

## Follow Your Conscience, But ...

By Susan Vogt



As children we were taught to obey our parents. That is a good rule for children. As adults, however, we are bound to follow our conscience. Does this mean that we can do whatever *feels* right? Check your conscience quotient.

### For

Adult / Couple

### Season

Fall

### Needed

A discerning mind and heart; a Bible and/or internet access for searches can be helpful.

### Prepare in Advance

Start to consider if there are any moral issues facing you that you are not sure of or that others disagree with you about.

### Activity Plan

1. As always, start all important times with prayer: Begin today with a personal prayer such as:

*Dear God, I seek what is right. I seek to do your will. May your Spirit guide me in all important decisions. Amen.*

2. Follow this with an incentive from Scripture, Acts 23:1:

“While Paul was looking intently at the council he said, ‘Brothers, up to this day I have lived my life with a clear conscience before God.’”

3. Consider this background:

How do I know what is the right thing to do?

- Yes we should pay heed to the Bible, but sometimes the Bible contradicts itself (see the order of creation in Genesis 1 vs. the order in Genesis 2). Sometimes Jesus contradicts the Old Testament (see Matthew 5:27-37 about divorce). Sometimes these apparent contradictions can be explained by different translations or authors, but it does cause one to pause and think. That’s good.
- Yes, we should listen to our religious leaders, but sometimes they disagree with each other. (One Church or pastor says that drinking alcohol, divorce, abortion, homosexuality, birth control etc. is

wrong, while another says that some of these issues may not be wrong or may have extenuating circumstances.)

What should one do, therefore, if my conscience appears to conflict with these authorities? Our Christian faith and human common sense teach us that one's conscience is the ultimate arbiter of moral actions. It is normally presumed that the Bible, Church teaching, and conscience are in sync. But what if they are not? Can I trust my conscience? Can I trust that God is guiding my conscience?

Theologians and spiritual guides confirm that although normally it is incumbent upon Christians to follow the teachings of their Church, still Churches are made up of human beings who are not God and thus they are fallible. When a teaching does not make sense to me, and perhaps even contradicts the official teaching of one's Church, one is bound to the higher law of "following one's conscience." This is called "primacy of conscience." Churches teach that one must follow one's conscience *even* if it conflicts with official Church teaching. BUT, it must be a well formed conscience. See #4 below.

Following one's conscience is related to what is called the *sensus fidelium* which means "sense of the faithful." *Sensus fidelium* refers to the instinct (or conscience) that arises when a fair number of believers feel led by the Spirit to a faith decision that may differ from official Church teaching. It is not to be taken quickly or lightly, but only after prayerful discernment. So what is a faithful believer to do when faced with thorny or complex moral decisions?

4. Decide what moral decision you want to think through and come to a conscience decision about. Apply the following method.

First consider some traps to a well-formed conscience:

- Rationalization – am I just talking myself into doing what feels good, or what I really wanted to do all along anyway?
- Scrupulosity – am I following the letter of the law at the expense of its spirit?
- Going along with the crowd – just because all my friends are doing it, doesn't make something right.

Next, consider these four steps to a well-formed conscience. An easy way to remember the steps is the acronym STOP. Stop and think:

- **Study** – know the facts. Study what your Church teaches, not just what popular summaries, magazines, or the internet say. Go to credible sources.
- **Together** – if your moral dilemma impacts other people (especially your spouse) consult with those affected. Make sure that your decision is mutually acceptable to those who must live with the consequences.
- **Others** – consult other people who you know to be wise, especially those who have faced a similar circumstance. This is where the *sensus fidelium* comes in. It is especially important to consult people who you expect might disagree with you so you can look at all sides of the problem.
- **Pray** – pray for guidance and an honest heart. We might fool ourselves or the world, but we can't fool God. Prayer before God who knows our inmost being helps us strip away self-serving rationalizations and biases.

5. Ponder your decision and of course, pray. Perhaps these guidelines don't neatly fit your particular moral dilemma. Consulting wise people, prayer, and being honest with God can be done in many different ways. Trust that God will give you peace in your decision. If you don't have peace, it may be a sign that God is prompting you to search further.

