

**Matters of Conscience:
Exegetical and Hermeneutical Observations on
the Use of Συνείδησις in the Greek New Testament
and Some Ministry Implications**

Bible Faculty Summit

August 1, 2018

Stephen J. Hankins, PhD

Seminary and Graduate School of Religion

Bob Jones University

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	ii
The Importance of the Study of Conscience	5
The Growing Absence of Conscience in American Culture	5
A Lack of Clarity about Conscience in the Church	6
The Warfare in the Heart of the Christian about Conscience Daily	9
The Value of Examining Συνείδησις Now	11
What the Lexicons Say	16
The Theological Significance of the Term	16
Some Value, with Deficiency	17
Others Following the Path of “Some Value, with Deficiency”	18
One Hits the Mark	20
Fuller Explanations	23
A Summary of Meaning	25
The Functions of Συνείδησις	27
The Witness Within	27
Moral Guidance for All Men	28
Accurate Judgment	31
Self-judgment Concerning Quality of Ministry	32
Judgment by Others Concerning Quality of Ministry	34

Protection Against Sin	35
Protection from Rebellion Against Civil Authority	37
Protection Against Failure While Suffering for Christ	38
Potential Protection Against Future Sin	38
Communication from the Holy Spirit	39
The Sine Qua Non Text	39
The Pervasive Effect of the Spirit's Indwelling	42
The Spirit's Authority through Conscience in the Individual Believer	44
The Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man	49
The Existence of Conscience and Its Function in Daily Life	49
The Role of Conscience in Bringing the Unregenerate Man to Repentance and Faith	51
Christian Carefulness with the Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man	56
The Seared Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man	57
The Defiled Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man	60
The Συνείδησις of the Regenerate Man	62
Descriptors of the Συνείδησις of the Christian	62
Positive Descriptors of the Christian Conscience	64

Negative Descriptors of the Christian Conscience	72
A Christian's Submission to the Conscience of a Fellow Believer (2 Corinthians 4:2; 5:11; 1 Corinthians 4:3- 5 Romans 14:1-23)	75
The Christian's Conscience as It Relates to Sanctification (John 17:17; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Hebrews 5:13-14)	78
Some Ministry Implications from the Study of Συνείδησις	80
For the Interpretation of the New Testament	80
For the Church	81
For the Believer	82

Matters of Conscience: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Observations on the Use of Συνείδησις in the Greek New Testament and Some Ministry Implications

The Importance of the Study of Conscience

The subject of this monograph is an important issue in American culture, in the Church and in the heart of every man, believer and non-believer, every day. Does this statement seem like a sweeping over-generalization to you? Awareness of media reporting and news commentary of the hour, a knowledge of the state of the theologically conservative Church in America, and an understanding of what the New Testament teaches about conscience coalesce to establish that it is, in fact, not an overgeneralization or overstatement, at all.

The Growing Absence of Conscience in American Culture

Americans, Christian and non-Christian alike, are puzzled and frightened by the sudden rash of unprovoked violent crimes and, in particular, the mass shootings of the innocent from Columbine to the present. The victims have been children, athletes, movie and concert attenders, co-workers and friends, senselessly slaughtered at school, at work, at entertainment venues, at athletic contests and at church. This Satanic work has been done by men, and tragically in some cases by boys, who were never suspected of mental or spiritual defect, at least not to the extent demonstrated by their heinous actions.

The media is flooded almost monthly with the scenes of the carnage for days following each incident, with law enforcement officers doing their best to calm the people in the communities where these brutal executions occur and answer the questions, “Why did this happen?” “How could this happen?” Often, they give partial, unsatisfying answers. In other cases, they give evasive, feckless explanations, while they attempt to defend the incompetence of the officers who had been on sight or first called to the scene of the unfolding horror.

Pleas for the elimination of the private ownership of firearms, for greater mental health services in our schools and communities, and the requisite evening-after candlelight prayer vigils fill the newscasts. “Do these monsters have *no conscience*?” both the interviewers and interviewees often ask on national television. “How could this happen, especially in America, our beautiful, brave and good country. Isn’t she ‘the city set on a hill,’ a beacon of light morally for all the nations?”

A Lack of Clarity about Conscience in the Church

A world apart from such tragedies is another crisis over *conscience*—*the crisis in the Church*. Though not a crisis of life or death physically, this crisis has rent the Bible-believing church into factions in America for decades now. For the Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christian Church, a solid seventy years of cultural shift in America has brought with it a re-examination of nearly every cultural conviction held by theologically

conservative Christians, who self-identify as being born again and believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God and therefore their guide for faith and practice.

These convictions that have come under scrutiny are about divorce and remarriage, television-movies-media entertainment, the beverage use of alcohol and the recreational use of less potent drugs, marijuana being the chief among them. This re-examining has also included the shift from a more semi-formal outward attire for worship for both men and women to casual attire, in the past normally only worn during relaxed social events or recreational activities by Christians, and of course the use of rock and roll music, in all its varied forms, for both personal Christian listening and public Christian worship.

The newer perspectives, more closely aligned with the culture on all of these issues, were once all rejected by the overwhelming majority of conservative Christians in America, as recently as fifty years ago. But now, they are routinely promoted in pulpits, on blog posts and in the seemingly endless flood of books about how to live life as a Christian in the twenty-first century “with relevance and impact.” It is said that these things are all simply a matter of personal preference. They are just *matters of individual conscience*. That is how the wildly divergent perspectives among believers about these practices is now explained. These are certainly not, it is argued, clear matters of right or wrong established by Scripture. Everyone’s

preference must be viewed as equally valid, to be equally esteemed as right for the individual, even if not right for all believers.

But what about the Scripture's emphasis on the greater discernment of the spiritually mature, the elders, those particularly knowledgeable in the Word and wise in the matters of the Christian life, as so identified in Hebrews 5:13-14? Shouldn't their perspectives be given greater weight and be the source of informing the sense of right or wrong of others who are less mature, both for the individual believer and for the local assembly as a whole? Even more weighty is the purpose of redemption, which is to yield a holy life in the believer and in the church corporately, as stated in Ephesians 5:25b-27 and Galatians 1:3-5.

...as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless (Ephesians 5:25b-27).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from *this present evil age* [italics added], according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forevermore. Amen (Galatians 1:3-5).

What is set before us in these passages is the demand for greater discernment about right and wrong for the glory of Christ in the Church forever, specifically with reference to issues affecting the Christian in the current culture., i.e., "the present evil age." These support the more familiar emphasis of Romans 12:2, which reads, "And do not be conformed to this world [the age], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you

may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

The moral content of one’s thoughts, disposition, actions, and affiliations must be carefully assessed while being compared with the teaching of Scripture to form a right conscience on any matter of cultural relevance or practice. And in reality, most matters in life as they touch culture are *not* without moral content, good or bad, especially those touching on worship and daily Christian behavior.

The Warfare in the Heart of the Christian about Conscience Daily

And for the individual believer, daily he or she struggles to discern right and wrong personally by the use of the Scriptures, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. In this spiritual warfare, there is a voice in his heart. It is *his* voice, his conscience, saying, “Choose this way!” or “Choose that!” But is it *just* his voice? Is it God’s voice too? Or, is it both? Even more concerning, could it be Satan’s voice speaking through his or her conscience, misleading him at the time of choice or condemning him through a sense of false guilt, rising up unexplainably after God’s complete forgiveness and cleansing recently sought for those very sins?

How can the Christian be sure that his feelings of guilt or righteousness over what he has done are valid? Certainly as fallen creatures, our conscience is not infallible in its judgments, whether those judgments are commendations or condemnations. When looking to sources outside himself

for guidance in this confusion, the believer may think of his pastor who probably enjoys listening to classic rock music most of the time, who spends countless hours scrolling through You Tube videos and articles about his personal hobbies, who is a huge fan of Facebook and spends hours interacting with others on it and who drinks a beer or two, or three, most evenings at home “to relax,” including after church on Sunday nights. With reference to alcohol, if his pastor drinks it, it must be ok, right? Besides, Jesus turned water into wine for everybody at the wedding in Cana, it says in the New Testament, so that pretty much settles the matter. Or does it, really? So much grief, loss economically from missed work and accidents, damage to family relationships, and devastation to health comes from addiction to alcoholic beverages today which are far more potent in intoxicating content than that consumed daily as a beverage in the first century. Why should a serious Christian have anything to do with such an addictive and potentially damaging substance? But Christian leaders and writers disagree about drinking alcohol, so the immature Christian just shrugs his shoulders and thinks, “This must just be one of those things pastor calls *a matter of conscience*. So, since it is just a *matter of individual conscience*, I should be satisfied with the perceptions of my own conscience on this matter and not worry about anybody else’s view or practice.” Right? Or wrong?¹

¹ Andy Naselli and J. D. Crowley teamed up recently to produce a helpful, shorter book written on the popular level, but with careful thought and strongly

The Value of Examining Συνείδησις Now

The questions raised in these opening paragraphs focus us sharply on the importance of a detailed consideration of the teaching of the New Testament on the subject of *conscience and the term for it in Koine Greek*, συνείδησις. A right perspective on the topic must be based on a careful, exegetical consideration of the thirty instances in the Greek New Testament where the word συνείδησις occurs in its varied contexts.

based on good research, entitled *Conscience: What It is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 157 pp. This book was distributed recently to the 12,000 attendees at the biennial conference of Together for the Gospel. D. A. Carson warmly commends the book in its forward saying, “It is a pleasure and privilege to recommend it....Read this book yourself and give a copy to your friends” (p.14). Andy has long been associated with Dr. Carson as his research assistant and more recently as editor of some of his publications. Andy also serves as a professor at the Bethlehem College and Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota and elder at the Bethlehem Baptist Church. J. D. Crowley is long-time missionary to Cambodia, whose work in church planting, translation, and commentary writing is extensive. Naselli and Crowley give an evenhanded treatment of the subject, but face the challenge of the limitations of both the size of the book and some Evangelical assumptions, e.g., that many long-embraced worship-style and lifestyle Evangelical positions are held by those with a “strong conscience,” i.e., more Biblically knowledgeable and generally better informed, and others rightly belong in the list of *adiaphora*, i.e., those things not required of or forbidden to Christians. In fairness, the purpose of the book is not to address specific areas of disagreement among believers, particularly the authors’ disagreements with more culturally conservative Christians, but to provide a good understanding of the subject of conscience in the New Testament. The many figures and charts in the book, as well as many of the explanations of important Scripture passages on the subject are an excellent contribution to that end.

Table 1 – New Testament References to συνείδησις

Biblical References	Greek Text	English (NASB)
Acts 23:1	Ἀτενίσας δὲ ὁ Παῦλος τῷ συνεδρίῳ εἶπεν· ἄνδρες ἀδελφοί, ἐγὼ πάση συνειδήσει ἀγαθῇ πεπολίτευμαι τῷ θεῷ ἄχρι ταύτης τῆς ἡμέρας.	And Paul, looking intently at the Council, said, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.”
Acts 24:16	ἐν τούτῳ καὶ αὐτὸς ἀσκῶ ἀπρόσκοπον συνείδησιν ἔχειν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ τοὺς ἀνθρώπους διὰ παντός.	“In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience <i>both</i> before God and before men.”
Rom. 2:15	οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν, συμμαρτυροῦσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως καὶ μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων.	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. 9:1	Ἀλήθειαν λέγω ἐν Χριστῷ, οὐ ψεύδομαι, συμμαρτυροῦσης μοι τῆς συνειδήσεώς μου ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ.	I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit.
Rom. 13:5	διὸ ἀνάγκη ὑποτάσσεσθαι, οὐ μόνον διὰ τὴν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν.	Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake.
1 Cor. 8:7	Ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν πᾶσιν ἡ γνώσις· τινὲς δὲ τῇ συνηθείᾳ ἕως ἄρτι τοῦ εἰδώλου ὡς εἰδωλόθυτον ἐσθίουσιν, καὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτῶν ἀσθενῆς οὕσα μολύνεται.	However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat <i>food</i> as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.
1 Cor. 8:10	ἐὰν γάρ τις ἴδῃ σὲ τὸν ἔχοντα γνώσιν ἐν εἰδωλείῳ κατακείμενον, οὐχὶ ἡ συνείδησις αὐτοῦ ἀσθενοῦς ὄντος οἰκοδομηθήσεται εἰς τὸ τὰ εἰδωλόθυτα ἐσθίειν;	For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?
1 Cor. 8:12	οὕτως δὲ ἁμαρτάνοντες εἰς τοὺς ἀδελφοὺς καὶ τύποντες αὐτῶν τὴν συνείδησιν ἀσθενοῦσαν εἰς Χριστὸν ἁμαρτάνετε.	And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.
1 Cor. 10:25	Πᾶν τὸ ἐν μακέλλῳ πωλούμενον ἐσθίετε μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν·	Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience’ sake;
1 Cor. 10:27	εἴ τις καλεῖ ὑμᾶς τῶν ἀπίστων καὶ θέλετε πορεύεσθαι, πᾶν τὸ	If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat

	παρατιθέμενον ὑμῖν ἐσθίετε μηδὲν ἀνακρίνοντες διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν.	anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake.
1 Cor. 10:28	ἐὰν δέ τις ὑμῖν εἴπῃ· τοῦτο ἱερόθυτόν ἐστιν, μὴ ἐσθίετε δι' ἐκείνον τὸν μηνύσαντα καὶ τὴν συνείδησιν·	But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat <i>it</i> , for the sake of the one who informed <i>you</i> , and for conscience' sake;
1 Cor. 10:29	συνείδησιν δὲ λέγω οὐχὶ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ἀλλὰ τὴν τοῦ ἑτέρου. ἵνατί γὰρ ἡ ἐλευθερία μου κρίνεται ὑπὸ ἄλλης συνειδήσεως;	I mean not your own conscience, but the other <i>man's</i> ; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience?
2 Cor. 1:12	Ἡ γὰρ καύχησις ἡμῶν αὕτη ἐστίν, τὸ μαρτύριον τῆς συνειδήσεως ἡμῶν, ὅτι ἐν ἀπλότητι καὶ εἰλικρινείᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ, [καὶ] οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ σαρκικῇ ἀλλ' ἐν χάριτι θεοῦ, ἀνεστράφημεν ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ, περισσοτέρως δὲ πρὸς ὑμᾶς.	For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you.
2 Cor. 4:2	ἀλλὰ ἀπειπάμεθα τὰ κρυπτὰ τῆς αἰσχύνης, μὴ περιπατοῦντες ἐν πανουργίᾳ μηδὲ δολοῦντες τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ ἀλλὰ τῇ φανερώσει τῆς ἀληθείας συνιστάνοντες ἑαυτοὺς πρὸς πᾶσαν συνείδησιν ἀνθρώπων ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ.	but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.
2 Cor. 5:11	Εἰδότες οὖν τὸν φόβον τοῦ κυρίου ἀνθρώπους πείθομεν, θεῷ δὲ πεφανερώμεθα· ἐλπίζω δὲ καὶ ἐν ταῖς συνειδήσεσιν ὑμῶν πεφανερῶσθαι.	Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.
1 Tim. 1:5	τὸ δὲ τέλος τῆς παραγγελίας ἐστὶν ἀγάπη ἐκ καθαρᾶς καρδίας καὶ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς καὶ πίστεως ἀνυποκρίτου,	But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.
1 Tim. 1:19	ἔχων πίστιν καὶ ἀγαθὴν συνείδησιν, ἣν τινες ἀπώσαμενοι περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἐναυάγησαν,	keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.
1 Tim. 3:9	ἔχοντας τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει.	<i>but</i> holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.
1 Tim. 4:2	ἐν ὑποκρίσει ψευδολόγων, κεκαυστηριασμένων τὴν ἰδίαν συνείδησιν,	by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron,
2 Tim. 1:3	Χάριν ἔχω τῷ θεῷ, ᾧ λατρεύω ἀπὸ προγόνων ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει, ὥς	I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my

	ἀδιάλειπτον ἔχω τὴν περὶ σοῦ μνείαν ἐν ταῖς δεήσεσίν μου νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας,	forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day,
Titus 1:15	πάντα καθαρὰ τοῖς καθαροῖς· τοῖς δὲ μεμιασμένοις καὶ ἀπίστοις οὐδὲν καθαρόν, ἀλλὰ μεμιάνται αὐτῶν καὶ ὁ νοῦς καὶ ἡ συνείδησις.	To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.
Heb. 9:9	ἥτις παραβολὴ εἰς τὸν καιρὸν τὸν ἐνεστηκότα, καθ' ἣν δωρὰ τε καὶ θυσίαι προσφέρονται μὴ δυνάμειναι κατὰ συνείδησιν τελειῶσαι τὸν λατρεύοντα,	which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience,
Heb. 9:14	πόσῳ μᾶλλον τὸ αἷμα τοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὃς διὰ πνεύματος αἰωνίου ἑαυτὸν προσήμενεν ἁμῶν τῷ θεῷ, καθαριεῖ τὴν συνείδησιν ἡμῶν ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων εἰς τὸ λατρεύειν θεῷ ζῶντι.	how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?
Heb. 10:2	ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἂν ἐπαύσαντο προσφερόμεναι διὰ τὸ μηδεμίαν ἔχειν ἔτι συνείδησιν ἁμαρτιῶν τοὺς λατρεύοντας ἅπαξ κεκαθαρισμένους;	Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?
Heb. 10:22	προσερχώμεθα μετὰ ἀληθινῆς καρδίας ἐν πληροφορίᾳ πίστεως ῥεραντισμένοι τὰς καρδίας ἀπὸ συνειδήσεως πονηρᾶς καὶ λελουσμένοι τὸ σῶμα ὕδατι καθαρῷ·	let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled <i>clean</i> from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.
Heb. 13:18	Προσεύχεσθε περὶ ἡμῶν· πειθόμεθα γὰρ ὅτι καλὴν συνείδησιν ἔχομεν, ἐν πᾶσιν καλῶς θέλοντες ἀναστρέφεσθαι.	Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things.
1 Pet. 2:19	τοῦτο γὰρ χάρις εἰ διὰ συνείδησιν θεοῦ ὑποφέρει τις λύπας πάσχων ἀδίκως.	For this <i>finds</i> favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.
1 Pet. 3:16	ἀλλὰ μετὰ πραΰτητος καὶ φόβου, συνείδησιν ἔχοντες ἀγαθὴν, ἵνα ἐν ᾧ καταλαλῆσθε κατασχυνθῶσιν οἱ ἐπηρεάζοντες ὑμῶν τὴν ἀγαθὴν ἐν Χριστῷ ἀναστροφὴν.	but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always <i>being</i> ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence;
1 Pet. 3:21	ὃ καὶ ὑμᾶς ἀντίτυπον νῦν σώζει βάπτισμα, οὐ σαρκὸς ἀπόθεσις ῥύπου ἀλλὰ συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν, δι' ἀναστάσεως Ἰησοῦ	And corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through

	Χριστοῦ,	the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
--	----------	-----------------------------------

Virtually all of the major English translations of the New Testament render the term συνείδησις by the word “conscience,” which is in itself helpful to right biblical interpretation. The contexts in which the word occurs are also helpful, providing vital nuances of the meaning of this word in the New Testament. Other more precise considerations of the synonymy of the New Testament relevant to the subject and some of the grammatical details of these passages offers more light on the subject as well.

Close consideration of all of these passages also answers another profoundly important question. What are the primary *emphases* of the New Testament on this function of the human heart called *conscience*? Or, is there a particularly strong emphasis on conscience in one specific part of the Christian life and service, in contrast to the popular preoccupation with the subject, i.e., the need for believers to adapt to each other because of the varied levels of knowledge informing their conscience about right and wrong. Should the varied views of Christians about cultural practices or doctrinal matters, e.g., the continuationism or cessationism with reference to the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit for believers, just be accepted as an inevitable result of the phenomenon of conscience in every believer?

Answering these questions will bring us face to face with the several emphases for Christian life and service brought forward by the use of the

term συνείδησις in the Greek New Testament. Further, the subject requires that the relationship between συνείδησις, the knowledge of Scripture, and spiritual maturity be examined closely, to answer the question whether each man's perception of right and wrong through conscience is equally valid before God, and should be used as the touchstone to determine what should be the individual person's attitudes, disposition, words and behavior. In short, is the believer always ultimately left primarily with the subjective conclusions of his own conscience in determining the nature of his obedience, or does God through Scripture intend a significantly more objective method in determining what is right and wrong in one's attitudes, disposition, thoughts, words, and actions?

What the Lexicons Say

The Theological Significance of the Term

At the most basic level, interpretation is about the meaning of words. Though it is the basic level, that should not be construed to mean that it is the *least significant* level of understanding. The opposite is actually the case. Great weight should be given to the meaning of specific words in biblical interpretation, while always giving full weight to the power of the context in which any given word is used to give emphasis to one nuance or another of a term. This is certainly true when addressing a theologically significant term like συνείδησις. So, the lexicons are the right place to start in grappling with this challenging, theologically-infused word.

The meaning of this term impacts the believer's understanding of theology proper (i.e., the nature, attributes, and works of God) and anthropology (i.e., the doctrine of man in Scripture) since we are made in the image of God in the inner man, of which the conscience is vital part. It impacts the Christian's soteriology, since saving grace directly effects the condition of a man's conscience, according to the New Testament. His sanctification, a vital subset of soteriology, is impacted because conscience is the moral-spiritual center of the soul for the discernment of good and evil, which is the essence of growth in holiness as taught in Hebrews 5:13-14. The believer's ecclesiology is affected since his perception of right and wrong through conscience has great bearing on his relationships with other believers, and therefore the unity and purity of the Church as a whole, as discussed in Romans 14.

Some Value, with Deficiency

Turning to the contributions of the primary lexicologists for interpretation, three results follow: (1) similarity in definition, (2) some special nuances of the word, and (3) significant omissions of the principal nuances of meaning for συνείδησις.

In their lexicon, Timothy and Barbara Friberg say συνείδησις² is “a perceptive awareness within oneself, consciousness,” that it is “the faculty of moral consciousness or awareness by which moral judgments relating to right and wrong are made.” The contribution is somewhat morally anemic, of course, and offers little help in interpreting the New Testament use of the term. The second entry of this definition does, however, get to the heart of meaning of the term, but then misses several functions of conscience, leaving his definition incomplete. For example, where is the hortatory element of conscience, which urges a man to do right, or the judicial element that commends right behavior or condemns wrong behavior? The conclusion forced upon us is that Fribergs’ definition is rudimentary, and therefore somewhat inadequate.

Others Following the Path of “Some Value, with Deficiency”

The United Bible Society Greek Lexicon is not unlike the Fribergs’, rudimentary and inadequate, when it simply defines the word as “awareness, consciousness.”³ Louw and Nida in their lexicon are equally minimalist in their definition when they say συνείδησις means “to be aware of information

² Timothy and Barbara Friberg, “συνείδησις,” *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (BibleWorks9: Digital Version), ref. no. 5575.

³ Barclay M. Newman, Jr., “συνείδησις,” *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; BibleWorks9 Digital Version, 1993), ref. no., 805.

about something.”⁴ Liddel and Scott, in their venerable lexicon, primarily of the Classical period of the Greek language, follow suit with the others by simply saying συνείδησις is “self-consciousness,” or “conscience” as it is used in the New Testament.⁵ The LEH Greek Lexicon defines the term as “inner consciousness,” “moral conscience,” and “consciousness of right- or wrongdoing.”⁶ The VGNT Greek Dictionary turns to etymology to assist in understanding the term by offering first the definition “co-knowledge,” hence “consciousness.” They observe “the deeper sense of ‘conscience,’ which the word has in philosophy rather than the Old Testament. There is no elaboration on what is the “deeper sense of ‘conscience;” the matter is left unexplained.⁷ Even the gold standard for New Testament interpreters, the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon, which specializes in the defining

⁴ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, “συνείδησις,” *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2nd ed. (New York City: United Bible Societies; BibleWorks9 Digital Version, 1988), ref.no., 28.4.

⁵ Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Robert McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. 9th ed. (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press; BibleWorks9 Digital Version, 1996), ref. no., 41055.

⁶ Erik Eynikel, Katrin Hauspie, and Johan Lust, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; BibleWorks9 Digital Version, 2003), ref. no., 73.

⁷ James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd; BibleWorks9 Digital Version, 1997), ref. no., 074.

words in the Greek New Testament and early Christian literature only says that συνείδησις means “consciousness, moral, conscience.”⁸

Considering the rich harvest of meaning to be derived from this term in its uses in the Greek New Testament, such a reductionist approach in defining this term is hard to understand, were it not for one thing.

Lexicologists must adhere to the maxim of brevity, that is, if they are to have any hope of producing a compendium of reasonable size of the most basic grammatical information, i.e., word definitions. To make their works accessible, manageable, and portable, dictionary writers have to be brief. So, exercising a measure of scholastic compassion, we should give them a pass in missing the mark some with συνείδησις. Brevity triumphed over full accuracy and clarity in the standard Greek-English lexicons.

One Hits the Mark

One Greek-English lexicologist did prevail in mastering συνείδησις for us, for the most part. Henry Thayer, Professor of New Testament at the Harvard Divinity School near the end of the 19th century, turns on the light in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* and reveals a comprehensive knowledge of the contexts in which συνείδησις is used in the

⁸ Walter Bauer and Frederick William Danker (editor and reviser), based on the earlier English Editions by W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F..W. Danker, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Electronic Version in BibleWorks9, 2000), ref. no., 6126.

Greek New Testament. He begins with the most basic definition like the other dictionaries, with a Latin etymological twist, by saying it is, “joint-knowledge,” derived from the Latin *conscientia*,” when you take the Latin word’s two component parts very literally to form a single word. Then he adds that it is “the consciousness of anything.” It can be a consciousness of sin or nobility, or anything, he argues. Finally though, he offers a full-scoped definition based on a comprehensive view of the contexts in which the word occurs in the New Testament. He says *συνείδησις* is “the soul as distinguishing between what is morally good and bad, prompting to do the former and shun the latter, commending the one, condemning the other.”⁹ This is a masterfully concise rendering of what rises from careful meditating over all thirty uses of *συνείδησις* in the New Testament.

He then follows by citing in his lexical entry, as examples, twenty-two of the thirty times the term is used in the Greek New Testament.¹⁰ To round out his discussion, he cites several Greek speaking Christian, Jewish, and pagan writers including Diodorus, Herodian, Philo, Clement of Rome, Dionysius Halicarnassus, Thucydides, Menander, and Epictetus. This last author’s use of the term as “serving the same office in adults which a tutor

⁹ Joseph Henry Thayer, trans., ed., rev., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (based on C. G. Grimm and C. L. W. Wilke, *Clavis Novi Testamenti*; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Divinity School of Harvard University, 1889; Bible Works9 Digital Version), ref. no., 5070.

¹⁰ Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 5070.

(παιδαγωγός) holds toward boys” is instructive. The slave-tutor role (παιδαγωγός) is well known from the first century to twenty-first interpreters of the New Testament. This was the adult teacher-tutor-minder assigned to the young sons of wealthy Romans to attend to the development of their learning and behavior daily.

An important implication to be drawn from this use of συνείδησις is that our conscience serves as our tutor-teacher-minder to guide us and develop us in the right way. Though this leads us to think of the Law of God in the Old Testament, care should be taken to not to assign too much Old Testament significance to the origin of the term and its idea. There is some discussion in the exegetical literature of the New Testament that συνείδησις has its linguistic roots, and more specifically, its semantic the roots in Greek, not Hebrew. It is claimed that the term is not in any sense a Hebraism, i.e., a Greek word influenced by a specific Hebrew term or concept. It is a Greek term, with a Greek linguistic lineage, uniquely “baptized” by Paul with Christian theological and ethical significance. But on the other hand, the theology of the inner man taught in the Old Testament certainly would have profoundly influenced Paul in his understanding of conscience. We must not overlook that the terms heart and spirit in Hebrew are used in the Old Testament to convey the idea of conscience, e.g., 2 Samuel 24:5, Psalm 51:10. Saul of Tarsus was a teacher of the Jews with a superior knowledge of the language and content of the Old Testament, which no doubt shaped his views

on the inner man, including the meaning he poured into the Greek term *συνείδησις*.

Fuller Explanations

The old mainstay of New Testament word studies, Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, treats *συννοια* and *συνείδησις* together.

With typical exhaustiveness, the absence of the use of the latter term in the Hebrew Old Testament, the Septuagint, and most of the intertestamental period is established, only finding appearance in a moral sense in the first century B.C.¹¹ The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* offers a substantial article which begins by defining *συνείδησις* as “an inner witness that testifies to the rightness or wrongness of one’s actions or motives and, on the basis of them, pronounces judgment concerning the worth of the person.”¹² This source also observes that by the first century B.C., the older Greek verb *σύννοια* gave rise through use to the noun *συνείδησις*. The secular Greek literature of the time establishes that the Greeks felt that conscience could bring great pain to the one who violated what he thought was right.¹³

¹¹ Christian Maurer, “*συννοια; συνείδησις*,” in Gerhard Friedrich Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 7, trans. and ed., Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 898-919.

¹² Raymond Opperwall, “Conscience,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Vol. I, edited by, Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 761-74.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 762-63.

For the believer, this witness is cleansed and has a greater sensitivity to the ultimate standard of right and wrong, the Word of God. While family, friends, and culture may continue to play a role in informing conscience, the final, clear voice of right and wrong for the Christian is the Word and the Spirit through conscience. The conscience is not infallible, but must be heeded due to its great power to damage a person's inner stability and peace if violated, as taught in 1 Corinthians 8:11.¹⁴

The term συνείδησις occurs thirty times in the New Testament, as mentioned earlier: nineteen times in the letters of Paul, five times by the writer to the Hebrews, three times in Peter, twice by Luke in Acts, and once in the Gospel of John in 8:9, though the accuracy of this latter reading has been questioned.¹⁵ Paul is not only the dominant user of the term but the author that gives the most instruction about it. He presents the conscience as functioning in an: (1) obligatory way, urging the person to do the right thing and refuse the wrong, (2) a judicial way, passing judgment on past thoughts, dispositions, words, and actions, and (3) an executive way, executing judgment by commending or condemning a person for their thoughts, dispositions, words, and actions.¹⁶ Conscience has been described as the

¹⁴ Ibid., 764-65.

¹⁵ Alfred Martin Rehwinkel, "Conscience" in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 267-68.

¹⁶ Rehwinkel, "Conscience," 267.

moral organ of the human soul; it is part of the immaterial man, a gift from God to guide and protect man from wrong¹⁷ through all of these functions. Conscience should be viewed in us both as moral consciousness, a constant awareness of the moral character of our lives, and as the resident witness and judge that forces us to face our wrongs, experience inner pain for it, and urges us to turn from evil, but also will urge us to do the right antecedent to action on the part of the believer.¹⁸

A basic understanding of the nature of conscience is rooted in the idea of self-awareness, a consciousness of the moral value of all a person thinks, feels, says, or does. Etymologically, the term is a combination word that means “with knowledge,” a true knowledge of the individual’s conformity to their sense of right and wrong.

A Summary of Meaning

The New Testament teaches that the conscience is a distinct function of the inner man. It is resident in all men as a gift from God, but is especially acute in its functioning in the regenerate man. It urges the believer to do the right thing according to the Law of God written in the heart and also illuminated in the Scriptures. Once a Christian takes action by thought,

¹⁷ Ibid., 268.

¹⁸ Moises Silva, rev. ed., “συνείδησις,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, Vol. 4, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 402-406.

feeling, disposition, or behavior, his conscience will either commend or condemn that action. Its witness will either bring guilt or joy depending on the quality of the action, and will urge repentance if there has been sin committed. Having a good conscience as a Christian is often equated with conforming to the Faith, emphasizing both the centrality and reliability of the believer's conscience to guide him daily as he walks with Christ. Human conscience is neither infallible nor omniscient, but it is to be trusted and is to never be willfully violated by the Christian. He must do all he can to have a conscience void of offense toward God and men and never be the cause in any way of another believer violating his conscience.

After considering the principal contributions of the lexicons, an examination of the passages that include the term, as they group themselves thematically, should follow. There are three themes that are developed by these passages, allowing the Scriptures to speak for themselves about the greater and lesser emphases given to each theme. These thematic passage groupings are (1) the essential functions of *συνείδησις*; (2) *συνείδησις* in the unregenerate man, including the moment his salvation; and (3) *συνείδησις* in the regenerate man. This will be followed by (4) some ministry implications.

First and foundationally, a thorough consideration of what the New Testament says about the *functions* of the human conscience (*συνείδησις*) is paramount in order to fully understand and appreciate the other divisions of the subject as presented by it.

The Functions of Συνείδησις

The Witness Within

In a review of the thirty uses of the noun συνείδησις which occur in the Greek New Testament, three of them bring the primary function of it to the fore. The conscience of man functions as a witness to him. In Romans 2:15, all men are said to have a conscience which is constantly συμμαρτυρούσης (“bearing witness,” present active participle) to them concerning the moral-spiritual quality of their thoughts, attitudes, dispositions and actions.¹⁹

In Romans 9:1, Paul said that his conscience did the same concerning his great sorrow concerning the lost condition of Israel and his willingness to suffer eternal condemnation if it would bring their salvation. The same term and form is used in this text as in Romans 2:15, συμμαρτυρούσης.

In 2 Corinthians 1:12, Paul turns to the noun form of the verbal used in the two other passages to describe τὸ μαρτύριον (“the witness”) of his conscience, that he had served throughout his ministry with godliness and sincerity by the grace of God, not in fleshly wisdom.

Drawing from juristic Greek of the Classical period, there is a strong sense that the conscience of man stands to testify either for or against him,

¹⁹ Bauer, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 957.

based on the Law of God.²⁰ There is an independence, a separateness from the will of the man involved in this. His conscience will testify whether he wants it to or not. It will either commend or condemn him, both before and after he thinks, feels, chooses, or acts.

The description and function of the conscience that unfolds in the New Testament is complex. It is central to the spiritual welfare of human culture, the health of the Church, and the spiritual wellbeing of the individual man. It also is presented as a primary goal of salvation and essential to a faith-filled and fruitful Christian ministry.

Moral Guidance for All Men

As part of the inner, immaterial part of every man, the conscience is daily “bearing witness” to each person on the basis of the Law of God written in their hearts. Romans 2:15 observes of men “that they show the works of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” Man’s conscience is the voice of his own consciousness, which speaks to him of the wrongness or rightness of his thoughts, disposition, speech, or actions, with the Word of God as the measure, to whatever extent he has knowledge of it. It is “bearing witness” in the court of the human heart. The συνείδησις either accuses the

²⁰ C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology, No. 15 (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1955), 48-49.

man for his lawlessness or defends him for his lawfulness. At first, a person's conscience functions more freely when he is a child, largely apart from his intentional and willful suppression of it, though this is not entirely the case with children, as every parent knows. From childhood on, conscience functions in as involuntary a way as breathing, seeing, smelling, hearing, or the beat of the human heart. However, the level of its functionality will by no means necessarily remain constant or improve. In fact, the opposite is the case unless God intervenes through regeneration.

In a normal human being, the conscience is functioning as the moral-spiritual center of the person, guiding them to right choices and away from wrong choices, based on the Law of God. Other influences become mixed with the law of God as part of the "law" of the individual's conscience, i.e., family influences, the influences of friends, instruction in false religion, and culture in general. But the primary and most important "law" informing the conscience of all men is the law revealed to man in the sixty-six books of the Bible, the Law handed down from the Christian God of Heaven to Moses, the Prophets, the Apostles, and other inspired writers. It is not merely a general moral code that all men are programmed with in creation, chosen by God based on the culture into which they will be born. Certainly this Law written in men's hearts is more basic in the sense that it does not contain all the detail of the written revelation of God, but it is a *Christian moral code* given by God, who is Jesus Christ, and which is fully fleshed out in the Bible. In

theological terms, this is one of the richest demonstrations ever of God's *common grace* to man, giving him moral and even spiritual guidance as an unregenerate man. As the Scriptures say, the rain falls on the just and the unjust (Matthew 5:45), so God has favored man with a moral-spiritual center, whether he is a believer or not, a conscience as an aid in life to assist him in treating others equitably and a light to bring him ultimately to repentance and faith.

A conscience that does not function in these ways, by either accusing or defending the person on the basis of God's Law, has become abnormal. Abnormality in the function of the human conscience sadly becomes normal for a person who resists its direction to righteousness, according to the Law of God, and decides in favor of unrighteousness repeatedly, i.e., based on the law of his own sinful nature, as Paul states explicitly in Romans 7:23) and the lesser laws of family, friends, false religion, and culture.²¹

²¹ Those who reach the most advanced stages of this abnormality are often deemed "psychopathic," having no conscience in one or several moral areas of life. Extensive studies of prison populations of those that evidence these traits have been published recently. The findings are astounding and terrifying concerning the state to which men come morally in their behavior toward other men. Consider for example Kent A. Kiehl's book *The Psychopath Whisperer: The Science of Those Without Conscience* (New York City: Broadway Books, 2014) in which he recounts his own experiences as a PhD candidate studying psychopathic inmates in Canada's prisons.

Accurate Judgment

There is a moral and spiritual judgment in the New Testament that is unrighteous, censorious or hypercritical of others which is sinful. Jesus warned against that sinful judgment of others and, by implication, even judging ourselves in this way. Jesus said in Matthew 7:1-2, “Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.”

But there is a righteous judgement commended in the New Testament that is “discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent” (Philippians 1:9) and thereby be pleasing to God, as Paul said. This is all made possible by the function of a good conscience as part of the human heart. For if there is to be any reasonable level of objective self-examination morally, ethically, or spiritually, and subsequent change for the better, a properly functioning conscience is required.

Conscience is the capacity of self-judgment rendering either approval of one’s self or disapproval, resulting in peace, joy, and a sense of God’s favor, or guilt, fear and a sense of alienation from God. Perhaps the most profound examples of this hard, latter outcome in the New Testament are Judas, who betrayed the Lord resulting in his arrest and death, and Peter, the leader of the Twelve, who denied the Lord three times at his trial before the high priest, leading to Jesus’ eventual crucifixion. Both of these men were part of

the Twelve, the originally selected group of special disciples of Jesus during His incarnate ministry and following His resurrection.

Both Judas and Peter were stricken with overwhelming guilt over their serious failures, the Scriptures tell us. Judas' guilt and great sorrow led him to suicide. He sorrowed the sorrow which leads to death spoken of by Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10. Peter's guilt and grief over his failure led him to repentance and restoration to fellowship and great service, also described by Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10. They both had heard the sentence of "guilty" in their own heart from their conscience and the power of that voice was overwhelming. One disciple responded correctly. The other, a disciple, but in reality a "son of perdition," or "destruction," (John 17:12), did not.²²

Self-judgment Concerning Quality of Ministry

The Apostle Paul depended on his conscience to bear testimony to him of his righteous life during all of his ministry. He was always pursuing moral and spiritual excellence. He said to the Jewish leaders when facing their accusations, "Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day" (Acts 23:1). This is a remarkable assertion by the Apostle.

²² The accounts of the failures of Judas and Peter are juxtaposed in the same chapter in each of the four Gospels: in Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22 and John 18.

Shortly after this confrontation with the Jewish leaders in front of the Roman rulers just mentioned, Paul was again standing before the Roman governor Felix and Herod Agrippa and testified as part of his personal spiritual credo, “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). He counted on his conscience to communicate to him if he had ever offended anyone, especially God, clearly with the intent of confessing his sin and seeking forgiveness from both God and man, if he had failed in some way by offending either of them. He did his very best to live by this high standard of a conscience, which remarkably, testified he was blameless of any offense toward God or man. That is the highest standard a man can live by and gives us insight into the heart of Paul. It is likely one of the reasons God trusted Him with such responsibility in ministry, the fruits of which continue today.

An astounding self-evaluation of his life and ministry, given by his conscience and then testified to before the Corinthians in Paul’s second letter to them, is found in chapter 1:12 where he wrote,

For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world and especially toward you.

Paul’s spiritual integrity is awe-inspiring, practically dumbfounding. How did he live the life he described in this statement? He would say “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Corinthians 15:10), of course. But what is perhaps the most astonishing fact is that he trusted his conscience, informed

by the Word of God and empowered by the Spirit of God, to render an accurate self-assessment of the condition of his heart and his whole life, so much so that he openly claimed this level of spiritual integrity before others. A good conscience is a powerful tool for correct spiritual self-assessment, resulting in confidence before God and others in ministry.

An encouraging capstone assessment by Paul's conscience about his ministry extended to his ministry in prayer for Timothy. He said in 2 Timothy 1:3, "I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience the way my forefathers did, as I constantly remember you in my prayers night and day." His conscience reassured him that he was faithfully performing the most important ministry he could for his protégé in the Faith—prayer for him.

Judgment by Others Concerning Quality of Ministry

Paul was not only concerned about his own evaluation of himself, relying on his conscience to faithfully speak to him if he transgressed in some way and needed guidance back to the right path. He also freely urged others to exercise their spiritual and moral discernment, seated in their conscience, to render a fair judgment of him in his ministry. He submitted himself to this evaluation by all men that he preached to when he said, "but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2).

The Apostle also valued the evaluation of believers he had reached with the gospel and poured out his life for as an offering to God. He didn't view himself as somehow spiritually superior and above their spiritual assessment on the basis of what they knew to be true and good about him, or what they knew to be sinful and inadequate in his ministry. He said to the Corinthians, whom he loved and served,

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences (2 Corinthians 5:11).

He wanted them, deep down in their conscience, to give full approval to his ministry because it was aligned with what was right. He knew that if they had that evaluation of him he could serve them most effectively, resulting in abounding fruit which would remain, the kind of fruit Jesus promised in John 15:16 to those who abide in Him in ministry.

Protection Against Sin

The conscience of man, informed by the Law of God within, further instructed in righteousness from the written Word of God and indwelt by the Spirit of God is a great protection from all sin. Of course, the unregenerate man comprehends and embraces little of the written revelation of God, the Bible, and does not have the powerful aid to his conscience in the indwelling Holy Spirit. Sadly, he is an easy victim for the Evil One, who roams the earth as "a roaring lion seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Satan's power to bring people to destruction is witnessed daily through the

local and national media, which is always fascinated when tragedy strikes again. It is always a surprise to them. Little wonder since they do not understand the essentially failed condition of the human conscience. Only the restraining influence of the Holy Spirit keeps the world from being swallowed up by the inherent evil of humanity.²³

Sometimes this power of Satan to destroy through the sin of man extends to whole nations, which are consumed either directly or indirectly due to the sins of their leaders or those sins pervasive in their culture, e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. This reality is taught repeatedly through the rising and falling of nations in the Old Testament. Paul alludes to this in his sermon on Mars Hill in Athens, explaining that in spite of the reality of Satan and the evil he spreads, God still reigns as the Sovereign over all, determining when nations come into existence and when they cease to exist by simply letting evil take its course in their culture or in their relations to other nations through war.²⁴

²³ The standard conservative premillennial-pretribulation interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:7 argues that the presence of the Spirit of God in the world through Christians restrains the “mystery of iniquity” from engulfing the world entirely. When the Spirit is removed from the earth as a ubiquitous presence through the rapture of the saints, evil abounds to levels never before experienced in the earth, during the seven-year Tribulation described in detail in Revelation 6-19.

²⁴ The sermon on Mars Hill is found in Acts 17:22-34. It is the most striking sermon by the Apostle to a pagan Gentile audience recorded in the New Testament. In it Paul almost incidentally presents a framework for a Christian philosophy of history concerning the nations of the world known through archaeological evidence and recorded history. In this philosophy of history, the Sovereign God of Heaven is in the center as the ultimate determiner of the existence of nations.

While the world experiences the harsh reality that unaided human conscience is incapable of assuring their safety, the Christian does not suffer this fate. He is protected by God through a newly regenerated conscience, the full revelation of God and the presence and work of the Holy Spirit daily in his heart. The New Testament addresses three particular sins from which the believer is protected through the influence of his divinely aided conscience.

Protection from Rebellion Against Civil Authority

In the single most thorough text in the New Testament delineating the believer's right relationship with civil government, Paul cites συνείδησις as a great aid in preventing a failure to obey and honor governmental leaders as ministers of God. He wrote, "Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience sake" (Romans 13:5).

Believers and non-believers will obey governmental authority because they fear the wrath of the government if they do not. But Paul urges that there must be an internal motivation to obey the government also. A believer must avoid the condemnation of his own conscience by failing to obey civil authorities. Putting these two motivations side by side speaks to the power of conscience to judge and condemn, rendering the believer in a miserable state until confession and restoration occur. Paul is also warning the believer because if he violates his conscience and disobeys civil law, the only way he will ever regain a clear conscience is not only to confess that disobedience to

God but also to the government, usually resulting in justly deserved punishment in keeping with the civil law.

Protection Against Failure While Suffering for Christ

Another protection provided by conscience is motivation to remain faithful when suffering unjustly, believing that obedience to and favor from God is more important than deliverance from the sorrows of suffering unjustly. Peter wrote, “For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a man bear up under sorrow when suffering unjustly” (1 Peter 2:19). The voice of conscience warns of the darkness, sadness, and guilt of unfaithfulness to God when under the pressure of persecution of some kind, that when the trial is over, he can know the peace and joy that comes from the knowledge that he did not betray His Master or the commandments of the Faith, when under severe pressure.

Potential Protection Against Future Sin

The writer to the Hebrews sought prayer from them that he would continue with a clear conscience, desiring to continue in a holy life, one which avoided sin. He wrote, “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things” (Hebrews 13:18). He wanted to avoid the displeasure of God, spoken through his conscience by the Spirit, caused by failing to be faithful on into the future.

The assumption in all of these statements by Paul, Peter, and the writer to the Hebrews is that conscience will give a reliable assessment of Christian behavior, whether it is good or bad, resulting in joy, peace, and confidence when the believer is faithful, or on the other hand, guilt, fear, and confusion when he is not.

Communication from the Holy Spirit

The Sine Qua Non Text

One clause, in one verse containing συνείδησις, has profound implications for how we respond to the voice of our own conscience as believers. It is Paul's statement of his heart's burden for the Jews found in Romans 9:1-3. He writes,

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, *my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit* [italics added], that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

When Paul says, “my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit” he invites an understanding of the ministry of the Holy Spirit hitherto not stated explicitly in his writings, or elsewhere in the New Testament. Greater clarity is gained about the meaning of phrase “in the Holy Spirit” if the Greek preposition ἐν is viewed as introducing an instrumental dative of agency, the Holy Spirit being the agent of communication through Paul's conscience. The phrase could be translated “by means of the Holy Spirit.” As Murray states on the ministry of the Spirit presented in Romans 9:1,

Just as the certification of his earlier assertion is derived from union with Christ, so the veracity of the witness of his conscience is certified by the Holy Spirit. It is only as we are indwelt by the Spirit and live in the Spirit, only as our minds are governed by the Spirit may we be assured that the voice of conscience is in conformity with truth and right.²⁵

John MacArthur similarly observes,

The conscience of a faithful believer, on the other hand, is reliable, because it is activated by the truths and stands of God's Word and is energized by the power of God's indwelling Holy Spirit. We live in the Spirit, walk in the Spirit, and obey the Spirit, we can trust our conscience because it is under divine control. The Spirit's perfect prompting will either commend or condemn what we are doing or are planning to do.²⁶

Moule adds that Paul was "informed and governed by" the Spirit.²⁷

Schreiner agrees, saying, "In this instance his conscience has been informed by and is under the control of the Holy Spirit, so the Roman readers can be assured of the truthfulness of his assertion."²⁸ Moo also insightfully observes, "Hence Paul reminds the Romans that, as a believer with a 'renewed mind' (12:1-2), his conscience testifies 'by means of' the Holy Spirit" and then adds in an explanatory footnote,

The Greek preposition ἐν before πνεύματι ἁγίῳ could be local, in a metaphorical sense (Kuss: Paul's conscience testifies *within* the realm of the

²⁵ John Murray, *Epistle to the Romans, Vol. 2, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company), 2.

²⁶ John MacArthur, *Romans 9-16, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 10.

²⁷ H.C.G. Moule, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans, The Expositor's Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896), 247.

²⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 479.

Holy Spirit), or perhaps more likely, instrumental—the conscience testifies to Paul through the Holy Spirit (cf. NRSV). Reference to both Christ and the Holy Spirit could be Paul’s attempt to meet the biblical requirement of ‘two or three witnesses’ to establish lawful testimony (Deut. 17:6; 19:15; cf. 2 Cor. 13:1).²⁹

Does this mean that every time my conscience warns, convicts or affirms me in some way that it is God the Spirit speaking to me? If what is being communicated reasonable and righteous application of them to life, then the answer is “yes.” In this case, Paul was asserting that the Holy Spirit was affirming through his conscience that he actually did have overwhelming grief about the lost state of Israel and that he actually was willing to be condemned to eternal Hell if it would mean their salvation. In other words, what he was writing to the Romans was absolutely true and had the imprimatur of God on it. For a man to come to that state of heart in personal sacrifice is utterly breathtaking. Again, we are reminded of the unusual level of true spirituality Paul lived out in his ministry experiences. He demonstrated the ideal of agape—complete, generous, self-sacrifice for the redemptive good of others and the glory of God, and it is worthy of note that the Jews were not even his primary focus of ministry. The Gentiles were, in fact, he was the apostle to the Gentiles, as he explained in Galatians 2:7-8,

But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, as Peter had been to the circumcised (for he who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles).

²⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 556.

Regardless of the target people group of his ministry, he had learned to obey the first and second great commandments, to love God with his whole being and to love others as himself.

The Pervasive Effect of the Spirit's Indwelling

Moving from these exegetical fine points, the teaching of the New Testament concerning the ministry of the Holy Spirit theologically must be considered in this discussion. The Scriptures teach in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, “Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.” Here we learn that the Spirit of God dwells in our hearts, our immaterial man. This adds an additional dimension to the idea of God’s indwelling in the believer, that He not only indwells our *bodies* as His temple, as taught in 1 Corinthians 6:19, but also indwells our *hearts*.

The word translated “heart” in this passage of Scripture is καρδία in Greek. It is a broad term, as used in the New Testament. Determined by its usage in context, the word is used to describe each of the full range of the functions of the inner man. It may be used to describe *rational thought*, meaning all processes of thinking such as logical refutation of falsehood, e.g., 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, meditation on Scripture, e.g., Colossians 3:16, and remembering with deep *emotion* expressed by many terms describing sympathetic and empathetic reactions in men, such as fear, sorrow, anxiety, peace and joy, e.g., Romans 9:1; Philippians 4:6-7; 1 Peter 1:6-12. The word

καρδία is at times used as a synonym for συνείδησις, when the inner man is *functioning morally* to discern the right path and reject the wrong one. Once the right path is discerned, the heart may then *function volitionally*, as it chooses the way to go, e.g., Matthew 22: 36-40.

Since the Spirit dwells in our hearts we may draw the conclusion that He has access to all of the function of our hearts. Our powers of thought and reason, our memory, our emotions, our will and our conscience. Therefore, the Holy Spirit can and does, as Paul teaches, speak through a believer's conscience, as He may well through other parts of a man's inner, non-material being, but never without the guardianship and communication of the conscience to guide him as he thinks, remembers, feels and decides.

Since the Spirit speaks through a believer's conscience, the Christian is never called upon to discern between the voice of his own conscience and the voice of the Holy Spirit in his conscience. The Holy Spirit speaks through the voice of the believer's conscience, not in a separately identifiable voice. They are inseparable, if the conditions listed above are met, with some additional development given here to each to sharpen our understanding of them. (1) What is being communicated through the believer's conscience must be consistent in every point with the teachings of Scripture. (2) Those Scriptures which are relevant to the occasion are clearly and accurately interpreted. (3) Those same Scriptures are reasonably and righteously applied to life, without fear of contradiction by mature, discerning Christians. These three conditions

each underscore a vital truth for understanding the function of conscience. Even the conscience of a Spirit- indwelled Christian must be objectively governed by the written Law of God external to himself.

The Spirit's Authority through Conscience in the Individual Believer

As conservative Christians, we believe for good reasons that the canon of Scripture was closed near the end of the first century with the writing of the Book of Revelation. Also, as conservative Christians, we believe for good reasons that the gift of prophecy was a miraculous, founding gift for the church and is no longer operative through believers in the twenty-first century church to give more revelation from God, having ceased after the completion of the canon of Scripture and the end of the founding era of the Church. Both of these ideas have been extensively explained and defended in the theologically conservative commentary literature, other theological works and the faithful preaching and teaching of conservative, non-charismatic pastor-teachers over the last two centuries.

But do both of these well-established understandings of doctrine require that we reject the idea of the Holy Spirit communicating directly to the individual Christian through his conscience, with divine authority *for that believer*? The answer is that we must not only believe that this is possible, but that it is a reality to be embraced. It is a dimension and privilege of intimacy with God for the obedient Christian that must not be denied him. The voice that is being heard in the heart of the believer is that

of his own conscience, but it is also the communication of the Spirit of God using the Christian's conscience to direct him into the way of obedience.

This is not a Keswick higher life idea, reserved only for the special few among Christians who are allegedly to reach some more elevated plane of spiritual existence and intimacy with God than the rest of the Church. This is the birthright of every Christian. To deny this privilege to every believer is to disclaim the validity of Paul's experience described for us in Romans 9:1-3. It is also to deny the teaching of the Scriptures concerning the call to the ministry God extends to specific believers. Further it is to deny the experience and uniform testimony of every man called by God to the ministry of the Word, described in personal narratives throughout the centuries of the history of the Church. It is to deny the experience of every man and women ever called by God to the mission field. For them, the burden of their conscience, the clarity of its voice concerning what God had asked of them, was so great, they had no choice but to recognize that burden of conscience as the voice of the Holy Spirit of God and obey it, leaving home, family, and friends for the place of God's appointment.³⁰

But it is not only in the great decisions of life that a believer must expect the voice of the Holy Spirit through conscience. That sense of

³⁰ For a theological discussion of the call to the ministry, consider Stephen J. Hankins, *A New Testament Theology of the Call to the Christian Ministry: An Exegetical Analysis of Its Objective and Subjective Elements* (PhD diss, Seminary and Graduate School of Religion, Bob Jones University, 1993), 315 pp.

obligation and internal urging to obey God's commands, whichever one of the commandments or several they may be, at whatever moment it may be, in whatever circumstance it may be, coming full force into our conscience, should be viewed as the voice not only of our own conscience but as the voice of the Spirit of God Himself. In many instances, the believer is making the application of a Scriptural command or principle to his own life situation. He is receiving and practicing wisdom poured into his heart by the Holy Spirit through the grace of Christ, as taught in 1 Corinthians 1:30-31 and James 1:5. He concludes through prayer, the reading of Scripture, the wise counsel of other believers, and a careful analysis of his providentially orchestrated circumstances, that the constantly growing conclusion he has come to is in fact "the will of God." It becomes something he must do as a matter of obedience, as the Spirit of God through his conscience constantly brings the matter before him and urges him to act. He experiences the truth of Philippians 2:13 where Paul wrote, "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." He had experienced this in his own life. He said, "For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I preach not the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:16). Paul was conscience-bound to proclaim the gospel as the Apostle to the Gentiles. He could do nothing else, if he hoped to maintain a clear conscience before God and men.

Any Christian who has walked with God knows the experience of the encouragement of the Spirit of God, Who is the great παράκλητος. The Spirit strengthens the believer in the inner man to understand and live the life of selfless sacrifice for the good of others and the glory of God, as taught in Ephesians 3:14-21. Paul prayed for that strengthening for the Ephesians as he wrote in v. 16, “that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.” The believer may fully perceive this phenomenon through his conscience.

On the other hand, the Christian who disobeys God knows what it is to fail in the command, “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19), extinguishing as a burning flame that sense of assurance and exceeding joy known through a clear conscience by the Holy Spirit. This results in the loss of the joy of unimpeded communion with God. In its place is a sad and troubled awareness of sin through his conscience. If he fails to obey the command, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30) by harmful, evil communication and actions toward others, he perceives through his own conscience the grief he has brought to God and he knows his own grief for his sin. The two become one—his own grieving and the Spirit’s grieving--which he is aware through his conscience. This is much like the experience of a child who is saddened by his own failure to obey his father, but is even more filled with grief when he

sees how full of grief his father is when he hears his words and sees his sorrowful, disappointed countenance.

A turning from sin through confession, seeking the full restoration of fellowship with God through the cleansing of conscience is the only antidote for these conditions of the soul. Christ will cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:7-10) and renew a right spirit within us by His grace. The Psalmist captures this idea expressed in part of an inspired prayer in Psalm 51:7-12,

Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, let the bones which you have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean Heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.

Rather than invoke a strong dispensational interpretive framework on these words to explain the Psalmist's concern about being cast away from God's presence and the Spirit being taken from him, the words of the Lord Jesus in Luke 11:13 offer clarity: "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him." As believers indwelt by the Spirit, we have the Holy Spirit, so what Christ is teaching is that Christians are to pray for His greater influence and for a greater awareness by faith of His work in us, "that Christ will dwell in our hearts by faith" through the

strengthening work of the Spirit (Ephesians 3:16-17a). These are in fact the same sentiments expressed by the Psalmist.

There are also echoes of this Psalm in the words of the writer to the Hebrews when he pens, “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Hebrews 10:22), alluding to the Old Testament ritual of sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on the alter in the Temple for the covering of sin. But in the believer’s case, it is the blood Christ, once and for all shed for sin on the Cross, which cleanses the conscience. As John wrote, “But if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

The Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man

The Existence of Conscience and Its Function in Daily Life

The pivotal text of Scripture with reference to the συνείδησις in the unregenerate man is Romans 2:14-16, as mentioned in the previous section of this paper.

For when 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, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ.

This statement is set in the section of Romans, chapters 1-3, which establishes that all men are sinners, irrespective of race or religion. It also teaches that they are responsible for their own spiritual destiny and are answerable for the knowledge of God which they all possess, as explained in chapter one. These chapters confirm that all men are condemned without Christ's redeeming grace made available through His vicarious atoning death and subsequent resurrection to life everlasting, particularly chapter three as the climax of the section.

This passage communicates four important truths about conscience in the unregenerate. First, God in creating every man, has written His Law in man's immaterial, inner man called the καρδία (heart), a term itself rich in meaning and of great value to us hermeneutically and spiritually as mentioned above. Second, every unregenerate man has been created with a συνείδησις that witnesses to him on the basis of the Law of God in his heart about the morality or immorality of his thoughts, attitudes, disposition, words, and actions. This is in addition to the knowledge of God's existence and power made known through the things that are made, as explained in Romans 1:18-33, not the least of which is his own body and inner life created by God in magnificent complexity. Third, every unregenerate man has the capacity to accept the accurate conclusions of his conscience as it testifies to him according to the internally written Law of God or rationalize away the testimony of his conscience about the morality or immorality of his inner

thoughts and external behavior. Fourth, every unregenerate man engages in the process of flawed self-condemnation or self-justification in answer to the testimony of his conscience, even up to the time of the Great White Throne judgment, “the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus” (Romans 2:16b).

The Role of Conscience in Bringing the Unregenerate Man to Repentance and Faith

It is at the Great White Throne judgment that God will judge the secrets of men’s hearts through Him to whom He has committed the role of judge, the Lord Jesus Christ, as taught by Jesus in John 5:22, 27 and described by John in Revelation 20:11-15.

For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son....and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man (John 5:22, 27).

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things that were written in the books, according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

It is at this judgment that all the rationalizations against conscience, informed by the Law of God in a man, will evaporate and each unregenerate man will face the truth from Him who is Truth. The case will be made in part by the evidence presented through the testimony of each man’s conscience as the Omniscient Christ, the Chief Justice of the Universe, explains what is

written in the books concerning each man's works. Justice will be sure, the sentence passed and condemnation swift and permanent. The suffering that ensues will be in direct proportion to the egregiousness of each unregenerate person's sins, which they committed in spite of the testimony of their conscience based on the Law of God written in their hearts. All of their sins "were written in the books, according to their deeds....and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds (Revelation 20:12-13).

But even before their works are assessed and judged, they will be judged out of the book of life based on how they responded to the knowledge of God through Creation and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit through their conscience, to bring them to repentance and faith in Christ. As Jesus said in John 16:7-11,

But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you. And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

The "Helper" (παράκλητος) in this context is the Holy Spirit, Who "will convict the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment" (John 16:11). Those who are convicted by the Holy Spirit are "the world," which is the word κόσμος, used in the New Testament for those who are not part of the kingdom of God through the new birth and who oppose believers in this age as taught

in John 3:1-17 and John 15:18-19. The term “convict” in this passage may be rendered “reprove,” as translated by the King James Version. Trench defines this Greek term ἐλέγχω, in his work *Synonyms of the New Testament* as “to rebuke another, with such effectual wielding of the victorious arms of the truth, as to bring him, if not always to a confession, yet at least to a conviction, of his sin.” He further notes that the term is used in juristic Greek of one who not only replies to an opponent but refutes what he has to say.³¹

The three-fold conviction of the Holy Spirit, through the preaching of the gospel by Christians and the merciful providence of God, is meant to bring the unregenerate man to salvation. But how is it that God can effectively work in the heart of an unregenerate man? Paul explains in Ephesians 2:1-9 that God raises the spiritually dead man to life eternal. Paul further explains in 2 Corinthians 4:1-3 that God miraculously pours the light of the gospel into the “blind” heart of a lost man so he can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and be saved. But John 16:11-15 helps us understand the prior work of God’s common grace by which he chooses to achieve this miracle through the work of the Holy Spirit.

The lost man has a conscience and in his heart is written the Law of God, which is the schoolmaster that brings men to Christ. The preaching of the salvific work of Christ through the Cross and His resurrection to the man

³¹ Richard Chenevix Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament*, 9th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1880, 9th printing, 1996), 13.

is the starting point. As Paul put it, how shall they believe the gospel unless they hear it and how shall they hear it without a preacher (Romans 10:15). While hearing, the unregenerate man is variously described in the New Testament as lost, starving for the bread of life and dying of thirst for the water of life, blind, sick, and dead, but may suddenly have his eyes opened spiritually, his conscience made alive to the truth about sin, righteousness, and judgment through the work of the Holy Spirit. This is all with the intent that he will respond to God in saving repentance and faith.

At the moment of saving faith, the unregenerate man experiences the truth unfolded in Hebrews 9:14: “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience of dead works to serve the living God.” Or as Peter put it, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves you—not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience—through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 3:21).

The Scriptures teach that salvation is the Lord’s work. Men are not born again by blood (family heritage), nor the will of the flesh (good works in this life), or of the will of man (a mere human decision), but by the will of God (John 1:13). But this is not without the communication of the gospel by some human means and faith on the part of the lost men. Scripture is as clear about that as it is that God shows mercy to lost men through their conscience and the undeserved convicting work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts to draw

them to saving faith through the supernatural work of the Cross. John 6:44 says no man will ever be saved unless the Father draws him to it and John 12:32 records the words of Jesus when he said that through His being lifted up on the Cross all men would be drawn to the Faith. This is not to say they will all be saved, but that the historical fact, the spiritual miracle, and the proclaimed message of the Cross has supernatural drawing power for all who hear its message.

One cannot help but think of the many miracles the Lord Jesus performed during His incarnate ministry that are described in the Gospels as remarkably illustrative of Christ's way in His salvation. Whether He was transforming water into high quality wine for a wedding feast, using five loaves and two fish to feed a multitude, placing saliva on the tongue of a mute man to give him speech, or placing clay on the eyes of the blind man to restore his sight, the use of these means in no measure lessened the simple fact that the Lord Jesus had performed a life transforming miracle in each case. These miracles left those who observed them to conclude that He was God. And just as these miracles illustrate, no matter to what extent the Lord in mercy uses human means in the communication and the reception of the gift of salvation, it is a divine and miraculous gift, the greatest gift of all. It is a new birth, the washing of regeneration by the power of the Holy Spirit, cleansing a man's conscience by the blood of Christ shed on the Cross and

bringing his conscience to life through the resurrection of Christ, as just quoted above from Hebrews 9:14 and 1 Peter 3:21.

Christian Carefulness with the Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man

For the sake of our testimony of righteousness before the unregenerate, we are never to engage in behavior that offends their conscience, even if their conscience is ill-informed. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:28-29,

But if anyone says to you, “This is meat sacrificed to idols,” do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man’s; for why is my freedom judged by another’s conscience?

The conscience of other believers is not the only or primary purpose of this statement, which is clear from the explanation which follows in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 from Paul, which says,

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.

In this case, the unbeliever is evaluating the sincerity of a believer’s attitude toward “the gods,” represented by the idols, when they talk about Jesus, who they claim is the only true God. If the Christian eats meat sacrificed to idols, in their view the Christians are being inconsistent in their exclusive claim of Jesus’ deity, acknowledging the legitimacy of the false gods by eating meat sacrificed to the idols representing them. The Christian is also being inconsistent in benefitting, in their view, by a good meal resulting from

idol worship, who Christians say are false gods and whom they say they will have nothing to do with. This all goes to the integrity and the credibility of the believer, whether or not he really believes what he says he does, in the view of the unregenerate man. If the Christian seems less than sincere in his faith, the unbeliever may use this as an excuse to close his heart to the message of the gospel, and continue in his spiritual blindness.

The believer is to always be careful to not run roughshod over even the ill-informed sensitivities of conscience of the unregenerate, so as not to offend them and turn them away from the gospel. Instead, the Christian is to be especially careful not to offend them carelessly about their false religious practices, in order to have continued opportunity to give them the true gospel and see many of them saved.

The Seared Συνείδησις of the Unregenerate Man

In the opening verses of 1 Timothy 4, Paul warns of the misleading work of false teachers, who lead others away from the Faith. With reference to the function of their συνείδησις, they are in a special category, and it is not a good one. Paul writes in verses 1-5,

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons, by means of the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron, men who forbid marriage and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.

These men who cause others to “fall away from the faith” hypocritically pretend to be faithful Christian teachers and lie by presenting false doctrines as truth, which actually originate in the minds of demons. These teachings are for their own benefit, currying to themselves the favor of people, accompanied by their respect and desired financial support.

To engage in this activity of false teaching, these men have reached a point where they are “seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron.” The metaphor is a bone-chilling one, drawn from both the first century world of slavery and the first century world of medicine and even earlier.³²

Branding a slave as one’s possession consisted of applying by means of a red-hot iron rod an identifying mark of the owner of the slave on the slave’s body by burning that mark into his flesh. In the process, not only is the flesh burned, but potentially there is permanent nerve damage to the area of the wound so that there is no feeling in the vicinity of the brand once the wound is healed. This practice has been common to most cultures throughout recorded history where human slavery was practiced.

Also, in ancient times, even to the present, the process of cauterization by burning with metal, and in the last two centuries with electrical current or chemicals, to stop the bleeding of a wound or remove undesirable tissue, has been practiced in medicine. The destruction of nerve endings rendering the

³² Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles: Studies in 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1982), 144-47.

area treated insensitive is an unintentional and unfortunate side effect of the process. Recovery from this desensitization may or may not occur.

The point of the metaphor of searing is that these false teachers damaged their own conscience beyond repair and have come to a place of insensitivity in their own sense of right or wrong about what they are doing. They have reached a pathological state. They have come to the point of complete indifference about the morality of their behavior. Only what they get from their false teaching matters to them, not the damage they are doing to others spiritually. They have lost the proper function of conscience entirely.

The broader lesson to be learned from these men is that they rendered themselves in this condition by hypocrisy and lying, specifically about the truths of God and Christianity. These are sins that can be committed by the regenerate, as well as the unregenerate. The New Testament is full of warnings about both of these sins being committed by Christians. These false teachers stand as a warning through their tragic example to all believers, as well as to all unbelievers.

While the searing of the conscience is only mentioned here in the New Testament, another expression frequently used in Scripture to describe this insensitive state spiritually is the “hardening of the heart,” e.g., Hebrews 3:7-9, 14-15, describing this frightening possibility even for believers. There is no longer a spiritual tenderness, pliability, or the ability to penetrate to the core

of the spiritual need of a person in this state. They have become deeply insensitive to what is right and to the truth. While the metaphor of searing through branding is not present in the phrase “hardening of the heart,” it carries the same idea of a deep and perhaps potentially permanent insensitivity to spiritual truth.

The teaching of the New Testament in cases like these is that there comes a point of no return, when rejection has persisted too long. No other human knows that point of no return for the unbeliever. It is always required of believers that they do all they can to reach the lost, no matter how long they have persisted in that condition and even in their positions as false teachers. Remember, the Apostle Paul was first Saul of Tarsus, a leading, younger false teacher in Judaism at the time of his conversion on the Damascus Road. The power of God to completely transform and restore sensitivity to a seared conscience is proven by what happened to Paul. In the case of a believer who hardens his heart against the truth, there may come sudden and final chastening from the hand of the Lord from which there will be no recovery in this life.

The Defiled Συμείδησις of the Unregenerate Man

In Titus 1:15, the Apostle Paul describes the conscience of the unbeliever when he says, “To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience is defiled.” The combination of defilement and unbelief renders a

man lost and apart from God, not to mention the threat he poses to other people.

In the language of the New Testament there are two synonyms, translated by the English word “defiled.” One is *μολύνεται* (1 Corinthians 8:7), meaning smeared, which is best understood by the filthiness of a pig as an example. The pig is “defiled” from wallowing in the mud and filth, but it can be washed off, though normally the animal will return by nature to smear itself again with mud, mixed with its own filth in the pig sty.³³

The other word translated “defiled” is *μεμιάνται* (Titus 1:15) which means stain, and by analogy can be understood through stained glass or any permanent stain on a cloth that cannot be removed.

It is the second of these terms that is used to describe the thoughts and conscience of an unregenerate man. The depth and permanence of his moral and spiritual filth and darkness are in view in Titus 1:15. He cannot keep himself from thinking evil thoughts and performing wicked acts that leave his conscience constantly stained with sin. He is aware that he is spiritually filthy, a constantly stained man, though he may pretend to be otherwise before others. He is deeply impaired in his ability to think in a righteous way or to evaluate any thoughts, dispositions, words, or actions by others in an accurate way morally or spiritually. For him, trying to get a clear view of any

³³ Trench, *Synonyms*, 110.

moral or spiritual issue is like looking through a window, whose glass has been stained black, not on the surface, but rather in the very substance of the glass itself. This does not prevent him thinking that his dark views are correct, because he is deceived by the evil one.

The only hope for this man is to have this stain miraculously cleansed from his conscience by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. His conscience will have to be made new entirely by the grace of Christ in salvation for this stain to be removed.³⁴

The Συνείδησις of the Regenerate Man

Descriptors of the Συνείδησις of the Christian

Life led by the Spirit of God through the conscience of a godly person varies in its description in the New Testament. The variable of obedience makes for this variable description of the conscience of the Christian. These descriptors are helpful as goals toward which to strive in holiness and warnings about what to avoid from our great enemies, the world, the flesh, and the Devil. The table on the following page shows how each use fits into the categories of either a regenerate or an unregenerate person.

³⁴ Trench, *Synonyms*, 110.

Table 2—Descriptors of συνειδησις in the New Testament

Biblical References	Descriptors	Regenerate	Unregenerate
Acts 23:1	perfectly good ἐγὼ πάσῃ συνειδήσει ἀγαθῇ	Yes	No
Acts 24:16	blameless ἀπρόσκοπον	Yes	No
Rom. 2:15	their thoughts alternately accusing or defending τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων	No	Yes
Rom. 9:1	in the Holy Spirit ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:7	not all men have this knowledge Ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐν πᾶσιν ἡ γνῶσις	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:7	weak ἀσθενῆς	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:7	defiled οὐσα μολύνεται	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:10	strengthened οἰκοδομηθήσεται	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:12	when it is weak ἀσθενοῦσαν	Yes	No
1 Cor. 8:12	wounding their conscience τύπτοντες αὐτῶν τὴν συνείδησιν	Yes	No
1 Tim. 1:5	good ἀγαθῆς	Yes	No
1 Tim. 1:19	good ἀγαθὴν	Yes	No
1 Tim. 3:9	clear καθαρᾶ	Yes	No
1 Tim. 4:2	seared κεκαυστηριασμένων	No	Yes
2 Tim. 1:3	clear καθαρᾶ	Yes	No
Titus 1:15	defiled μεμίανται	No	Yes
Heb. 9:9	cannot make the worshipper	No	Yes

	perfect μὴ δυνάμεναι...τελειῶσαι τὸν λατρεύοντα		
Heb. 9:14	cleanse...from dead works καθαριεῖ...ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων	Yes	No
Heb. 10:22	having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience ῥεραντισμένοι τὰς καρδίας ἀπὸ συνειδήσεως πονηρᾶς	Yes	No
Heb. 13:18	good καλὴν	Yes	No
1 Pet. 3:16	good ἀγαθὴν	Yes	No
1 Pet. 3:21	good ἀγαθῆς	No	Yes

Positive Descriptors of the Christian Conscience

A Good Conscience (Acts 23:1; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19, Hebrews 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16; 1 Peter 3:21)

The most frequently used English word used to translate the adjective for the Christian συνείδησις in its ideal condition is “good,” in one case with other modifiers (i.e., Acts 23:1). All but one of the references where this translation is found (instead καλὴν in Hebrews 13:18) is a rendering of the Greek adjective ἀγαθός in one of its feminine forms, which means “clear,” or “moral, inner worth”³⁵ (Acts 23:1; 1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 1 Peter 3:16, 21).

The noun form of this word family (“goodness,” ἀγαθωσύνη) is significant in that it is a categorical positive as a description of Christian

³⁵ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 3-4.

character over against evil, including zeal for what is right and true, as demonstrated by Christ in His cleansing of the Temple.³⁶ There is a wholesome aggressiveness for what is right and true as opposed to a kind, gentle passivity, also used to describe Christ. The contexts in which this adjective is connected with συνείδησις are supportive of this choice of words, even in 1 Peter 3:21, which features a crying out in saving faith for a good conscience.

The one instance where the ἀγαθὴ συνείδησις has additional modifiers is in Acts 23:1 in which Paul describes his own conscience. He says, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.” Preceding the phrase with ἐγὼ πάση gives particular stress to the completeness of this condition and Paul’s own special efforts to make that so.

In 1 Timothy 1:5, the goal of Paul’s instruction to Timothy and others is described as love out of “a pure heart, a good conscience, and sincere faith.” Here the phrase is nestled between “a pure heart” which describes the whole inner man and “sincere faith” which is to be the outward expression of an inner holy life. The “good conscience” is dead center as that which gives testimony to the pure heart and allows for bold expression of faith in life. Without that inner testimony, the living out of a true inner spirituality never makes it into the open.

³⁶ Trench, *Synonyms*, 231-35.

1 Timothy 1:19 warns of two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who “put away” i.e., pushed aside or repudiated³⁷ a good conscience and ruined their lives as a consequence, described as suffering “shipwreck in regard to their faith.” Following this metaphor, the good conscience would have been the rudder of the ship of their lives. They simply pushed the rudder to the side the wrong direction and ended up on the rocky shore or reef. Their first names are given, so it is reasonable to assume they were people that Timothy and Paul both knew and who perhaps were men in ministry leadership, who ruined their Christian testimonies by failing to heed what they knew through their conscience was right to do and to avoid. Paul exercised his apostolic authority as he did in 1 Corinthians 5 in the case of the professed, Christian man who was living in open immorality with his stepmother. Paul handed him and these two men over to Satan for the severest discipline.

Peter encourages the believers who were suffering for their faith to “συνείδησιν ἔχοντες ἀγαθήν” (“keep a good conscience”), so that those who were falsely accusing them would be put to shame when they were proven to be liars by the consistent, impeccable character and behavior of the Christians (1 Peter 3:16). By continually having or holding (ἔχοντες, present active participle) a good conscience, they would achieve this end.

³⁷ Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 126-27.

As mentioned above, in one instance another Greek adjective is used and translated by the English “good.” In Hebrews 13:18, the writer requests, “Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. The phrase “καλὴν συνείδησιν ἔχομεν,” translated “we have a good conscience,” expresses that it is the continual, honest intent of the writer to live an honorable life for God’s glory. The adjective καλὴν gives special emphasis to the idea of wholeness or completeness, as something sound or healthy or as something symmetrical or balanced in its beauty. The writer was saying there was no defect in his conscience, he was speaking with complete integrity when he requested prayer that he might live a holy life.³⁸

A Pure Conscience (1 Timothy 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; Hebrews 9:14; Hebrews 10:22)

The second dominant descriptor of the ideal Christian conscience, in terms of frequency of use, is derived more literally from objects, food, or substances that are clean or pure. The idea is either expressed in adjectival form (clean, pure, καθαρῶς, 1 Timothy 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3), verb form (καθαριεῖ, Hebrews 9:14), or is implied and therefore editorially included as “clean” in contrast to “evil” (πονηρὸς, Hebrews 10:22). The use of these terms in these

³⁸ Trench, *Synonyms*, 389.

New Testament references have only to do with the internal condition of the conscience of the believer.

In the first instance, those qualifying for the office of deacon must “hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.” (1 Timothy 3:9). This means that their own conscience must testify to them that they are continually holding (ἔχοντας, present active participle) the revealed Faith. There must be no significant, ongoing blemish in belief or practice concerning the commands of God.

In the second instance, Paul was giving a testimony that just as his forefathers in the Faith had, he was living with a clear conscience and particularly with reference to his continual prayers for Timothy (2 Timothy 1:3). There was no stain or impurity there, no failure.

The third reference is to the work of Christ in the believer’s salvation. He offered Himself by shedding of his blood through the power of the Eternal Spirit to καθαριεῖ τὴν συνείδησιν ἡμῶν ἀπὸ νεκρῶν ἔργων εἰς τὸ λατρεύειν θεῷ ζῶντι (“cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God,” Hebrews 9:14). Through this great cleansing comes deliverance from both the specific works and the whole concept of works for eternal salvation. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone achieved by His atoning death and resurrection to life.

The final reference speaks of the believer drawing near to God, having a conscience sprinkled “clean” (editorially added), alluding to the sprinkling

of the blood of sacrifices on the altar in Old Testament symbolic worship as a covering for sin (ῥεραντισμένοι, perfect passive participle, “sprinkle,” translated in BDAG as “After we have purified our hearts of an evil conscience,” Hebrews 10:22).³⁹ The heart sprinkled clean is to rid oneself ἀπὸ συνειδήσεως πονηρᾶς (“from an evil conscience”).

A Blameless and Perfect Conscience (Acts 24:16 Hebrews 9:9)

These two descriptions of conscience found in our English translations are similar to each other in that they express a faultlessness of conscience not expressed by the word “good” either in English translation or the Greek text that rests behind it, i.e., ἀγαθὴ or καλὴ, the descriptors of the ideal Christian conscience discussed above. On the other hand, the English translation of these two earlier adjectives is translated a “clear conscience” in some instances, which tends to communicate the idea of offense-less or faultless, just as do the translations “blameless” and “perfect” in English.

In Acts 24:16, Paul is defending himself before the Roman Governor Felix and the Jewish leaders, who had come with a lawyer named Tertullus from Jerusalem to accuse him before the Roman seat of power in Caesarea. During his defense, his personal philosophy of life toward God and others is expressed in the statement, “In view of this, I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.” The phrase

³⁹ Bauer, *The Greek-English Lexicon*, 903.

“to maintain a blameless conscience” is ἀπρόσκοπον συνείδησιν ἔχειν in Koine. The word ἀπρόσκοπον means “undamaged” or “blameless” and may be rendered “clear” as well.⁴⁰ The choice of this word by Paul may suggest that prior offenses against his conscience, now rectified, had no bearing on his constant and best efforts (ἄσκῶ, present active indicative) and significant success in maintaining a conscience that witnessed to him of his purity “before God and before men.”

In Hebrews 9:9, referring back to the Tabernacle and Temple worship, the writer says, “...which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly, both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience.” This statement anticipates what follows in verse 14 of the same chapter, which states by contrast that the blood of Christ cleanses the conscience of those who have saving faith from dead works. The former, symbolic worship system of the Jews, with its offerings and sacrifices could not make the conscience of the worshiper “perfect.” The term translated “perfect” is τελειῶσαι (1st aorist active infinitive), meaning to bring to its goal, to accomplish, or make perfect, bring to full measure.⁴¹ Those washed in the blood of the Lamb have their conscience brought to a full level of potential at

⁴⁰ Bauer, *The Greek-English Lexicon*, 102.

⁴¹ Ibid., 817.

saving faith, though sanctification heightens even to a greater degree the discernment and testifying capacity of the believer's conscience.

A Conscience Influenced by the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1)

As developed earlier in this paper, the Christian's conscience is directly communicated with by the Holy Spirit concerning his personal, internal spiritual integrity. The pivotal phrase in Romans 9:1 that teaches this idea is a commentary by Paul on his own continual sorrow concerning the lost condition of Israel and his willingness to be condemned eternally if it would mean their salvation. He states, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit." The clause συμμαρτυρούσης μοι τῆς συνειδήσεώς μου ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ ("my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit") emphasizes the testifying power of conscience in the thoughts of the believer and the energizing power and communication of the Holy Spirit through the believer's conscience. This is based on the instrumental dative of agency following the preposition ἐν in the phrase ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ in Romans 9:1.

A Conscience with Knowledge (1 Corinthians 8:7)

In the important section of his second letter in which conscience comes under discussion with reference to eating meat offered to idols in pagan temples, i.e., 2 Corinthians 8-10), Paul alludes to the idea that a believer who

understands the true nature of idols as nothing, because there is only one true God, has no problem with his conscience when eating such meat.

But then he states in 1 Corinthians 8:7, “However not all men have this knowledge.” In other words, if someone had this knowledge they would have a well-informed conscience that would not condemn them for eating such meat, but if the believer does not have this knowledge he will be condemned by his conscience if he eats it. His conscience is “weak,” lacking knowledge, and when violated becomes “defiled.” This clause in 1 Corinthians 8:7 underscores a truth elsewhere presented concerning conscience. A believer with a conscience informed by the truth and who lives by such a conscience is safe spiritually, he has a good conscience and peace with himself and God. The more fully informed the believer’s conscience is by the truth of reality and the truth of God’s revelation, the Bible, the healthier his conscience is and the safer his life is spiritually.

Negative Descriptors of the Christian Conscience

A Conscience without Knowledge—Weak, Wounded and Defiled (1 Corinthians 8:7-10)

The most concentrated grouping of negative descriptors of the Christian conscience is found in 1 Corinthians 8:7-10, the passage just discussed above with a focus on only one single positive modifier of conscience. But what dominates in this passage is the negative outcome of a conscience without sufficient knowledge of the truth concerning the non-god-

like quality of idols. Idols are not gods, nor do they represent true gods, though demons and their power do rest behind them. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:19-21,

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

On the other hand, the Christian without a correct knowledge concerning idols and the meat sacrificed to them is described as ἄσθενοῦς (“weak,” 1 Corinthians 8:10, 12). In the physical realm, this describes an unhealthy state, malnourished, fraught with sickness, and weakness.

Sadly, a believer in this weakened condition of conscience may be emboldened to eat the meat because sees a more mature Christian eating it, who understands that idols are nothing and the meat itself is not actually physically polluted. The stronger Christian is, however, culpable for the failure of this weaker brother’s eating. The stronger brother should have known that eating meat sacrificed to idols was wrong because of the connection between demons and idols, as stated in 1 Corinthians 10:19-21. He certainly should have been more careful toward his weaker brother, who was still thinking that the meat was sacrificed to actual gods. In causing his weak brother to eat, he sinned against Christ, as stated in 1 Corinthians 8:12, by causing the weaker brother to align himself with what he thought was the worship of idols.

As soon as the Christians with a weak conscience ate, they were suddenly condemned by their conscience because they had violated what they thought was right, based on their limited understanding of the true nature of idols and the meat sacrificed to them. Instead they decided to give greater weight to the behavior of more mature Christians rather than obey the dictates of their conscience. By this action, the stronger Christians, with adequate knowledge of the truth, were τύπτοντες αὐτῶν τὴν συνείδησιν (“wounding their conscience,” 1 Corinthians 8:12). More literally, they are giving the conscience of their weaker brother a terrible spiritual beating (τύποντες, present active participle, to beat, to strike),⁴² resulting in their conscience οὐσα μολύνεται (“being [present active participle] defiled”). This defilement is unlike the defilement of the unregenerate man whose conscience is deeply and permanently stained, like the black stained glass mentioned earlier in this discussion. This is the defilement of the pig in mud and filth.⁴³ The spiritual filth of this defilement can be washed away by the blood of Christ through confession, as 1 John 1:7-10 teaches. However, the healing of the wound to his conscience may take considerable time, knowledge, and experience. In fact, the trauma of this wound to his conscience may cause him to never know any freedom of heart ever about the

⁴² Bauer, *The Greek-English Lexicon*, 838.

⁴³ Trench, *Synonyms*, 110.

nature of idols and anything related to them. He may always be overly sensitive about them, even having an overly scrupulous conscience in their regard. The eating of meat offered in the temples to idols is not a current concern for Christians for the twenty-first century Christian. But emboldening weaker Christians to violate their conscience in ways that more knowledgeable Christians are at ease with spiritually is sin.

A Christian's Submission to the Conscience of a Fellow Believer (2 Corinthians 4:2; 5:11; 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 Romans 14:1-23)

Submission for Evaluation

Twice in 2 Corinthians, Paul commended himself to others for the evaluation of himself by their conscience, their internal judgement of right and wrong. He said in 2 Corinthians 4:2,

But we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

He commended himself to "every man's conscience," saved and lost alike, for evaluation. He was living an ethically honest life, "not walking in craftiness," and a doctrinally pure life, "not adulterating the word of God." Paul believed that this life of transparent integrity on both the ethical and theological levels was the only life that would stand the test of men and God. He welcomed the scrutiny; he knew he could stand up under it, and that it would give him a hearing with men.

Urging on believers the ministry of reconciliation through the spread of the gospel of Christ and reminding them of the future Bema Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10-21), Paul said he hoped that he would be ταῖς συνειδήσεσιν ὑμῶν πεφανερῶθαι (“made manifest in their consciences”) concerning the absolute sincerity of his ministry among them as an ambassador of Christ. His desire was that they understood his heart and came to the right conclusions about what mattered to Paul, as it should to any man in the ministry toward those he serves.

Submission with Human Limitations

While Paul was rightly concerned about the correct perception of his ministry by others through their conscience, he recognized there were limits to this. He knew that ultimately a thoroughly instructed and Spirit-guided conscience was not omniscient. He said in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5,

But to me it is very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

While the Apostle does not use the term συνείδησις in this passage, the language describes conscience. He said he was not σύνοιδα (“conscious”) of anything against himself, but not only did not fully trust the evaluation of others concerning himself, he did not even trust himself. He knew that only

Him who knows all things could be trusted to give a right evaluation at the Bema Seat of Christ.

Submission in Love Toward Those Who Differ in Conscience (Rom. 14:1-23)

In this passage, which does not include the term συνείδησις, Paul argues that there are two reasons Christians differ in conscience: (1) one is weak and the other strong, i.e., unknowledgeable or knowledgeable in the truth, or in other words, spiritually mature or immature (Romans 14:1-4); or (2) they simply respond differently to matters which have no moral content or character because of personal experience and preference (Romans 14:5-11).

While the term συνείδησις does not occur in this passage, the concept is strongly in play throughout the chapter. The Apostle articulates important guiding standards that should control our attitude toward both weaker brothers and brothers with whom we simply disagree on the basis of personal experience and preference. First, we must recognize that each man is ultimately answerable to the Lord Who is his Master, not us (vv. 4, 7-12, 22-23). We are never to take overmuch responsibility for other Christians in areas of simple, non-moral differences, no matter the cause of the differences. If we are not dealing with a clearly moral or spiritual matter stated explicitly in Scripture, or a clear matter of Biblical application about which mature believers universally agree in our Christian community, there should be no criticism of or conflict with our Christian brothers. Second, we must never cause a brother in Christ to stumble by our attitudes or behavior toward him.

We are to never offend our brothers in Christ by being harsh or unwarranted in our criticism of them (vv. 13-18). Third, we are to only pursue through love that which builds up our brothers and the work of God in peace (vv. 19-21).

This passage does not address the process of determining the moral and spiritual content of thinking, philosophies, emotions, dispositions, actions, or affiliations of believers. These matters are left to mature discernment, based on a sophisticated comparison of scripture with scripture and godly application of the truth by elders in the Body of Christ in every culture and in every generation. Assuming that any current practice in Christian lifestyle or worship falls automatically within Romans 14 as a determinative and directive passage is an egregious error that will lead inevitably to a spiritual downgrade in the Church.

The Christian's Conscience as It Relates to Sanctification (John 17:17; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Hebrews 5:13-14)

The whole process of Christian sanctification assumes three elements: the knowledge of Scripture, a regenerated conscience, and the indwelling Spirit of God to impart all the grace necessary to bring transformation of thinking, disposition, character, and behavior. The work of the Scriptures in this process is found in numerous passages such as John 17:17 where Jesus said in His high priestly prayer, "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth." Nowhere is the working of the Spirit in sanctification more explicitly stated than in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, where Paul said,

Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty. But we all with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

The operation of conscience in sanctification is explained in Hebrews 5:13-14, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.” While this verse does not contain the term συνείδησις the function of conscience is described precisely and the effects to follow are implied. The mature believer is described as τῶν διὰ τὴν ἔξιν τὰ αἰσθητήρια γεγυμνασμένα ἔχόντων πρὸς διάκρισιν καλοῦ τε καὶ κακοῦ (“who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil”). This is exactly what the conscience in a mature, Word-instructed believer does. The conscience is described as the believer’s αἰσθητήρια (“senses”), a more obscure and little used word for conscience in Koine. It leads him to choose the good, and if he fails and chooses evil, it judges him and directs him to confess his sin and return to the righteous pathway. Ideally, the process continues daily until the moment of glorification when the believer instantly becomes like Him in holiness for he sees Him as He truly is—pure, full exposure to the Son of God, bringing complete transformation into His image, forever.

Some Ministry Implications from the Study of Συνείδησις

For the Interpretation of the New Testament

A fresh look by theologians and pastors at the heart of man in the theology of the New Testament is probably in order at this point in the academy, with the goal of the results trickling down in our Christian college classrooms and our churches.

While there is value in considering whether man is bipartite or tripartite in his immaterial being, interpreters will probably be better served in thinking in terms of functions of the inner man, rather than parts. A reading of the New Testament makes apparent that the interplay between all the functions of the inner man are constant. The thoughts, empathetic and sympathetic reactions (emotions), dispositions, qualities of character, desires, choices, and moral-spiritual judgments are constantly intermixing to bring a result, all effected by the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit. Central to all of these functions is the conscience, as the internal teacher, exhorter, judge and jury of the inner man, a particularly forceful channel for God's communication to the believer in daily life by the Holy Spirit.

A renewed emphasis on a good conscience also should be asserted as the benchmark for Christian ministry, due to the emphasis that Paul gives this in his ministerial practice and overall ministerial theology.

The theology of conscience taught in the New Testament affirms that it is a universal phenomenon in all men. The New Testament equates it with

living life truly in the Faith. Its centrality to sanctification is second only to the concept of love as the heart of the two greatest commandments. The authority of conscience is absolute, when guided by the Spirit and Scripture. Its dictates must never be violated. Though the conscience of the unbeliever and believer alike is malleable depending on the influences on it, it is to be viewed according to the New Testament as a reliable guide in life, fully capable of directing the believer in the true way when he is strong in conscience due to a thorough knowledge of the Word of God.

For the Church

The theologically conservative church in America has been hurt by assigning too much of a determinative role to the conscience of the individual believer in settling the right or wrong path to holiness for Christians. The rising tide of popular opinion and common practice, often an expression of the conscience of the immature in Church, has been given far too much sway in determining what the Church looks and acts like in this early part of the twenty-first century.

While varying views about Christian behavior, the importance of certain ideas in Scripture, and worship forms and practices are inevitable because of the levels of knowledge of the Word of God, the variety of Christian communities within the Biblical church in America and varying levels of spiritual maturity among believers, this should not deter the leaders of the Church from a serious search.

This fresh search will be for the moral nature or content of *everything* Christians think and do. We are called upon to “examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22). Even more, we are challenged to “approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory of God” (Philippians 1:9-11). We are long overdue for an “excellence reset” in the theologically conservative church in America, all the way from the far-right fundamentalists to the leftwing evangelicals, clear across the full spectrum of those who claim that salvation by grace through faith Christ alone is the only way of salvation, and the that the Word of God is the inerrant revelation of God for believers for faith and practice. An historic word for this “excellence reset” is revival.

For the Believer

The teaching of the New Testament on the conscience of the believer requires a new birth of self-examination and a refocus on holiness among the people of God, rather than cultural adaptation. A truly biblical separation, not cultural adaptation, is the secret to impactful evangelism, as the light of godly example shines forth in the dark world and into the dark hearts of the lost.

For the believer to year after year bemoan his lack of Bible reading, prayer, and overall inability to make serious progress in holiness is an affront

to Christ, the compassionate “Holy One” (so named in Luke 4:34; Acts 4:27). It is right for believers to say they have a good conscience, a strong conscience, a pure conscience, a clear conscience, a blameless conscience. Yes, we will always have the flesh and sinful failure, but this is not to be the daily norm for the believer. Those of us who teach must teach sanctifying grace and as well as saving grace so those we serve will live a life of spiritual triumph, joy, and fruitfulness, as their conscience assures them that they are walking faithfully with Him.