also true if a person does not know the Bible (yet) but is moved by the Spirit to follow moral principles unknowingly, that are based on Scripture.

3. In mission and evangelism, we expect people to make a decision, following their conscience, and to turn away from their former religions, pseudo-religions or other Christian denominations when they start implementing biblical truth in their lives.

4. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 417.

5. Here Ellen G. White seems to have in mind the GC in session and not just GC administration.

6. Ellen G. White, *Ibid.*, p. 492. Ellen G. White at some point also had some critical remarks about the General Conference that she addressed to some individuals in leadership positions at the General

Conference. She challenged their one-sided decisions and kingly power. But she never questioned the authority of decisions of a General Conference in Session, where representatives from the whole world meet and decide. On this important question see the balanced article by George E. Rice, “The Church: Voice of God?” *Ministry* (December 1987), available online at <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1987/12/the-church-voice-of-god> and more recently the detailed study written by GC Secretariat, “A Study of Church Governance and Unity”, 2016, esp. pp. 20-29.

7. Cf. Edwin Cook, “Conscience’ in the New Testament.” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15/2 (2004): 142–158.

8. In the Old Testament the term conscience hardly ever appears. In the New Testament the term conscience (*syneidesis*) occurs some 30 times, especially in Pauline writings.

dent norm that decides what is right and what is wrong in and of itself but follows other norms outside itself.⁹

Our conscience, therefore, needs to be sharpened and shaped by God's standard. Otherwise my own opinion and conscience may become distorted and is no sure guide in what is right and what is wrong. This is clearly perceived by Ellen White who wrote: "It is not enough that man follows the dictates of conscience. The

mind must be enlightened as to what is God's will, and then an enlightened conscience will be an enlightened, intelligent will."¹⁰

The widespread notion that one is responsible to one's conscience alone (*quasi sola conscientia*)—independent of God's will and his Word is problematic.¹¹ In a sense the English word conscience, which is derived from the Latin *con-scientia*, already points to the fact that the knowledge that conscience possesses is shared knowledge, a joint knowledge, a knowledge (*scientia*) that is held in common with (*con-*) (an)other. That other, biblically speaking, should be God. A healthy Christian conscience is one that constantly listens to God's Word, is captive to the Word of God, and seeks to follow God's will in his written Word. This was also the case with Martin Luther as can be seen in his complete statement: "Unless therefore I am convinced by the *testimony of Scripture* or by the clearest reasoning, unless *I am persuaded by means of the passages I have quoted*, and unless they thus render *my conscience bound by*



A conscience that is rooted in obedience to biblical truth is the bedrock of moral integrity for any person.

*the word of God, I cannot and I will not retract, for it is unsafe for a Christian to speak against his conscience."*¹²

Because Luther's conscience was bound to the Word of God he could not and would not recant. Thus the first and foremost binding authority for Luther was not his conscience but the Holy Scriptures to which his conscience responded.

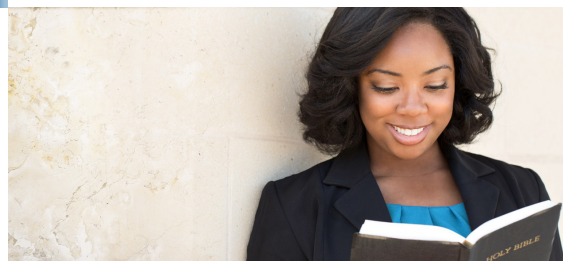
HUMAN CONSCIENCE NOT INFALLIBLE

This is important because our human conscience is not infallible. The Bible indicates that our conscience can become oversensitive, as was the case with those believers in Corinth and Rome who had moral scruples against the eating of food offered to idols.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that the apostle Paul did not exhort the weak brothers in Corinth and in Rome to act against their conscience (cf. 1 Cor. 8 and Rom. 14:20-23). On the contrary, the strong are called to watch out that they do not become an obstacle to the weak. Paul does not encourage us to go against even an overscrupulous conscience.

One commentator has aptly pointed out that "violation of the dictates of the

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DID YOU KNOW?

- At its meeting on May 3, the North Pacific Union Conference (NAD) executive committee adopted three general strategic priorities: 1) Re-engagement and relationship-building with young adults in every local church and community; 2) An emphasis on becoming one in Christ — finding unity centered in Him; and 3) Total Member Involvement (TMI).
- Following the TMI model, approximately 3,800 evangelistic programs were presented simultaneously across the country of Cameroon (WAD) from March 5 to April 1, 2017. The programs were presented at 511 public sites and in approximately 3,300 small groups.
- At the end of the meetings in Cameroon, 5,042 people were baptized, nearly the same number who were baptized during all of 2016.
- The Children's Ministries department in the Hungarian Union (TED) hosted a very successful "Super Sabbath" where children "traveled" back 500 years to the time of Martin Luther. Through engaging activities, they learned the importance of Bible reading. For more visit <http://bit.ly/2r2dAs7>
- During a severe flood in Jamaica (IAD) on Sabbath, April 22, the Palmetto Gardens Adventist church in Clarendon was partially submerged under water and members had to take refuge in neighboring houses. One member saved a neighbor and the neighbor's son from drowning. Read more at <http://bit.ly/Jamaicaflood>
- The Japan Union Conference (NSD) is aiming to have 5,000 baptisms and a membership of 20,000 people by the year 2020. To help accomplish this goal, in May 2018, the Japan Union will conduct the "All Japan 2018 Maranatha" project with more than 100 simultaneous evangelistic series across the country.
- Leading up to this event, Hope Channel Japan is creating short videos to share through social media, aiming to enroll people in Bible correspondence courses. From March 13-31, 2017, the team created more than 100 short evangelistic films.

9. Cf. Hans Joachim Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (1983), and idem., "Gewissen" in *Das große Bibellexikon*, eds. Helmut Burkhardt, Fritz Grünzweig, Fritz Laubach and Gerhard Maier (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1987), 1:462).

10. Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* [Nos. 1236–1300, 1987]. Vol. 17, 1993, 168. Cf. also her statement that "the law of duty [to God] is supreme. It claims authority over reason and conscience, over talents and possessions" (Ellen G. White, *The Upward Look*, Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1982), 25.

11. Cf. the critical interaction with this one-sided view in Siegfried Kettling, *Das Gewissen: Erfahrungen, Deutungen, biblisch-reformatiorische Orientierung* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus Verlag, 1985), 106–111.

12. Ellen Gould White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan*, vol. 5, Conflict of the Ages Series (Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911), 160, emphasis supplied.

MAJOR CHANGES IN THE NETHERLANDS UNION



Newly elected Netherlands Union officers include (from left to right): Treasurer Istrahel Schorea, President Rob de Radd, and Secretary Enrico Karg

Photo: Madelon Comvalius

During its constituency meeting, held May 4-7, 2017, delegates of the Netherlands Union Conference voted major changes for their territory. Some 180 delegates attended the four-day meeting.

Rob de Radd, 61, was voted in as the new union president, and Enrico Karg, 35, became union secretary. Istrahel Schorea, 43, was re-elected as union treasurer.

Constituents also voted a new Constitution and Bylaws, and appointed a newly formed Constitution and Bylaws Committee. Under the new Constitution and Bylaws, the executive committee was enlarged from 15 to 17 members, and now requires 50 percent, plus 1 to be laypersons. Previously, a maximum of 40 percent lay members were allowed to serve on the committee.

In addition, delegates voted to replace all department heads and the six lay members who were previously serving on the Executive Committee.

"It is a privilege to serve the Church, but it is an enormous responsibility as well," said Pastor De Raad, the newly elected union president. "It is important that, in the coming years, we seek connection and encourage and strengthen each other in faith."

Pastor De Raad is an experienced leader, having served the Church in various pastoral and leadership positions during the past thirty years.

Secretary Enrico Karg began working for the church as a pastor in 2011. He ad-

mits that being elected as union secretary is a special privilege and responsibility and is heartened that so many delegates supported his nomination.

"I will do my utmost to continue the work of my predecessors," he said, "and I hope many people will support me in prayer."

Istrahel Schorea started his work as Treasurer in 2012. He expressed his gratitude at the trust the delegates expressed by re-electing him for this position.

"I am also grateful to my colleagues of the Executive Board these past years," he said. "I have faith that this new Board will continue the path we have started on, to achieve financial health for our church."

Outgoing president Wim Altink and union secretary Bert Nab, expressed their gratitude to their colleagues and to the delegates. Pastor Altink has served the union as president for the past ten years and gave a speech during the constituency meeting on May 5 where he thanked members for their support and his colleagues of the Executive Board and Committee for their time and hard work.

— Gina Wahlen, Editor & Project Manager, GC, with Nelske Verbaas, from the Netherlands Union

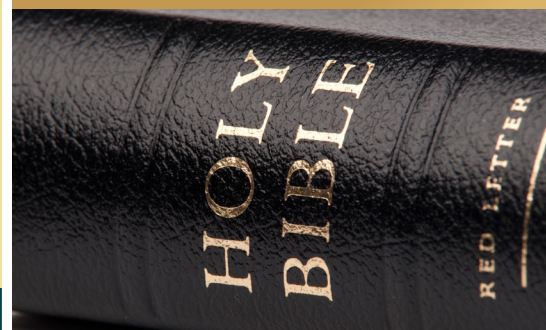
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conscience, even when the conscience does not conform perfectly with God's will, is sinful."¹³ That means that from a biblical perspective no one should be forced to go against his or her conscience. But there is more that needs to be taken into consideration. The Bible also indicates that sin can erode the conscience so that our conscience can become distorted¹⁴ and even perverted.¹⁵

To be continued.

13. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 863–864. Since Paul is strongly opposed to heresy but lenient in other cases this may indicate that there are matters of faith that are unnegotiable, whereas there are others aspects of faith that may be dealt with some kind of latitude and tolerance.
14. In 1 Timothy 4:2 (cf. Titus 1:15), Paul speaks of false teachers "whose consciences are seared." A seared conscience is nearly destroyed and no longer a reliable moral guide. When people refuse again and again to follow God, and indulge in worse and worse sin, they may reach a point at which they have almost no consciousness of the difference between good and evil. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 363.
15. This is drastically illustrated in certain Nazi doctors who performed horrific experiments on human beings and even killed people whom they considered unworthy of life, yet claimed to have acted in good conscience. See Edward Zukowski, "The Good Conscience of Nazi Doctors" *Annual Society of Christian Ethics* 14 (1994): 53–82.

EDITOR'S NOTE: In part 2 of this article (to be published in the June 2017 ECN), the author looks at the situation of what to do when one's conscience conflicts with other values.



WRONG TEXT MESSAGE? DON'T PRESS DELETE



Byongju Lee, 51, is the Sabbath School and Personal Ministries director for the Korean Union Conference. He also is director/speaker of "Chun Su Dap," a daily devotional podcast that is ranked the second-most popular religious podcast in South Korea.

Byongju Lee looked with puzzlement at the text message on his cell phone. The words formed a poem in Korean, and he didn't recognize the sender's phone number.

Many people might have deleted the message as a wrong number, but not Byongju. He texted back, "Who is this?"

Then his cell phone rang.

"Who is this?" a woman's voice asked.

"You texted me first," Byongju replied.

It turned out that the woman had wanted to text the poem to a friend but misdialed the phone number by a single digit.

Many people might have hung up at that point, but not Byongju. He asked one more question, "Are you a poet?"

"No, I'm an elementary school teacher," the woman said. "I write poems as a hobby." "Oh really?" Byongju said. He thought he recognized her accent and asked one more question. "Do you live in Busan?" he said, referring to South Korea's second-largest city.

"No, I live in Jinju," the woman said.

"I actually graduated from high school in Jinju," Byongju said. "It's very interesting that you live there."

The woman asked which high school he had attended, and they learned that she had studied at a high school just up the street from his.

The two reminisced about their high school days for a few minutes.

Then the woman asked, "What do you do?"

"I'm a church pastor," Byongju said.

"Oh really? Which denomination?" she

asked.

The question made Byongju think that the woman wasn't a Buddhist, the second-largest faith group in South Korea, comprising 15 percent of the population. "Christians don't ask a monk which temple he works at, so the woman must be a Christian," he thought. Christians account for 27 percent of the population of 51 million.

"I'm a Seventh-day Adventist pastor," Byongju said.

"I see," the woman said. "Do you know Noah's Ark?"

Byongju was surprised. Noah's Ark is an offshoot of the Adventist Church in South Korea.

The woman explained that she had worshipped briefly with a Noah's Ark group while studying at a university. She had left the group convinced of one thing — that the biblical Sabbath is not on Sunday. Now 20 years later she had sent the wrong text message to an Adventist pastor.

That evening, Byongju sent the woman a follow-up text message. "It was great to meet you today!" he wrote.

A year later, the woman was baptized into the Adventist Church.

Evangelism is easy, Byongju said.

"If I had ignored the text message, maybe she wouldn't have become a church member," he said. "But I tried to form a relationship by asking just one more question."

— ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission
www.adventistmission.org

A FURTHER WORD ABOUT AUTHORIZED MEETINGS

In the April issue of the *Executive Committee Newsletter*, we addressed the topic of Authorized Meetings. Since that time, some further questions have been raised, so we hope the following information will be helpful:

- As a Church we have always worked cooperatively through the General Conference when calling meetings involving entities from more than one division. The purpose is to harmonize our work around the world.
- The GC Authorized Meetings cover all meetings involving more than one division. If a meeting is not voted as an authorized meeting, then those wishing to attend from other divisions are required to have service requests voted by the host division.
- Those organizing meetings that involve entities from more than one division follow the process of working through the General Conference to be voted as an Authorized Meeting.
- When unions have meetings with other unions within their division, they work with their division for authorization.
- Divisions, unions, or local conferences only have jurisdiction within their own territory and are not responsible for calling meetings of other organizations outside their territory.

—CLAUDE RICHLI, Associate Secretary, GC Secretariat