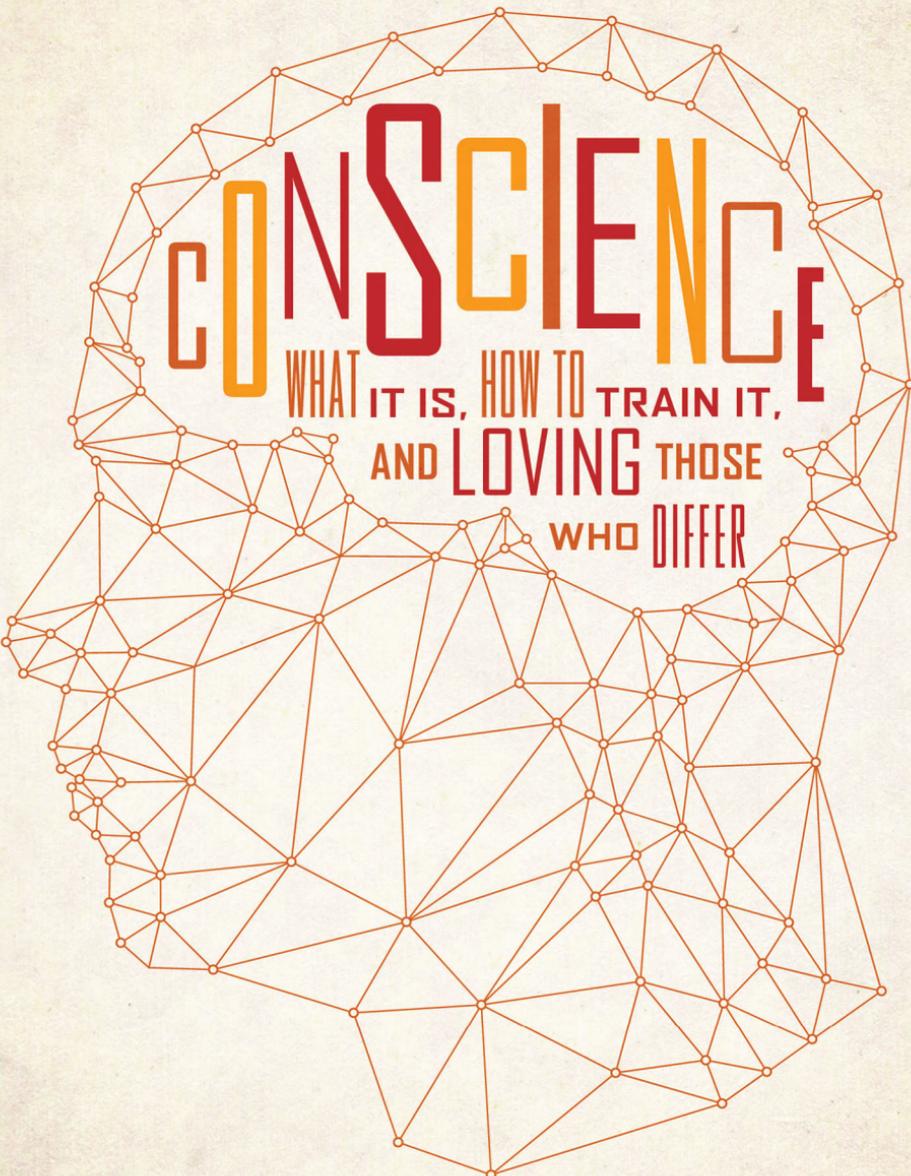


FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON



CONSCIENCE
WHAT IT IS, HOW TO TRAIN IT,
AND LOVING THOSE
WHO DIFFER

ANDREW DAVID NASELLI & J. D. CROWLEY

“I expected this book to be good but found it to be great. *Conscience* is a much-needed treatment of a vital yet neglected subject. Naselli and Crowley’s overview of the New Testament doctrine of conscience is superb. I was ready to say that that chapter was worth the price of the book, but in fact, I found every chapter to be worth the price of the book! Its treatment of how Christian consciences overlap yet differ and of why we need to calibrate our consciences was remarkable. This book is for everyone with an interest in cross-cultural ministry, as well as for those seeking to become all things to all people that they may win some. It’s also extremely helpful for those living in churches, marriages, and friendships where different convictions aren’t always as black-and-white as we imagine. *Conscience* would be great to study in a small group.”

Randy Alcorn, Founder and Director, Eternal Perspective Ministries; author, *Heaven* and *Happiness*

“How should Christians navigate the complex world of disagreements with other Christians? Can we differentiate the scriptural nonnegotiables, the things we just personally feel strongly about, and those to which we give scarcely a second thought? How can the church best model unity in both love and truth in these matters? Naselli and Crowley bring both cross-cultural experience and scriptural acumen to deftly deal with these issues in straightforward language that almost anyone can grasp. Warmly recommended.”

Craig L. Blomberg, Distinguished Professor of New Testament, Denver Seminary

“In our culture awash with instructions to follow our own hearts, we desperately need this book. On a personal note, next to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, the Bible’s teaching on the conscience has become to me a deeply encouraging motivation in my evangelism. In the last chapter in particular, Naselli and Crowley have given a great gift to cross-cultural workers everywhere!”

Gloria Furman, pastor’s wife, Redeemer Church of Dubai; author, *The Pastor’s Wife* and *Missional Motherhood*

“It is rare to find a book that is both punchy and practical. It was a delight to read, and now it is a delight to recommend. I believe that the scriptural concept of the conscience has become so fuzzy or forgotten that *all* readers will find this little book illuminating for issues that touch upon *all* of life. All will find it life-giving. Some will find it life-changing.”

Jason C. Meyer, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

“I have never read a better book on the conscience. Naselli and Crowley base their view of conscience on a careful reading of the Scriptures. At the same time, the book is full of practical wisdom. The biblical teaching on conscience is applied to numerous situations so that readers see how the Scriptures apply to everyday life. The reflections on how conscience should operate in missionary situations is alone worth the price of the book, but the entire book is a gem.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation and Associate Dean of the School of Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There is, for too many of us, a casual, maybe even self-righteous, contentment with the current status of our consciences rather than an active cultivating of them so as to bring them more in line with God’s view of things. This book pushes us to that second, better choice. It is a thoughtful and provocative treatment of this hugely important and all too often insufficiently considered subject. I believe you will find it very helpful.”

Mike Bullmore, Senior Pastor, CrossWay Community Church, Bristol, Wisconsin

“Naselli and Crowley have produced a book of deep and broad practical relevance for living the Christian life. We are often far too little aware of the role of our consciences in our day-to-day lives, while the truth is, God has given us those faculties as part of the divinely designed means to keep us on the path of righteousness. I found their discussion of the recalibration of the conscience, and of how to deal with fellow Christians who have different senses of right and wrong, to be filled with biblical wisdom and enormous insight. Here is a book that promises great reward for those who will follow not only its clear discussion but also its biblical admonition.”

Bruce A. Ware, T. Rupert and Lucille Coleman Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Naselli and Crowley have provided us with a practical, biblical work that cleans out the clutter in the closets of our consciences. There is gospel-centered perspective here that can bring about greater healing in our relationships, holiness in our lives, unity in our churches, and joy in our mission.”

Tim Keese, Founder and Executive Director, Frontline Missions International; author, *Dispatches from the Front*

“In his kindness God has created each of us with a conscience to bear witness to his supreme authority. The problem for many of us is that our consciences have been subject to cultural, religious, and sinful influences that warp and distort our ability to make life choices. Naselli and Crowley have provided God’s people with a tremendous tool for understanding the Scriptures as they define the conscience, describe its role, and teach us to cleanse and calibrate it according to God’s authority alone. The church is indebted to these two authors for their careful scholarship and practical discussion of this most important topic.”

Dan Brooks, Pastor, Heritage Bible Church, Greer, South Carolina

CONSCIENCE

What It Is, How to Train It,
and Loving Those Who Differ

ANDREW DAVID NASELLI AND J. D. CROWLEY

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
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To Kara Marie Naselli,
Gloria Grace Naselli,
and Emma Elyse Naselli,

and

to Charis Kaimilani Johansen,
Ethan James Dale Crowley,
Anna Kawainohia Pruden,
Jenna Malia Crowley,
Taylor Elliot Alden Crowley,
and Nathaniel Judson Martin Crowley,

May God grace you to maintain a good
conscience and to calibrate it wisely so that
you can love other Christians when you
differ by flexing for the sake of the gospel.

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FOREWORD

As Charles Taylor reminds us in his impressive book *A Secular Age*, we live in the “age of authenticity,” in which individuals feel they have the right to pursue and do whatever they want: that is what makes them “authentic.” Inevitably, that stance makes one suspicious of all voices of authority that seem to tug in any direction different from what makes our lives “authentic.” The source or nature of that authority does not matter: government, parents, tradition, religion, morality. Nothing trumps my right to be “authentic,” which from a Christian perspective is nothing other than the siren call of the supreme idol: Self. Combine this with a strong emphasis on individualism and the stage is set for the overthrow of a great deal of what was received from the past. Ironically, the voices that call for this destruction of the past and this construction of a new reality are highly selective in their treatment of authority. If they seem set to trim my authentic living, they are antiquarian, obscurantist, old-fashioned, and doubtless bigoted; if they are busy establishing the new consensus, using all the authoritative powers of the media and the cultural imagination to approve certain stances and not others, then they are prophetic, wise, liberating, and in line with history.

Small wonder, then, that this is an age that gives little thought to the nature and functions of conscience. Conscience is easily trampled if it gets in the way of authentic living. More dangerously, conscience is malleable and is easily reshaped to conform, in substantial measure, to the dictates of our age. We crush conscience in order to toss off what now appear to be the shackles of a bygone age, and then we immediately resurrect conscience in new configurations that establish new shackles, new expectations, new legalisms, new failures, new pools of guilt. For example, by determined suppression a new generation silences the voice of conscience in many sexual matters, and teases it alive when it comes to the importance of finding out where your coffee beans were grown and what we should do to protect the most recently highlighted victim.

Christians, of course, are not exempt from these pressures. But one of the things we must do to think clearly about such matters is regain biblical perspectives on the nature, nurture, and proper functions of conscience. This short book by Andy Naselli and J. D. Crowley is designed to meet this need at a popular level. It is a pleasure and a privilege to recommend it. A proper focus on conscience, especially conscience that is shaped and strengthened by Scripture, will incite us toward holiness, teach us what to do with guilt, drive us toward the gospel, draw from us something of the joy of the Lord, help the church to be a countercultural community, and even prepare us for cross-cultural missionary work. Read this book yourself, and give a copy to your friends.

D. A. Carson

PREFACE

Buy One, Get Ten Free

Some subjects in Christianity are so fertile, so abundantly promising and useful on so many different levels, that studying them reaps a harvest far beyond expectations. It's like *buy one, get ten free*. Conscience is one of those subjects. It touches on salvation, progressive sanctification, church unity, evangelism, missions, and apologetics. Yet hardly is a topic more neglected in the Christian church:

- When was the last time you heard a sermon about conscience?
- Have you ever mentioned your clean conscience in your testimony, as Paul did?
- Did those who discipled you talk much about keeping a clean conscience?
- How many ministry books emphasize the unbreakable link, as Paul did, between getting your conscience under the lordship of Christ and achieving success in church ministry and missions?
- Did you know that a proper understanding of conscience is a key to church unity?

We've written this book to help you get to know your conscience better, to put conscience back on your daily radar. Many

Christians have neglected their conscience, quite possibly you as well. And as the two of us found, this neglect is serious, a failure to give a priceless gift from God the care it deserves. For most of our lives, we didn't spend much time thinking about our conscience. Then certain events forced us to take a closer look.

For me (J. D.), conscience started catching my attention when I came back from Cambodia on home assignment and found that I couldn't make myself step over someone else's outstretched legs. I was at a family get-together and had just gotten up from the couch to grab a refill of chips and salsa when I found my way blocked by someone's legs propped up on the coffee table. I stopped and waited for him to do the decent thing: pull his feet off the table so I could get by. But he just sat there like an uncultured boor. Then I remembered I was in America, a country famous the world over for the Statue of Liberty, baseball, and stepping over other people's legs with impunity. So I forced myself to do *That Which Must Not Be Done*. In Southeast Asia, one could hardly do something more offensive.

I began to wonder about my involuntary inability simply to cross over someone's legs. It felt like a pang of conscience, yet I knew that the matter had nothing to do with moral right and wrong, just proper etiquette. How had that new rule wormed its way into my conscience without my knowing it? Should it have been in my conscience at all? What is conscience? Where did it come from? How does it work? Does it always judge correctly? Can it change? How does it change? Why did mine change? How do I take care of my conscience? How is my American conscience different from the conscience of my friends in Cambodia? And so began my quest for a deeper understanding and appreciation of this gift from God.

For me (Andy), I started thinking more deeply about how the conscience works when my wife, Jenni, and I moved from

our fundamentalist context in Greenville, South Carolina (we both graduated from Bob Jones University), to a conservative evangelical context in Chicago (I attended Trinity Evangelical Divinity School). We knew godly brothers and sisters at both institutions, but two actions repeatedly grieved us: (1) people in both places often lobbed verbal grenades at one another as if they were opponents, and (2) they painted each other with a broad brush that lacked sufficient nuance. The reasons for such behaviors are many and complex.¹ But I began to realize that a key cause of the divide between these two groups of Christians has to do with the conscience.

A Modest Agenda

If you're hoping that this book will directly address a particular conscience scruple with which you've been wrestling, you'll probably be disappointed. Our purpose is not to referee controversies. Neither will you find in this slender volume an exhaustive theology of conscience (though we attempt to leave no *conscience* verse unturned).

Our modest but potentially life-changing goal is to put conscience back on your daily radar, to show from Scripture what God intended and did not intend conscience to do, and to explain how your conscience works, how to care for it, and how not to damage it. We'll show you how awareness of conscience increases church unity and strengthens evangelism and missions. We'll talk about how to get along with others whose consciences enable them to hold different personal standards. And we'll give you principles for how to calibrate your conscience to better conform to God's will. We'll even include a chapter on how missionaries and other cross-cultural servants

¹ See Andrew David Naselli and Collin Hansen, eds., *Four Views on the Spectrum of Evangelicalism*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011).

can avoid pitfalls that arise from misunderstandings over differing consciences across cultures.

We believe you'll benefit greatly from studying the conscience if

- you want to know how conscience relates to your spiritual maturity;
- you want to know how to get along with people who have different personal standards than you;
- you're a pastor who suspects that a significant number of your church's problems stem from disagreements about disputable issues of conscience;
- you're a missionary who needs help negotiating the minefield of differences between missionary and local consciences and who wants to avoid importing merely cultural Christianity;
- you want to help people in your church understand why they have culture clashes with those of different opinions and habits;
- you want to learn how to adjust your conscience to match God's standards without sinning against your conscience; or
- you feel the weight of a guilty conscience and want to experience the freedom and sheer happiness of a clear, cleansed conscience.

There's a misperception that conscience-related controversies occur only in strict churches. But really all of us are incurably judgmental. As creatures made in the image of a moral God, we are incapable of *not* making moral judgments, whatever our situation. A church that thinks it has gotten beyond last generation's debates over music and wine will find that this generation's debates over recycling and child discipline are just as divisive. A believer who has prided himself on being generous

on disputable matters will suddenly find himself judging a fellow believer who doesn't buy fair-trade coffee. Conscience issues will remain an important part of your personal life, your church life, and your ministry life for the rest of your life. Take a moment to think about these questions:

- What exactly is the conscience?
- What should you do when your conscience condemns you?
- How should you calibrate or adjust your conscience?
- How should you relate to fellow Christians when your consciences disagree?
- How should you relate to people in other cultures when your consciences disagree?

If you can't answer these questions, then you might be

- living under a perpetual weight of guilt;
- sinning against God by ignoring or disregarding your conscience;
- missing out on the joy that attention to conscience can provide;
- hesitating to adjust your conscience because you don't know how to do it safely;
- harming fellow Christians who hold different convictions than you;
- contributing to sinful divisiveness within Christ's church; or
- proceeding unwisely in the way you're spreading the gospel to non-Christians in other cultures.

This book addresses these issues in three steps:

1. Chapters 1–2 describe what conscience is.
2. Chapters 3–4 talk about how you should deal with your own conscience.

3. Chapters 5–6 explain how you should relate to other people when your consciences disagree.

We wrote this book because we feel so deeply that people today need clear and accurate answers to these questions. Not only do people *need* them; they *want* them. We've had many opportunities to preach, teach, and counsel about the conscience in many different venues to many different kinds of Christians, and in our experience, people love to learn about the conscience because it helps them practically.

We pray that God will use this book to educate you in how to handle your conscience for his eternal glory and your eternal good.

Christian, meet Conscience.

WHAT IS CONSCIENCE?

Most people probably think of the conscience as the “shoulder angel.” Comic strips and films often depict an angel dressed in white on a person’s right shoulder and a demon dressed in red and holding a pitchfork on the person’s left shoulder (see figure 1). The angel represents the person’s conscience, and the demon represents temptation. The angel attempts to persuade the person to do right, and the demon tempts the person to do wrong.



Figure 1. Shoulder angel vs. shoulder demon

This picture resonates with people because we commonly experience internal conflicts that seem like voices in our heads arguing about what to do in a particular situation. What is right? What is wrong? Thankfully, we're not left to popular perception in regard to conscience. We have the Bible to teach us what conscience is and is not. In chapter 2 we'll attempt to define conscience from the Bible. But first we want to lay out some introductory principles about conscience, principles that we'll unpack throughout the rest of the book. Most of them are pretty obvious, but it's possible that you haven't thought much about them.

Conscience Is a Human Capacity

To be human is to have a conscience. Animals don't have a conscience, even if they often seem to. I (J. D.) have a dog, Lucy, whose tail is almost permanently fixed between her legs, her eyes always averted, always guilty. We think she was mistreated as a puppy. But in spite of all appearances, Lucy doesn't have a conscience—not even the trace of one. She doesn't have a conscience because she doesn't have the capacity for moral judgment. Our cat doesn't have a conscience either, but you already knew that.

Notice we said conscience is a *capacity*. Like other human capacities such as speech and reason, it's possible for a person never to actualize or achieve the capacity of conscience. A child dies in infancy, having never spoken a single word or felt a single pang of conscience. Another child is born without the mental capacity to make moral judgments. Others, through stroke, accident, or dementia, lose the moral judgment they once had and the conscience that went with it. Still, to be human is to have the *capacity* for conscience, whether or not one is able to exercise that capacity.

Conscience Reflects the Moral Aspect of God's Image

It shouldn't surprise you that you have a conscience. You're made in the image of God, and God is a moral God, so you must be a moral creature who makes moral judgments. And what is conscience if not shining the spotlight of your moral judgment back on yourself, your thoughts, and your actions. A moral being would expect to make moral self-judgments.

So conscience is inherent in personhood. It is not the result of sin. It is not something that Christians will lose after God glorifies them. This means that Jesus, who is fully human, has a conscience. Unlike our consciences, though, Jesus's conscience perfectly matches God's will, and he has never sinned against it.

Conscience Feels Independent

But what ought to surprise you is that you would even care about the verdict of your conscience. Yet you do care, intensely. Many have taken their lives because of a secret guilt—a sin that no one else knew except that impossible-to-suppress voice within. Others have gone mad from the telltale heartbeat of a guilty conscience.

But when you think about it, why should you care what your conscience says about you? If you heard that a judge accused of a crime had decided to hear his own case, you'd laugh. First he sits on the bench and reads the charges. Then he jumps down to the witness stand to defend himself and then jumps back up to the bench to pronounce himself "not guilty." What a joke! And yet you judge yourself every day, and it doesn't feel like a joke. It's deadly serious. Why?

The *why* is a great mystery. No one knows why the conscience feels so much like an independent third party, but it probably has something to do with the relationship between

two universal realities that Paul discusses in Romans chapters 1 and 2. Romans 1:19–20 claims that all humans know intuitively by the witness of nature that God exists and must be absolutely powerful. Romans 2:14–15 goes on to teach that everyone also has a conscience, an imperfect-but-accurate-enough version of God’s will, as standard equipment in their hearts. Then verse 16 makes a link between the conscience and the day of judgment. Listen to these two passages side by side:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. (Rom. 1:19–20)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom. 2:14–16)

Put together, these passages seem to explain conscience like this: though we all have a sense that what’s going on in our conscience is secret, we also have a sense that an all-powerful, all-knowing God is in on the secret and will someday judge those secrets at his great and terrifying tribunal. We’re not saying that people actually reason it out like a syllogism but that all of us intuit very strongly our accountability to an all-powerful, all-knowing God, even if we suppress that intuition, as Romans 1:18 claims. Perhaps that is why the voice of conscience

seems so much like an independent judge rather than a kangaroo court.

Conscience Is a Priceless Gift from God

The conscience is a gift for your good and joy, and it is something that God—not your mother or father or anyone else—gave you.

Consider your sense of touch. That sense is a gift from God that can function as a warning system to save you from great harm. If the tip of your finger lightly brushes the top of a hot stove, your nervous system reflexively compels you to pull back your hand to avoid more pain and harm. Similarly, the guilt that your conscience makes you feel should lead you to turn from your sin to Jesus. God gave you that sense of guilt for your good.

The conscience is also a gift from God for your joy: “*Blessed* is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves” (Rom. 14:22b). Like everyone else, you long to be “blessed” or happy. That’s how God wired you. The ultimate way to nourish this longing is to satisfy it with the deepest and most enduring happiness, God himself, and then share that deep joy with others by loving them. Your chief end is to glorify God *by* enjoying him forever.¹ You can intensify that satisfying pursuit if you understand that your conscience is a priceless gift from God, learn how it works, and then cultivate it so that you can love others.

Conscience Wants to Be an On-Off Switch, Not a Dimmer

Conscience is all about right or wrong, black or white. It doesn’t do gray scale very well. It doesn’t nuance. It doesn’t say, “It’s complicated.” It leads your thoughts to either “accuse

¹We are paraphrasing John Piper’s definition of what he calls “Christian hedonism.” See especially John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*, 3rd ed. (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003), 28.

or even excuse” (Rom. 2:15), to pronounce guilt or innocence. Because conscience wants to make such stark pronouncements, it is of utmost importance that you align your personal conscience standards with what God considers right and wrong, not just with human opinion. Otherwise, your conscience will pronounce guilty verdicts on matters of mere opinion.

Your Conscience Is for You and You Only

Conscience is personal. It is *your* conscience.² It is intended for you and not for someone else. And the conscience of others belongs to them and not you. You cannot, must not, force others to adopt your conscience standards. MYOC. Mind your own conscience. Accepting this one principle would solve a large percentage of relationship problems inside and outside the church. (More on this in chapter 5.)

No Two People Have Exactly the Same Conscience

If everyone had the same conscience standards, we wouldn’t need passages like Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8, which teach people with differing consciences how to get along in their church. Let’s use the triangles in figure 2 to compare the consciences of two Christians, Anne and Bill.³ The letters in the triangles stand for various rules of right and wrong. Though not identical, Anne and Bill’s consciences overlap significantly in what they view as right and wrong (C, D, E, F, and dozens of other rules). In fact, people usually agree much more in matters of conscience than they disagree.

²Gary T. Meadors defines *conscience* as “an aspect of self-awareness that produces the pain and/or pleasure we ‘feel’ as we reflect on the norms and values we recognize and apply. Conscience is not an outside voice. It is an inward capacity humans possess to critique themselves because the Creator provided this process as a means of moral restraint for his creation.” “Conscience,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 115.

³The triangles on conscience in this section are adapted from Bob Priest. See especially Robert J. Priest, “Missionary Elencics: Conscience and Culture,” *Missiology: An International Review* 22, no. 3 (1994): 291–315.

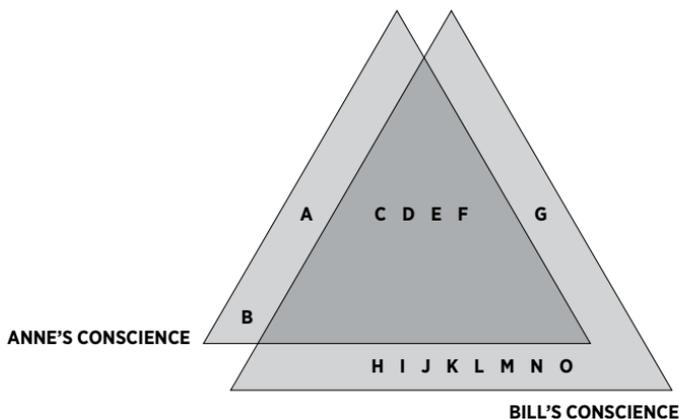


Figure 2. Two consciences

Notice, however, that Bill’s conscience has more rules than Anne’s (rules G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O). Anne sees Bill assiduously following these unnecessary rules, such as staying away from movie theaters and never playing video games, and she rolls her eyes at such “legalism.” All the while, Bill is shocked that Anne can ignore these “obvious” commandments and still call herself a Christian. But Bill isn’t the only one being self-righteous. Anne sees that Bill is completely oblivious to rule B and says to another friend, “Do you know that Bill buys non-fair-trade coffee? Doesn’t he care about downtrodden workers in South America?” Differences in conscience cause a significant percentage of conflicts in any church.

No One’s Conscience Perfectly Matches God’s Will

Of course, we all tend to assume that our own conscience standards line up with God’s will. Returning to our example of Anne and Bill, figure 3 superimposes God’s righteous will over their consciences.

It turns out that neither Anne’s nor Bill’s conscience perfectly

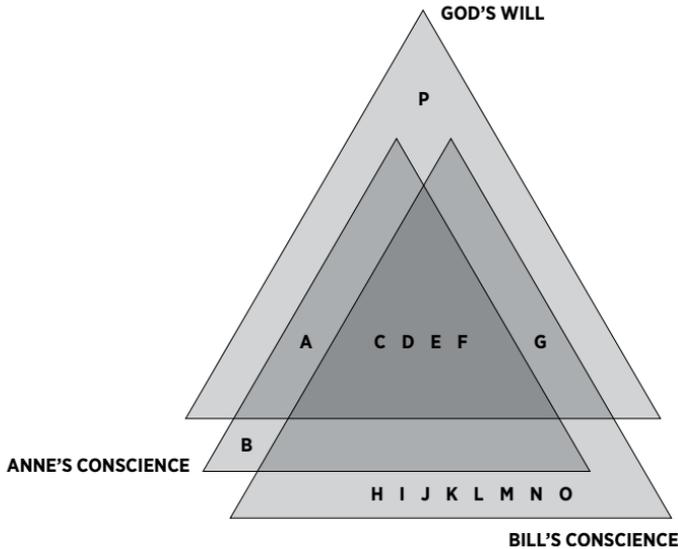


Figure 3. Human conscience and God's standards

matches God's will. No person's conscience does. Let this truth sink deep into your heart.

Anne needs to realize that buying non-fair-trade coffee (rule B) turns out *not* to be a sin before God, and Bill needs to understand that rules H, I, J, K, L, M, N, and O—including going to the theater and playing video games—are not inherent sins in God's sight. However, Anne better be thinking a whole lot more about rule G since God cares about it. And notice that Bill is wrong to omit rule A from his conscience. And they're both off about P, which doesn't show up on either of their radars. But God thinks it should!

As we come to understand God's revealed will more and more, we will have opportunities to add rules to our conscience that God's Word clearly teaches and weed out rules that God's Word treats as optional. This will take a lifetime, but we have the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the church of God to help us.

How can you discern between your conscience and the Holy Spirit? You can't know infallibly. But you can know when it is *not* the Holy Spirit: if the message contradicts Scripture, then it is not from the Holy Spirit but from your wrongly calibrated conscience. But when the message is consistent with Scripture, the Holy Spirit is likely working *through* your conscience.

(Of course, as long as Bill considers H, I, J, K, etc. to be truly wrong actions for him, he'll need to obey his conscience in those areas, even if Scripture is silent. Say, for example, that rule H is "Don't use unfiltered Internet." As long as Bill believes God morally requires this rule for him, he must follow it. But as he understands more about conscience, he will see that he can't force Anne to agree that God has made this rule a hard-and-fast commandment for all believers. Eventually, Bill will see that rule H is not truly a commandment from God at all but an issue of wisdom.)

You Can Damage Your Conscience

You can damage the gift of conscience, just as you can damage other gifts from God. Oddly enough, you can damage it in two opposite ways: by making it insensitive and by making it oversensitive.

We make conscience *insensitive* by developing a habit of ignoring its voice of warning so that the voice gets weaker and weaker and finally disappears. Paul calls this "searing" the conscience: "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron" (1 Tim. 4:2 NIV).

We make conscience *oversensitive* by packing it with too many rules that are actually matters of opinion, not right and wrong. Oddly enough, both kinds of damage to conscience can occur in the same person. After Paul described the conscience of false teachers as "seared," he went on to say that those same false teachers also imposed strict and unnecessary scruples

about abstinence from food and marriage (1 Tim. 4:3). Jesus made the same connection between a seared conscience and an oversensitive conscience when he accused the Pharisees of scrupulously straining out gnats but then swallowing camels (Matt. 23:24), even the camel of murdering the Son of God.

This may explain why a generation ago in some parts of America, very strict churches were extremely careful about many minor issues that they perceived were right and wrong, but the same churches also trained their deacons to guard the church doors and keep out blacks. Talk about “neglect[ing] the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness” (Matt. 23:23)! Talk about choking on camels!

The Two Great Principles of Conscience

Of all the principles related to conscience, two rise to the top: (1) God is the only Lord of conscience, and (2) you should always obey your conscience. These two principles come up repeatedly in this book and in your life. We’ll look at the second principle first because it’s the most obvious.

Principle 2: Obey It!

Even unbelievers sense deep in their hearts the importance of obeying conscience. The Bible teaches in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 that to go against your conscience when you think it’s warning you correctly is *always* a sin in God’s eyes. Always. Even if the action is not a sin in and of itself. Why? Because your intention is to sin. But does this mean your conscience is always correct? No. And this brings us to the first principle of conscience.

Principle 1: God Is the Only Lord of Conscience

Like the “one ring to rule them all,” this conscience principle governs all the rest. Your conscience is not the lord of itself—

that's idolatry. You are not the lord of your conscience. Your parents are not the lord of your conscience (though you do well to obey them when under their care). Your pastors are not the lord of your conscience (though they care for your soul, and you would be foolish to disregard their counsel). Fellow believers are not the lord of your conscience. God is the only Lord of conscience.

This means that the second principle (obey conscience) has one critical limitation. If God, the Lord of your conscience, shows you through his Word that your conscience is registering a mistaken moral judgment and if you believe he wants you to adjust your conscience to better match his will, your conscience must bend to God. Do you remember the principle, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)? That holds true even when the "man" happens to be you! You must God rather than yourself. You must obey God rather than your conscience. If your conscience is so sacrosanct that it's off-limits even to God, that's idolatry. For example, had Peter decided to listen to his conscience instead of to God when God told him to "kill and eat!" (and, by extension, to receive Gentiles into his home), he would have committed a serious sin (Acts 10:9–16). Whenever "obey conscience!" collides with "obey God!," "obey God!" must come out on top—every time. Thankfully, a Christian with a well-calibrated conscience will rarely have to make this choice.

We promised that we would attempt to leave no *conscience* verse unturned. God is far from silent on the subject of conscience, so now it's time to look at each of the thirty occurrences of the Greek word for *conscience* in the New Testament to come up with a biblical definition.

CHRISTIAN, MEET YOUR CONSCIENCE.

What do you do when you disagree with other Christians? How do you determine which convictions are negotiable and which are not? How do you get along with people who have different personal standards?

All of these questions have to do with the conscience. Yet there is hardly a more neglected topic among Christians. In this much-needed book, a New Testament scholar and a cross-cultural missionary explore all thirty passages in the New Testament that deal with the conscience, showing how your conscience impacts virtually every aspect of life, ministry, and missions. As you come to see your conscience as a gift from God and learn how to calibrate it under the lordship of Jesus Christ, you will not only experience the freedom of a clear conscience but also discover how to lovingly interact with those who hold different convictions.

“*Conscience* is a much-needed treatment of a vital yet neglected subject.”

RANDY ALCORN, Founder and Director, Eternal Perspective Ministries; author, *Heaven and Happiness*

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JASON C. MEYER, Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

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CHRISTIAN LIVING