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SHORT TITLE

THE FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE

*K. W. Bannister*  
1913

*W. H. Miller*  
1913



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AN EXAMINATION OF THE MOTIVATIONAL  
AND JUDGMENTAL FUNCTIONS OF CONSCIENCE

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Practical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Sacred Theology

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by  
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June 1965

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
1. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	1
2. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF LUTHER, THE REFORMERS, AND THE MODERN PERIOD . . . . .	5
3. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	5
4. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE EARLY PERIODS OF THE REFORMATION . . . . .	8
5. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE CURRENT DEGRADATION OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI . . . . .	12
6. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE BY MEN OF THE REFORMATION PERIOD . . . . .	18
7. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	23
8. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD OF THE REFORMATION . . . . .	23
9. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT . . . . .	38
10. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY . . . . .	62
11. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY . . . . .	63
12. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY . . . . .	68
13. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE CHANGED MEANING AND NATURE OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	76
14. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN THE CHURCH . . . . .	84
15. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	89
16. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	93



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY . . . . .	1
II. CONSCIENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF LUTHER, THE CONFESSIONS AND THE MISSOURI SYNOD . . . . .	5
Luther's Concept of Conscience . . . . .	5
Conscience in the <u>Book of Concord</u> . . . . .	8
Conscience in the <u>Early Writings</u> of the Missouri Synod . . . . .	9
Conscience in the Current Dogmatics Text Books of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod . . . . .	12
Recent Articles on Conscience by Men of The Missouri Synod . . . . .	18
III. THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE . . .	23
Conscience in the New Testament World of Thought . . . . .	23
Conscience in the New Testament . . . . .	38
IV. THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY . . .	62
Conscience in Freudian Psychology . . . . .	63
Conscience in Jungian Psychology . . . . .	68
V. AN EVALUATION OF THE CHANGED MEANING AND FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE . . . . .	76
VI. THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE IN THE CHURCH . . . . .	84
The Sin Against Conscience . . . . .	89
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	93



## CHAPTER I

### AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

One of the aspects of man's psychic nature which has received increased attention during the past few years is the conscience. In reviewing the literature regarding conscience, it was noted that there was, for the most part, general agreement that:

1. conscience is an innate psychic attribute of man, at least in terms of potential.
2. the norm upon which conscience functions is acquired during the person's lifetime.
3. one of the major functions of conscience is to judge the actions of the individual in terms of the person's ethical norms which he has accepted for himself, and to "punish" the person for infractions of these norms.

There was disagreement among the sources regarding the good conscience. Some held that a good conscience referred to a positive approval for an action which was in harmony with the ethical norm. This positive approval is opposite to the punishment function, but of similar intensity. Other sources defined a good conscience as being merely the absence of a bad conscience, but without any positive function.

A second area of disagreement was noted in regard to the



praefacto, before the fact, function of conscience. Some held that conscience functions before an action, motivating the person toward good moral action and warning away from bad action. Other sources held that conscience functions only in a postfacto, after the fact, role, judging acts that have actually been started, or at least decided upon.

The paper deals with the two areas in which disagreements have been noted. It seeks to determine whether conscience:

1. judges the ethical quality of an action prior to the action or decision to act, or whether it judges only after an act has at least been decided upon.

2. has a positive motivational function.

It is to be recognized that the concept of conscience has both a popular usage, and also a rather precise scientific, psychological usage. This paper is an attempt to clarify at least one aspect of the precise meaning and usage of the concept.

The second chapter of this study presents the views of Luther, the Book of Concord which is the official confession of the Lutheran Church, various authors of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod who have discussed the function of conscience in convention essays and various publications of the church, and the doctrinal textbooks used in the schools of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod.



E. Eckhardt's Homiletisches Reallexikon nebst Index Rerum was consulted for articles on Das Gewissen which had appeared in Missouri Synod publications prior to 1907. These articles were consulted. For post 1907 articles, the writer consulted all the issues from 1907 to 1963 of The Lutheran Witness, Lutheran Education, Concordia Theological Monthly, and their German predecessors. The Proceedings of both Synodical and District conventions were reviewed for essays concerning conscience. The bibliographic references in these and various other books and articles were also checked.

Chapter III presents the concept of conscience as it was known in the New Testament world of thought and used in the New Testament. This chapter is heavily indebted to a book by C. A. Pierce who made an extensive study of the concept of conscience during this period and came to the conclusion that in recent years the meaning of the term conscience has changed from being only a postfacto judgmental, punitive function of man, to include the idea of conscience exerting a positive ethical motivation. This chapter presents evidence which seems to substantiate Pierce's conclusions. In this chapter the passages of the New Testament which use the term *συνείδησις* are examined to determine what use Scripture makes of the term and whether such use either substantiates Pierce's conclusions or invalidates them.

Chapter IV approaches the concept of conscience from the



viewpoint of psychology. Sigmund Freud and Carl G. Jung were selected as representatives of the field since they are the only two who have developed a relatively complete psychological explanation of the psychic nature of man. In addition Psychological Abstracts was consulted for articles on "conscience" and "Superego" and all available articles were consulted.

Chapter V evaluates the evidence presented by these three representative groups and concludes that the concept of conscience should be limited to that of passing postfacto judgment on moral actions and "punishing" the person for infringements. Any praefacto activity of man's psychic nature should probably be identified by some other term.

Chapter VI discusses the role of conscience in the life of the church. It points out that while the viewpoints expressed in several recent articles is inconsistent with the conclusions of this paper, the practice of the church would not be greatly affected since the usual application of the concept is the natural postfacto judgmental and accusing function. One area of concern is the appeal to conscience as motivation for doing various morally good activities--this is use of the Law instead of use of the Gospel for accomplishing the work of the Lord.

An area suggested for further study is the "sin against conscience."



## CHAPTER II

### CONSCIENCE IN THE WRITINGS OF LUTHER, THE CONFESSIONS AND THE MISSOURI SYNOD

#### Luther's Concept of Conscience

While Luther often discussed the function and activities of conscience, he did not actually formulate a systematic description of its essence and activities. For him, it was a natural part of every man which was given by God. It was the ethical eye by which man viewed his activities and decided whether they were right or wrong:

Conscience is not a power designated to act but a power designated to judge, one that judges acts. Its proper work is, as Paul says in Romans 2:15, to accuse or excuse, to charge with guilt or to absolve from guilt, to make fearful or secure. Its office, therefore, is not to do but to sit in judgment on what has been done or is to be done; this makes a person either guilty or innocent before God.<sup>1</sup>

Luther apparently did not discuss the source of conscience nor was any mention found concerning the basis upon which conscience judges the acts of man. It can be deduced from the manner in which he attacked the antinomians that he felt that man is in need of the Law in order to know the will

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<sup>1</sup>Ewald M. Plass, editor, What Luther Says, An Anthology (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), I, 333.



of God.<sup>2</sup> It would follow that Luther merely accepted the fact that the conscience was put in man by God, but that man in his sinful condition had to turn to the Law to know in what way he was actually offending God.

It is only by means of a bad conscience that God leads us to repentance and faith, for without the accusing force of conscience making us realize our despicable position before God, the message of salvation has no meaning--no use.

Bornkamm comments:

Luther also realized that God must lead us over a thorny path, that He must plague us through our conscience, that He must let us ram our heads against the walls of expiation before we can finally comprehend the magnificent either-or and learn to rely solely on God's mercy.<sup>3</sup>

It is the message of forgiveness, not good actions which gives a person what is known as a "good conscience." While individual statements of Luther, such as that quoted by Plass

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<sup>2</sup>Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther's World of Thought, translated by Martin H. Bertram (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958), p. 26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 170. Yrjö Alanen in his study of conscience according to Luther notes a similar conclusion: "Der Glaube schafft ein gutes Gewissen, weil er an die Sündenvergebung glaubt. Aber ehe ein Glaube an Sündenvergebung entstehen kann, muss sich Sündenerkenntnis Vorfinden. Die Vorbedingung des Glaubens ist das Wachsein des Gewissens. Solange der Mensch mit einem verstockten, totem Gewissen lebt, kann er nicht glauben. Das Evangelium hat ihm nichts zu sagen. Der Glaube entsteht im bösen Gewissen, welches unter der Schuld leidet. Das Paradoxale im Glauben ist eben dieses, dass es in einem bösen Gewissen entsteht." Yrjö Alanen, Das Gewissen bei Luther (Helsinki: Suomal. Kirjall. Seuran Kirjapainon oy, 1934), p. 63.



from What Luther Says on the previous page, might appear to presuppose a praefacto positively good function of conscience, studies of Luther's writings seem to show that for Luther a good conscience is the negation of a bad conscience; the realization that conscience is not accusing you:

Das böse Gewissen ist bei Luther des Schuld gebundene Gewissen. Das gute Gewissen ist das von der Schuld frei gewordene. Frei wird das Gewissen durch das Wort der Vergebung. Das Wort der Vergebung ist das Wort von Christi Versöhnung. In diesem Worte kommt Christus selbst in das Herz des Menschen und macht das Gewissen frei und gut. Das Gute Gewissen ist also was in Christus gebundene, durch Christus von Schuld frei gewordene Gewissen. Dieses ist in grossen Hauptzügen die Lehre Luthers über das gute Gewissen.

In sienem vortrefflichen Byche vom Gewissen sagt H. G. Stodes, das gute und das böse Gewissen keine korrelativen Phänomene sind. "Das ursprüngliche, primäre, tiefere ist das böse Gewissen; das gute Gewissen ist eine positive Betonung der Negation der Schuld, und dem Schuldphänomene als sochem untergeordnet. Es ist in gewissen Sinne eine Form des Bösen, nämlich jene Form, welche die Schuld nicht bejaht, sondern verneint." Bei Luther ist das böse Gewissen wohl das ursprünglichere, auch kraftiger betonte. Luther sagt, das man "das Gewissen trägt," wenn man ein böses Gewissen hat. Luther gebraucht zuweilen vom bösen Gewissen nur die Benennung "des böses Gewissen." Und oft stellt Luther das Gewissen, als die Benennung des bösen Gewissens mit den anderen Mächten des Verderbnis (Sünde, Tod, Teufel, Gesetz) in eine Reihe. Hat nun das gute Gewissen einen selbständige sinn bei Luther oder ist es nur als eine positive Negation des bösen Gewissens zu betrachten?

Wir haben sohn frührer bemerkt, dass es leichter ist, bewusste Gewissenszustände bei Luther zu konstatieren, also seinen Gewissensbegriff zu definieren. Das böse Gewissen ist ein Zustand, das gute Gewissen wieder ein anderer. Un man kann wohl in gewissens nennen. Aber man kann nicht die selbständige Stellung des guten Gewissens bei Luther in Abrede stellen. Denn das Gewissen an sich ist für Luther doch etwas Selbständiges Wirkliches,



welches auch seinen Stellung--ganz abgesehen von dem bösen Gewissen--sonst sein mag.<sup>4</sup>

### Conscience in the Book of Concord

While the reformers used the term conscience many times in writing the various documents of the Book of Concord, there is no actual discussion of what they mean by conscience. Its function, however, according to the way in which it is used, is to condemn the sinner, to make him aware that he has done something wrong, and to make him feel the full dreadfulness of God's fury. According to the confessions, the only way to a good conscience is through the forgiveness of sins. The confessions do not speak of conscience motivating action, although there are several references to the Roman Church "obligating conscience" to certain man-made laws or good works. It is not clear from the context whether this could imply a motivation to action, or whether this would only mean that a man made rule had been imposed as a norm upon which conscience was to function. The Latin version speaks of "obliget conscientias," and the German "Dazu die Gewissen für Gott verpflichte und verbinde."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Alanen, pp. 53-54.

<sup>5</sup>"Apology to the Augsburg Confession," "Article XII," Book of Concord (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1952), p. 80. "Apologie der Konfession," "XII Von der Buss," Die Bekenntnisschriften (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1952), p. 256.



## Conscience in Early Writings of The Missouri Synod

In its summary of comments concerning conscience in the various Synodical publications before 1907, Eckhardt's Reallexikon gives a comprehensive definition of the essence and function of conscience.<sup>6</sup> It is a function of fallen rational man which was created in man by God and which judges whether an action is in accord with the internal moral norm of the person. It is not the voice of God in us: its norm in natural man is not the Law of God nor does it judge the correctness of the norm upon which it operates. Although everyone has a conscience, its judgments are imperfect according to God's law because of ignorance, indecision, or wrong knowledge. Although man cannot lose his conscience, he can in effect silence it--or to put it another way, he can so harden himself that he no longer feels or senses its disapproval.

Eckhardt identifies three functions of conscience:

- Das Gewissen a. legt den Masstab an das Tun des Menschen und sagt ob die Tat mit den Gesetz übereinstimmt oder nicht, recht oder unrecht ist.  
 b. rechnet die Schuld dem zu, der die Sünde begangen hat und hält ihn dafür verantwortlich.  
 c. gibt sich als urteilenden Richter kund.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>E. Eckhardt, "Das Gewissen," Homiletisches Reallexikon nebst Index Rerum (St. Louis, Missouri: Success Printing Co., 1907), II, 247-255.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., pp. 249-50.



One of the earliest discussions concerning the conscience in the periodicals of the Missouri Synod was C. F. W. Walther's article in the September 1, 1878 issue of the Lutheraner on I Peter 3:16, "Habt ein gut Gewissen."<sup>8</sup> While the article touches upon the good conscience, it mainly discusses the "terrors of conscience" which a person experiences when he has sinned. The term "Gewissen" (conscience) is used twice in the absolute form implying the idea of a bad conscience, as illustrated by this quote:

das Christen, wen ihnen über Etwas, was sie thun wollen oder gethan haben, von ihren frommen Sellsorgen oder von anderen frommen Christen Bedenken gemacht werden, nicht unbedacht schnell mit der Rede zur Hand sind: "Daüber lasse ich mir kein Gewissen machen!"<sup>9</sup>

A good conscience according to Walther, is one which is free of the terrors of conscience:

Diese geheime Stimme in dem Inneren des Menschen, dir ihn wenn er Böses thut, verurtheilt, und wenn er recht thut, losspricht, ist mit Einem Worte das Gewissen.<sup>10</sup>

Expressing this idea still more strongly: "dabei ein ruhige, heiteres und fröhliches Gewissen haben das sie von diesen anklagen losspricht."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>C. F. W. Walther, "Habt ein gut Gewissen, I Petri 3,16," Der Lutheraner, XXXIV (September 1, 1878), 129-132.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 130.



Conscience, he indicates, also functions in a praefacto manner in warning against wrong action or prompting to good action:

So oft ein Mensch Etwas thun will, wovon er weisse, das es unrecht ist, so oft meldet sich in seinem Inneren eine geheime Stimme, welche ihm warnend zuruft: "Thue das nicht!" und so oft ein Mensch Etwas bereits gethan hat, wovon er weiss, dass es unrecht gewesen sei, so oft hört er in der Tiefe seines Herzens strafend zu ihm sprechen: "Was hast du gethan?" So oft hingehen ein Mensch Etwas thun will wovon er überzeugt ist, das es recht sei, so oft heisst es ermunternd in seinem Inneren: "Das thue!" und so oft er es hierauf gethan hat, so oft ist's ihm, als hiesse es in seinem Inneren beruhigend: "Wohl dir!".<sup>12</sup>

C. A. Frank in a Lehre und Wehre article in 1876 speaks of the conscience as an inner voice which accuses one of wrong doing. He does not speak about conscience motivating to good action, and discusses a good conscience in terms of an absence from the accusing inner voice.<sup>13</sup>

In general, the various articles about conscience, or brief comments about conscience in the periodicals of the Missouri Synod mention or imply that one of the functions of conscience is to advise prior to action as to the permissibility of the action according to the norms which the person holds. A second function is to "disturb" the person if he violates the moral norm in thought, word or deed. A good

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>13</sup>C. A. Frank, "Über das Gewissen," Lehre und Wehre, XXII (August, September, and October 1876), pp. 231-234, 257-262, 302-306.



conscience is described variously as the absence of "disturbance," a "good feeling," or even a "speaking of approval" when a person has acted in accord with the "dictates" of conscience.

**Conscience in the Current Dogmatics Text  
Books of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod**

It is interesting to note that the two major dogmatics textbooks used in the training of ministers in the Missouri Synod comment only superficially on the function of conscience and do not specifically define the concept or discuss it at any length. The Table of Contents of the three-volume Christian Dogmatics by Francis Pieper does not list any section dealing with conscience, although there is a subsection in volume one on "The Relation of Peccata Actualie to the Conscience":

The old division of actual sins into peccata contra conscientiam (a) veram, (b) erroneam, (c) probabilem, (d) dubiam may appear at first glance rather mechanical, but it serves a real need. Whoever sins against a correctly informed conscience (conscientia recta) sins most grievously. He sins as an αδικησας ("being condemned of himself," Titus 3:10); he is approaching the condition of a man who is determined to espouse error and faces the danger of committing the sin against the Holy Ghost.--One who has an erring conscience (conscientia erronea), who regards it, e.g., as his duty to pray to saints, is in a predicament. He sins when he obeys his conscience, and he sins when he does not obey his conscience. In the second case he sins because he fails to do something which he feels conscience bound to do as a command by God.

Pieper then appends a footnote from Baier-Walther, II 269:



An erring conscience . . . does not obligate [obligat], but it binds [ligat]. But to bind is to constrain one that he cannot justly act contrary to it and also sins if he acts in accordance with it.<sup>14</sup>

Continuing with Pieper's comments: "It is therefore of great importance to correct an erring conscience by proper instruction from God's Word."<sup>15</sup>

The Index of Pieper's Dogmatics<sup>16</sup> has an extended list of references on conscience but only a few of them actually shed any light on our discussion. The index listed one reference which comes close to defining Pieper's concept of conscience:

Though the Gospel remains hidden to the natural heart of man . . . man has a natural knowledge of the Law. Also after the Fall the conscience . . . of man still bears witness of the divine will, or Law. Man's conscience functions in two ways: a) it reveals and demands (Rom. 2:15a: The heathen, who do not have the written Law, "showing the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness"); and b) it judges and condemns (Rom. 2:15b: "Their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another").

But since the Fall the conscience does not give a fully reliable testimony concerning the will of God.<sup>17</sup>

In a second comment, Pieper says that

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<sup>14</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), I, 565-566.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>W. F. Albrecht, editor, Index: Christian Dogmatics by Francis Pieper (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), IV, 171-173.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., I, 531-532.



Luther demands that all questions of right and wrong be submitted to the conscience of the individual, that the individual Christian decides for himself the questions of doctrine and morals according to God's revealed Word.  
 . . .<sup>18</sup>

The reference in Luther which Pieper then quotes in a footnote says clearly that the individual must know for himself from Scripture what the correct doctrine is--but Luther does not appeal to conscience as the judge, in the passage which is cited.

Finally Pieper observes that "the natural concept of God never rises above the Law, and for this reason may indeed produce an evil, but never a good conscience."<sup>19</sup>

It would seem from these examples, and particularly from a study of the Index's references to Pieper's use of the term, that Pieper had not considered the concept of conscience as a major item of study which needed precise definition and usage. While Pieper "defines" it as having a praefacto revealing and guiding function, most of his references are to its judgmental and accusing character--and many are rather ambiguous uses of the term.

The topic index of Mueller's Christian Dogmatics lists only two places where conscience is mentioned, both of these

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., III, 65.

<sup>19</sup>Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, III, 220.



in connection with the Doctrine of Man and his conflict with the Law:

Through the Fall the absolute knowledge of the divine will which God at creation had planted into the human soul was greatly weakened or obscured. For this reason man after the Fall no longer knows the divine will, or Law, with certainty, though his conscience (συνείδησις, conscientia) in a measure still functions, Rom. 2,14.15. Moreover, after the Fall, conscience may err (conscientia erronea), so that man often regards as forbidden what God allows (eating of certain foods at certain times, drinking of spiritous liquors, etc.), or, vice versa, regarding as allowed what He has forbidden (worshipping idols, trusting in one's own works for salvation). So also conscience may entertain doubts (conscientia dubia) with regard to the propriety of certain acts, or it may suggest no more than a mere probability (conscientia probabilis) of right or wrong, so that man remains uncertain with regard to the course which he must follow. Conscience, after the Fall, is therefore no longer a safe standard of what God wills or forbids.<sup>20</sup>

In classifying actual sins, Mueller comments:

On the basis of clear Scripture statements, we distinguish between voluntary and involuntary sins. The former (peccata voluntaria, malitiae, proaeretica) are such sinful acts in which man transgresses the divine Law by a deliberate volition, contrary to the dictates of conscience, John 13, 26.27.30. The latter (peccata involuntaria) are such sinful acts as are committed without sure knowledge (peccata ignorantia, I Tim. 1,13) or without a deliberate purpose of the will (peccata infirmitatis, peccata praecipitantiae, Luke 22. 55-62).

Voluntary sins must be considered not only with respect to the will, but also with respect to conscience. For this reason we regard as voluntary sins also those committed against conscience.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>John T. Mueller, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 213.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 228-229.



Mueller then goes on to discuss sins against a correct conscience, an erring conscience, probable conscience and a doubting conscience in much the same manner as Pieper.

It is to be noticed that Mueller seems to indicate that conscience has a knowledge revealing function as well as a praefacto dictating function.

A third dogmatics textbook, by Edward Koehler, which is used extensively in the non-ministerial schools and courses of the Missouri Synod, devotes a number of pages to a discussion of the conscience. Koehler seeks to define specifically the concept and function of conscience. Conscience, he says, is a precious gift of God which distinguishes man from the beasts of the field.

It is a powerful force and monitor in his life; for it is conscience that urges him to do, or not to do what he himself believes to be right or wrong. Conscience must, therefore, not be identified with man's moral convictions, nor with the natural knowledge of the Law, to which it "bears witness"; but as we distinguish between a judge in court and the law according to which he judges, so must we also distinguish between conscience and our knowledge of right and wrong.

It does not examine the correctness of our convictions . . . conscience simply urges us to comply with them in our lives and judges our actions according to them. We may therefore define conscience as a feeling of compulsion; we feel that we ought to do what we believe to be right, and that we ought to avoid what we believe to be wrong . . . it is a feeling which urges and moves us to will and to do what the mind regards as right and true



and deters us from willing and doing what we believe to be wrong.<sup>22</sup>

Koehler approvingly quotes from an article on conscience by Charles Scaer:

Conscience is that God-given feeling or emotion which, before the act, prompts us to do what we believe to be right, and deters us from doing that which we believe to be wrong. And after the act, it condemns us for having done what we believe to be wrong.<sup>23</sup>

While one cannot ignore conscience, it is not an infallible guide: one might have an erring conscience or a doubting conscience; the only sure guide for conscience is the revealed law of God. In speaking of an erring conscience, it is not that the conscience acts incorrectly, but rather that the norm upon which conscience acts is incorrect. Even if the norm is incorrect, however, the person should not go against what he believes to be right.<sup>24</sup>

Koehler disagrees with Mueller's interpretation of Romans 3:15. Mueller seems to indicate that conscience reveals or testifies concerning the will of God<sup>25</sup> while Koehler limits the function of conscience to that of merely judging, not revealing.

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<sup>22</sup>Edward W. A. Koehler, A Summary of Christian Doctrine (Second Revised Edition by Alfred W. Koehler, n.p., c.1959), p. 54.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 54-55. Scaer, A Treatise on Conscience (Boston: The Stratford Co., 1927), p. 13.

<sup>24</sup>Koehler, p. 55.

<sup>25</sup>Supra, p. 15.



While all three of these Dogmatics textbooks define sin as something which is against the will of God as this is known through His Word, and while they carefully stress that man-made laws cannot in and of themselves be criteria for defining what is sin and what is not sin, they all contend that "to disregard the voice of conscience is always sin."<sup>26</sup> Romans 14:23 "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" is usually given as the "proof text." "Faith" is interpreted to mean conviction or certainty of being correct.

#### Recent Articles on Conscience by Men of the Missouri Synod

In the past few years there have been several articles by men of the Missouri Synod which have specifically concerned themselves with the essence and functions of conscience. In a monograph, entitled Conscience,<sup>27</sup> published in 1942, E. W. A. Koehler elaborated on his theory of conscience which is presented in his Summary of Christian Doctrine. Dr. L. C. Wuerffel prepared an essay for the 1955 Atlantic District Convention entitled "Conscience--Its Essence, Functions, and

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<sup>26</sup>Koehler, p. 25; Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, I, 565-566; Supra, p. 12; Mueller, p. 229; Supra, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup>E. W. A. Koehler, Conscience (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1942).



Nature,"<sup>28</sup> and Dr. A. M. Rehwinkel published the book The Voice of Conscience<sup>29</sup> in 1956. All three of these discussions indicate their indebtedness to Prof. Charles Scaer's 1927 monograph on conscience,<sup>30</sup> and in many ways they are merely elaborations and developments of Scaer's thesis. All three of them quote this passage from Scaer's article which is of particular interest for our study:

Conscience is that God-given feeling or emotion which, before the act, prompts us to do what we believe to be right, and deters us from doing that which we believe to be wrong. And after the act, it condemns us for having done what we believe to be wrong.<sup>31</sup>

Both Wuerffel and Rehwinkel distinguish the component parts of this definition as being (1) Judicial, (2) Executive, and (3) Obligatory.

According to its judicial function, conscience passes judgment upon man's behavior, whether such behavior is contemplated or already completed. In this capacity the conscience commends man for doing that which he believes to be right and condemns him for doing that which he believes to be wrong. Conscience is categorical in this

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<sup>28</sup>L. C. Wuerffel, "Conscience--Its Essence, Functions, and Nature," Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Convention of the Atlantic District of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (n.p. 1955), pp. 42-57.

<sup>29</sup>A. M. Rehwinkel, The Voice of Conscience (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1956).

<sup>30</sup>Charles Scaer, A Treatise on Conscience (Boston, Mass.: The Stratford Co., 1927).

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 13.



judgment, that is, conscience expresses its judgment without giving a reason.<sup>32</sup>

In its executive capacity, conscience also carries out the judgment which it passes. This execution takes place, of course, in the heart of man. Self calls itself up to judgment before itself, and condemns it for wrong doing. Here is where the emotional factor comes most clearly to the fore. If a man has acted in harmony with his conscience and it approves of his actions, he experiences that inner gratification and pleasure which we call virtue's own reward. If, on the other hand, man acts contrary to what he believes to be right, his conscience will condemn him and he will experience an inner disquietude and pain that we call pangs of conscience.<sup>33</sup>

According to this obligatory function, conscience demands of man that he subject himself under the law of [sic] standard which he believes to be right and which he knows is binding upon him. Some speak of this function as the "oughtness" of conscience. This feeling is the very essence of conscience. In its obligatory function conscience is the "categorical imperative" in man.<sup>34</sup>

Phrasing the obligatory function in another way:

According to its obligatory function, conscience appeals to the will of man and it acts in both a positive and a negative way. In a positive way it prompts man to do that which he believes to be right. And in a negative way it deters him from doing that which he believes to be wrong.<sup>35</sup>

While the concept of conscience is used often in Missouri Synod literature, the various references merely reflect the understanding outlined above and do not contribute anything

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<sup>32</sup>Rehwinkel, pp. 59-60.

<sup>33</sup>Wuerffel, pp. 49-50.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>35</sup>Rehwinkel, p. 54.



of significance. Even P. E. Kretzmann in his commentary on the various passages which use the term conscience does not discuss the function of conscience to any great extent.<sup>36</sup>

The symposium report What, Then, Is Man?<sup>37</sup> does not shed too much additional light on the function of conscience from the Lutheran psychological point of view, but it does point up some of the problems which an improper understanding of conscience can create:

When the statement appears in religious literature: "Conscience never errs," or "Conscience is the voice of God," the writer separates the standard by which the action is judged from the inescapable feeling of necessity to apply the judgment to specific situations. The definition of conscience in this sense is based on Romans 2:14-15, which states that the Law written in the hearts of the Gentiles, together with their conscience, leads their thoughts to accuse or excuse one another. Conscience, then, presupposes knowledge of a moral law followed by an interpretation, which is then applied to action planned or already taken or under way. The implication evidently is that man's intellectual understanding of the moral principle may be false or incomplete, that his interpretation of the rightness or wrongness may be faulty, but once the judgment has been made, the action of conscience as to its application is the same without modification in every human being.

If we grant that the function of conscience may be restricted as indicated, it still makes such statements as "conscience never errs" easily subject to abuse. A person may refuse to take action or to permit others to

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<sup>36</sup>Paul E. Kretzmann, Popular Commentary of the Bible, The New Testament, two volumes (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1923), passim.

<sup>37</sup>What, Then, Is Man? A Symposium of Theology, Psychology, Psychiatry (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1958).



do so . . . because he maintains his conscience forbids him.<sup>38</sup>

In evaluating the use of the concept of conscience in the writings of Luther, the Confessions and Missouri Synod authors, it seems that until the time of Charles Scaer's article there was no clear-cut description of the function of conscience. While Walther evidently understood conscience to have some sort of a praefacto advisory function, this function was not spelled out until Scaer set down his observations. Building upon Scaer, the other writers of the Missouri Synod elaborated upon the "obligatory" function of conscience.

While most of them agree that the norm upon which conscience judges is not by nature the Moral Law of God, but rather is the norm acquired from the environment and upbringing, they nevertheless agree that it is a sin to "go against conscience," even if the action would involve the individual in a direct violation of the Moral Law as it is set forth in Scripture.

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<sup>38</sup>What, Then, Is Man?, p. 311.



## CHAPTER III

### THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE

Since the concepts of the Church must always be in conformity with the teachings of Scripture, we need to study the concept of conscience as it is used in Scripture. This involves two steps: we must first of all determine the meaning of the concept as it was used and understood in the New Testament thought world, and secondly, examine the use which the Scriptures themselves make of the concept.

#### Conscience in the New Testament World of Thought

The Greek word for conscience is *συείδωσις*. While literally meaning "co-knowledge" or more loosely "knowledge which one has with, or of oneself,"<sup>1</sup> the term *συείδωσις* has the deeper significance of a consciousness of right or wrongdoing, complicity, guilt or crime.<sup>2</sup> As it is used by St. Paul, the term seems to have a rather technical sense

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<sup>1</sup>James H. Moulton and George Milligan, The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Limited, 1952), pp. 604-605.

<sup>2</sup>Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (New Edition revised and augmented by Henry Stuart Jones and Roderick McKenzie et al.; Oxford: The Clarendon Press, c.1940), II, 1704.



which some feel has been drawn from Greek rather than Jewish affinities;<sup>3</sup> however, there seems to be a general understanding of the concept evident in the Old Testament use of the term  $\text{לֵב}$ , "heart."<sup>4</sup>

While Paul and the author of Hebrews use the term  $\text{συείδης}$  a number of times, they do not explain its meaning. Their use would indicate that the concept was commonly known by the people to whom they addressed themselves, but to isolate the source of this common knowledge and to determine what the people understood when they heard the term is not easy.

Many are of the opinion that the term has a Stoic origin, others are quite adamant that the Stoics merely made use of a commonly understood concept.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps it is not necessary to isolate the prime source of the concept.  $\text{συείδης}$  was a popular, living concept in the thought world of the people to whom Paul wrote, and while its meaning was probably colored by the Stoic use, it was not a purely stoic concept.

The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics traces the development of the concept of conscience from the time of

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<sup>3</sup>Moulton and Milligan, pp. 604-605.

<sup>4</sup>Infra, p. 35f.

<sup>5</sup>Infra, p. 25f.



Plato through the use by the Epicurians. In Plato's writing conscience was essentially the functioning of "reason" which decided between "rational" and "irrational" conduct. The Epicurians used the term to speak of a guilt feeling upon the exposure of some sin. Summarizing the encyclopaedia's presentation of conscience in Greek thought: Conscience operates in an individual and passes an intellectual judgment on definite acts accomplished or purposed, deciding whether they are right or wrong: satisfaction or dissatisfaction results. The conscience can be affected intellectually and emotionally. Sensitivity depends on heredity, habit and training. Homeric Greek is concerned with "fear of the gods, respect for public opinion and self respect." Further development brought public opinion or law to the supreme position--the gods were brought into the picture to enforce civic obedience. By the fifth century the idea had developed that the  $\psi\upsilon\chi\eta$  was supreme judge in morality. Human nature took precedence over the now discredited state laws and state gods. Shame and self respect came into play.<sup>6</sup>

Although most commentators on the New Testament such as Sandy and Headlam, Denny, Dodd, Moffatt and Knowling all hold that Paul's usage can be traced to the Stoic origin in some

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<sup>6</sup>W. H. W. Jones, "Conscience: Greek and Roman," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1959), IV, 30-41.



way or another, C. A. Pierce definitely opposes the idea of a Stoic source for Paul's usage.<sup>7</sup>

The main burden of Pierce's argument for the non-Stoic origin is the allegation that the Stoic writers did not use this term until about the time of Paul, and perhaps not until after Paul.<sup>8</sup> Instead of narrowing the origin to any particular philosophic group, Pierce seems to demonstrate that the term *συνείδησις* was common to the everyday thought world of the Greek-Roman culture in which Paul lived.

Pierce bases his conclusions on his study of a catena by the sixth century A. D. writer John Stobaeus entitled Περὶ τοῦ συνειδήσως. In this work, Stobaeus has brought together pertinent material from Greek literature between the sixth century B. C. and the sixth century A. D. Using this, Pierce has tabulated the uses of the term *συνείδησις* and its cognate words and phrases *το συνειδός*, *αὐτῶ συνειδήσιναι*, *αὐτῶ*

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<sup>7</sup>C. A. Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament (London: CSM Press Ltd., 1955), pp. 13-16.

J. N. Sevenster indicates that there are several others who have reached the same or similar conclusions: C. Spicq, Saint Paul, Les Epitres Pastorales, 1947, p. 29, in an excursus on "La bonne conscience et la foi"; J. Dupont, "Synesis aux origines de la notion chetienne de conscience morale," in Studia Hellenistica, Ed. L. Cerfaux and W. Peremans, 5, 1948, p. 123<sup>2</sup>: "la notion de conscience joue un role capital dans la morale de Seneca"; and J. Stelzenberger, Die Beziehungen der fruchristlichen Sittenlehre zur Ethik der Stoa, 1933, p. 212ff. J. N. Sevenster, Paul and Seneca: Supplements to Novum Testamentum (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, c.1961), IV, 48-50.

<sup>8</sup>Pierce, pp. 13-16.



σοφιστικῶν τι, and σύνεσις, and comes to the conclusion that the concept expressed by συνείδησις and its cognates changes very little in meaning over this thirteen-century period. Whatever Paul, or the Stoics, did with this term, it was still an intelligible word to Paul's pagan contemporaries and their successors.<sup>9</sup>

At the time of Paul, the popular concept of συνείδησις included the realization of a god who in some way was responsible for the ordered universe and to whom man was responsible for his conduct.

By comparing the context in which the term συνείδησις and its cognates occur in the writings of the various Greek authors which Stobaeus feels are representative of the thirteen-century period surveyed, Pierce comes to the conclusion that the absolute use of the phrase or word in a moral context, that is its use without any specific qualifying epithet such as good or bad, carries with it the force of a moral badness.<sup>10</sup> Where it is used with a negative of some

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 17-18. Max Pohlenz is also of the opinion that even before the time of Seneca, the conscience was a recognized philosophical concept: "denn ganz ähnlich wie er würdigen es etwa gleichzeitig Philon und Paulus, obwohl sie aus jüdischer Überlieferung nicht einmal den Namen entnehmen konnten." Max Pohlenz, Die Stoa (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1948), I, 317.

<sup>10</sup>What a world of difference there is between the mental state and outward appearance of a man with a troubled conscience and one who can rejoice in a clear conscience. The



sort, the moral emphasis becomes neutral, that is, there is no realization of having done wrong. Usually when a negative is applied there is also some adjective indicating a bad conscience is being negated, that is, no bad conscience. This does not mean, however, that there is any approval by conscience. It merely means that there is no consciousness of accusation, or of a ground for accusation.<sup>11</sup> Even when an epithet implying good is used with *συνείδησις* the concept usually only expresses moral emptiness or neutrality. A good conscience is one which does not accuse.<sup>12</sup>

Pierce also concludes that conscience functions only in a postfacto relationship to the action to be judged. It is limited to judging an individual's acts after they have at least been begun. Sandy and Headlam in their commentary of Romans 2:15 also note that "Conscience, with the ancients, was the faculty which passed judgment upon actions after they

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troubled conscience may reveal itself in a man's behavior, for example, in his silence, as was so with Cinna, when Augustus spoke to him about his plan to murder the emperor. When this plot was disclosed in all its details, Cinna remained silent 'not because of his compact, but because of his conscience' [Seneca: Clem. i. 9. 10]. Cinna's conscience began to make itself heard, evidently as one troubled, although conscientia is used here as elsewhere in the absolute sense [Ep. 97. 15; 105. 7. 43. 4] [*Italics added*]." Sevenster, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup>Pierce, pp. 21-27.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 37-39.



were done [sic] (in technical language the conscientia consequens moralie); not so much the general source of moral obligation."<sup>13</sup>

Concerning this judgmental function of conscience,

Pierce elaborates:

We find that it is always first of all, to the quality of a man's own acts and, it follows, of his own character--that is, it is not concerned with the acts, attitudes or character of others. . . . No external authority need be consulted: he knows, and is his own witness to himself; and this knowledge and witness are private to him alone. . . .

Secondly its reference is to specific acts--and to character only in so far as that is both determined by and expressed in specific acts. . . .

Thirdly, the reference is always to past acts . . . in the popular usage ἐντὶ συνείδησις was the result of a specific act as antecedent clause. . . .

The reference of συνείδησις, then is to the specific past act or acts, . . . committed by the subject himself . . . and normally the act, acts, condition or character are bad. . . . When no such [bad] act has been committed, it [conscience] remains dormant.<sup>14</sup>

These past acts may be separated into three categories, depending upon the participle which is expressed or implied:

- a. Aorist--acts which were begun and completed in the past.
- b. perfect--a present condition or character resulting

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<sup>13</sup>William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Fifth Edition; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), p. 61.

<sup>14</sup>Pierce, pp. 42-45. Infra, p. 26, note 7.



from an act completed in the past.

c. present--a present action which had its beginning in the past.<sup>15</sup>

The function of *συνείδησις* can be said to give pain upon violation of the norm: "(a) to be a pain; (b) to inflict pain . . . and (c) to feel pain."<sup>16</sup> Only rarely, if ever, is even a good conscience spoken of as bringing pleasure.<sup>17</sup>

The extent of the pain which conscience inflicts is held by many Greek writers to be sufficient penalty for the wrong they have done. Conscience is often spoken of by the same writers as the agent by which the punishment is inflicted. The metaphors of both judge and prosecutor are frequent. Conscience is also spoken of as the organ of faculty in which pain is felt.<sup>18</sup>

At the time of Paul, the popular usage of the term was so specific that one could merely speak of *συνείδησις* and by the absolute use of the term indicate the accusing aspect of an inner sense of guilt.<sup>19</sup> Pierce summarizes the function of conscience as it was popularly held at the time of Paul:

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<sup>15</sup>Pierce, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>17</sup>Infra., p. 31-32.

<sup>18</sup>Pierce, pp. 45-50.

<sup>19</sup>Supra, p. 27, n. 10.



Until bad action has been committed, or at least initiated, there is no *συνείδησις*. If the necessary metaphors of internal agent or capacity be employed, the absence of pain will have to be expressed in some such way as: "*συνείδησις* is quiet," "not aroused," or "off duty"; but such phrases are doubly metaphorical, in that they themselves depend on metaphors.

The fundamental connotation of the *συνείδησις* group of words is that man is by nature so constituted that, if he oversteps the moral limits of his nature he will normally feel pain--the pain called *συνείδησις*. . . . The wise and experienced will therefore rejoice whenever an action is accomplished, or initiated without the ensuing onset of the moral foot dashing, which is *συνείδησις*. If the "goodness" of a journey lies in the absence of mishap, or even of discomfort, the absence of *συνείδησις* is taken as great joy. This absence is classically expressed by *μηδὲν ἄνευ συνείδησις* and is a good and desirable thing. When the substantives replace the verbal phrase, it requires but the introduction of one or the other of the two secondary metaphors for this "good and desirable thing" to be expressed in, apparently positive terms. In order that the reference to the absence of *συνείδησις*, rather than that of any other sort of pain, may be made clear, *συνείδησις*, has, paradoxically, to be included. Thus *μηδὲν ἄνευ συνείδησις* is represented in substitutional form by such phrases as *συνείδησις*. . . , *ἀγασθῆναι* or *ὀργῆν συνείδησις*.<sup>20</sup>

Such a limited function for conscience is challenged by some present day writers who hold that conscience, in addition to the postfacto accusing function, also has a praefacto directional and motivational function.<sup>21</sup> Literature dealing with this period of history, however, seems to substantiate this limited function of conscience.

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<sup>20</sup>Pierce, pp. 50-51.

<sup>21</sup>Supra, pp. 18-21.



Walter Bauer's Lexicon does refer to the sayings of Bias and Periander on ἀπρῆ or ἀγροῖ συνιδῆς,<sup>22</sup> and Stobaeus also includes these sayings in his catena. Pierce allows the possibility that these may be instances where συνιδῆς actually has a positively good meaning, in the sense of approving or urging some action, but there is not enough context available to warrant definite conclusions either way. If these are instances where συνιδῆς has a positively good meaning, they are the only instances where they have this meaning in the literature which Stobaeus quotes.<sup>23</sup>

What often appears a conscience praefacto urging some good action can also be understood as a consciousness of the fact that conscience is not bothering the person as he begins an action, or memory of the fact that after previous similar action, conscience did not accuse.

E. Vernon Arnold in his presentation of Roman Stoicism alleges that the concept of conscience changed somewhat, shortly after the time of Paul, with the implication that previous to the change, the type of conscience of which Pierce

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<sup>22</sup>Walter Bauer, Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literature, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, c.1957), p. 794.

<sup>23</sup>Pierce, p. 143.



speaks was prevalent. Conscience

which originally expressed the burden of a guilty secret, became in the Roman period of Stoicism modified in meaning, and could thus express the approval awarded to a man by his inner and personal consciousness, even when all the world disapproves his acts: this self approval is closely akin to peace of mind [Italics added].<sup>24</sup>

While indicating at first that conscience might have come to be understood to have some positively good value, Arnold seems to water down this positively good approval to a "peace of mind" which can easily be equated with a lack of an accusing feeling of guilt. What Arnold presents here is little, if any, different from what Pierce has concluded from his study.

Although J. N. Sevenster takes a number of pages to present Seneca's use of the concept, he discusses the good conscience only in contrast with the bad:

How different is the life of a man with a good conscience! A bad conscience may even make a man nervous and uneasy when he is alone, a good conscience can call up witnesses and be quite unafraid of their judgment. If one's actions are honorable, everyone may know them. Wickedness fears the dark, a "good conscience, however, wishes to come forth and be seen of men." Then the uneasy, evil dreams, of which a man with a bad conscience is never free, vanishes. "Real tranquility is the state reached by an unperverted mind when it is relaxed. . . ."

The wise man wins the victory in every field. But then he must take every care to keep his conscience unimpaired, every precaution to see that it remains clear; he must be resolute in saying: "Nothing shall I ever do for the

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<sup>24</sup>E. Vernon Arnold, Roman Stoicism (New York: The Humanities Press, 1958), p. 320.



sake of opinion, everything for the sake of my conscience. . . ." When asked whence springs the desire for the real good, Seneca answers:

"I will tell you: it comes from a good conscience, from honorable purposes, from right actions, from contempt of the gifts of chance, from an even and calm way of living which treads but one path."

Accordingly, we see that there is a tremendous difference between the shame, the fear; the constant anxiety of the man with a bad conscience, and the inner freedom, the peace and firmly rooted tranquility of the man with a good conscience.<sup>25</sup>

E. Zeller, in dealing with the Epicurianism of the same period, shows that a similar understanding of the concept was extant in the Epicurian context also:

Virtue has only a conditional value as a means to happiness; or, as it is otherwise expressed, virtue taken by itself does not render a man happy, but the pleasure arising from the exercise of virtue. This pleasure the Epicurean system does not seek in the consciousness of duty fulfilled, or of virtuous action, but in the freedom from disquiet, fear and dangers, which follows as a consequence from virtue [italics added].<sup>26</sup>

Max Pohlenz in commenting on the Stoic philosophy seems to feel that Paul perhaps took his use of the term itself from the Stoic vocabulary, but that the Stoic use of the term as it is explained by Pohlenz retains the same accusing force which Pierce finds throughout his investigations.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Sevenster, pp. 87-88.

<sup>26</sup>E. Zeller, The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics, translated from the German by Rev. Oswald J. Reichel (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1892), pp. 481-482.

<sup>27</sup>Max Pohlenz; Die Stoa (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1948), I, 317-320, 377.



Sanday and Headlam also feel that Paul took his use of the term *συνείδησις* from the Stoics, but observe that:

The usage of St. Paul corresponds accurately to that of his Stoic contemporaries, but is somewhat more restricted than that which obtains in modern times. Conscience, with the ancients, was the faculty which passed judgment upon actions after they were done (in technical language, the conscientia consequens moralis), not so much the general source of moral obligation.<sup>28</sup>

Prof. Hans Schär observes from his study of the "Protestant Conscience" that prior to Cicero, Livi, and the Younger Pliny, the concept of conscience had only the connotation of bad. Beginning with the writers noted, we find the concept of the good conscience discussed.<sup>29</sup>

While the term *συνείδησις* and its cognates are used several times in the Septuagint and the Apocrypha, these references contribute little to an understanding of the concept. It is used only once where it has a moral significance: Ecclesiastes 10:20 speaks of a bad or accusing conscience. There is no value in pressing the Hebrew original.

The concept of conscience does show up in the Old Testament, however, as one of the meanings of the term *לֵב* or *לֵבָב*, "heart." Usually the "heart" refers to the rational function of man, but there are several references where heart can be

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<sup>28</sup>Sanday and Headlam, p. 61.

<sup>29</sup>Hans Schär, "Das Gewissen in Protestantischer Sicht," Das Gewissen (Studien aus Dem C. G. Jung-Institut Zürich, VII. Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1958), p. 122.



understood to mean roughly, conscience. I Samuel 24:5, 28:5, II Samuel 24:10, Jeremiah 20:9, Lamentations 1:20, and Psalm 38:8 would all convey the idea of an accusing conscience. Of these, the I and II Samuel passages are the clearest examples. Exodus 35:21,26, and 36:2 could be taken as instances where the conscience function of the heart is prompting to good action, although it would also be possible to ascribe these to the rational or faith function of the heart.<sup>30</sup>

Dr. R. I. Zwi Werblowsky, Professor of History of Religions at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, comments that when leb is used in the sense of conscience it is always something which tells a person that he has done wrong. He continues by pointing out that conscience is not so much a voice in us as it is a voice to us. As in Deuteronomy 6, it is something which must be inscribed upon the heart: "These words which I give you today shall you inscribe upon your heart, says the Lord." "It is something that man must learn, he does not have it by nature."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>It is interesting to note that Hebrews 10:22 and I Timothy 1:5 use both "heart" and "conscience" in the same construction. Hebrews 10:22 indicates that conscience is a function of the "heart." Sevenster, p. 93, also cites a work by F. H. von Meyenfeldt, Het hart (leb, lebab) in het Oude Testament, 1950 (Dess. Free University of Amsterdam) which mentions various places in the Old Testament where the word leb, or lebab virtually has the same meaning as "conscience."

<sup>31</sup>R. I. Zwi Werblowsky, "Das Gewissen in jüdischer Sicht," Das Gewissen (Studien aus Dem C. G. Jung-Institut Zürich, VII. Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1958), p. 96.



Hans Schär cites as examples of the concept of conscience in the Old Testament the excuse of Cain to God for Abel's whereabouts and the sense of shame which Adam and Eve experienced after the Fall into Sin. These are both clear examples of a bad conscience. It was only through man's disobedience of God's command that man found that he had a conscience. Man would not have heard the voice of conscience had he not sinned.<sup>32</sup>

The Jewish writers also understood the concept of conscience as an accusing function of the heart is evidenced by the

Twelve Testaments, in which apparently the very word "conscience" occurs for the first time in Palestinian texts: Reub. 4:3 "Even until now my conscience causeth me anguish on account of my impunity." In other testaments the same idea occurs: Jud. 20:5, where the corresponding word is "heart," and similarly Gad 5:3.<sup>33</sup>

In connection with quotes from several Jewish Rabbinic sayings from leading men of the Great Synagogue during the period of the Second Temple, all of which concern a bad conscience, M. Gaster, author of the article on the Jewish conception of conscience in the Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, comments:

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<sup>32</sup>Schär, pp. 122-124.

<sup>33</sup>M. Gaster, "Conscience: Jewish," Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics; edited by J. Hastings (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1959), IV, 42.



The burden of the message of these collections is to seek the judge in one's own conscience, in the consciousness of a fall from a moral height, and in the desecration of the Sacred Name.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, it can be seen that the concept of conscience, whether it be expressed as *συνείδησις*, conscientia or *24*, cannot be restricted to an exclusive philosophical thought world. It was a common concept which was well understood by the people to whom Paul wrote; and for the most part, if not exclusively, it denoted an accusing function of man's inner psyche which came into action after the inception of the morally wrong thought of activity.

#### Conscience in the New Testament

Having isolated a basic meaning of the concept of conscience, *συνείδησις*, we now look to the New Testament for the dual purpose of properly understanding what the New Testament writers are saying when they use the term, and to see whether there is anything in what they say which would invalidate or else substantiate the limited postfacto accusing function which we have thus far presented in this chapter.

In discussing the various New Testament occurrences of *συνείδησις* we shall follow the organization of Pierce. The chart on the following page is Pierce's analysis of the uses of *συνείδησις* according to the possible meanings which he has

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 42-43.



TABLE 1

OCCURRENCES OF THE TERM *συνείδησις* IN THE NEW TESTAMENT ANALYZED\*  
 \*C. A. Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament, Page 62.

Classification	Paul		Pauline A		Pauline B Hebrews	I Peter	(John)
	Corinthians	Romans	Pastorals	Acts			
NA <sup>7</sup> (Not Applicable)	II 4:2 II 5:11					2:19	
MPG (Morally Positively Good)	II 1:12				13:18 <sup>5</sup>	3:16 <sup>3</sup>	
MB (Morally Bad)	Neg. (Negative)	(II 1:12) I 4:4 <sup>1</sup>	I Tim. 1:5 <sup>3</sup> I Tim. 1:19 <sup>3</sup> I Tim. 3:9 <sup>4</sup> II Tim. 1:3 <sup>4</sup>	23:1 24:16 <sup>6</sup>	10:2	3:21 <sup>3</sup>	
		Norm. (Normal)				10:22 9:14	
A. (Absolute)		I 8:7 I 8:10 I 8:12 I 10:25 <sup>2</sup> I 10:27 <sup>2</sup> I 10:28 <sup>2</sup> I 10:29**	2:15 9:1	I Tim. 4:2 Titus 1:15	9:9		8:9

\*\* *συνείδησις* occurs twice in I Cor. 10:29

1 I Cor. 4:4 is the sole N. T. instance of

2 The phrase *διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν* rendered in the A.V. for conscience sake.

3 Ephithet *ἀγαθός* applied to *συνείδησις*.

4 Ephithet *καθαρῆς* applied to *συνείδησις*.

5 Ephithet *καλῆς* applied to *συνείδησις*.

6 Ephithet *ἁπλοῦς* applied to *συνείδησις*.

7 N.A. . . . cannot properly be rendered conscience at all.



isolated in the popular Greek language of the New Testament period. Since Pierce has some questions as to the authorship of several of the New Testament letters which are ascribed to Paul, and because of the previously held idea that Hebrews might be a Pauline letter, Pierce categorizes them as Pauline A and Pauline B.

The classification code is:

NA: Not Applicable. It should not be rendered conscience at all; it rather conveys the idea of consciousness.

MPG: Morally Positively Good. To be classified as such, the context must indicate that it is definitely speaking of something which has a positive moral force or motivation, as distinguished from the following categories. While Pierce holds that there are no pure uses of *συνείδησις* where it has a positively good force, he indicates several which might have this meaning.

MBNeg: Morally Bad Negative. A construction in which a negative particle is used to modify the idea of a bad conscience with the result that a neutral conscience is postulated, that is, no bad conscience. By use, the same result is attained when an epithet expressing good is used to modify the term conscience. This is possible since the absolute use of the term *συνείδησις* has in itself the idea of moral badness. The spelling out of the meaning would result in a good bad conscience or no pain of conscience.



MBNorm: Morally Bad Normal. The normal use of the term *συνείδητος* in which the concept is clearly indicated to be morally bad by the context and/or modifying adjectives. The punishment is usually also indicated.

MBA: Morally Bad Absolute. The use of the concept without modifying adjectives which by inference is bad. To speak of having conscience in itself means that you have an accusing conscience, a bad conscience.<sup>35</sup>

Pierce feels that the writer of Hebrews is the only New Testament writer who fully understood and deliberately used the various shades of meaning which *συνείδητος* can carry. Paul was more or less forced to use the term because it was being used by the errorists, and his use was limited to correcting any wrong application of the concept by the Christians to whom he wrote. The writer of Hebrews, however, as can be seen from the chart on page 39, uses *συνείδητος* in all the various classifications and with one exception, uses it in an ascending order from MBA through MPG. We shall observe this more closely after studying the other passages.

#### Morally Bad Absolute

Both I Corinthians 8:7-12 and 10:25-29, which use the term *συνείδητος* in an absolute way, concern themselves with

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<sup>35</sup>Pierce, pp. 23-25, 36-39 (NA. p. 23; MBNeg. pp. 25, 36-39; MBNorm. p. 24; MBA. pp. 24-25).



meats which have been offered to idols. Paul grants in I Corinthians 8:7-12 that idols have no real existence and therefore cannot in any way affect the essence of meat and its use as food. Nevertheless, the connection of this meat with idol worship is a source of spiritual concern for some of the converts from the idolatrous religions and perhaps also for some Jewish converts. This spiritual concern is caused by a weak conscience, *συρρέϊδες ἰσχυροῦ ὄντος*, a conscience which is undecided in its judgment as to whether an act is sinful or not.<sup>36</sup>

Since the conscience arouses concern and bothers the person, even though it errs in doing so, it can be termed a bad conscience which is painful to the person who experiences it.<sup>37</sup> To "wound" the conscience of one who is weak means in effect to cause him by your example to do something for which his conscience troubles him; he ignores its warnings in this matter because of your example, and by so doing the conscience is defiled (v. 7) so that it no longer is as effective in its work. Finally the weak brother is able to commit actual sin

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<sup>36</sup>"A weak conscience is one that is not fully clear as to whether an act is right or wrong." R. C. H. Lenskie, The Interpretation of St. Paul's I and II Epistle to the Corinthians (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, c.1946), p. 342.

<sup>37</sup>"If one's brother thinks it wrong for a Christian to eat sacrificial meats, then, should he be induced either by example, or by fear of being mocked as "ignorant" to eat them, he will not be able to free himself sufficiently, from familiarity until now with meats as means of communion with idols, not to suffer the pain of conscience." Pierce, p. 81.



without being able to hear the judgment of his not defiled conscience. I Timothy 4:1-3 provides a commentary on what happens.<sup>38</sup>

While I Corinthians 8 dealt with the eating of meats that had been offered to idols in relation to what this example would do to the weak brother, Paul speaks in I Corinthians 10 on the matter of whether it is all right for a Christian to eat these meats at all.

Pierce points out several items which are very important for a correct understanding of this section:

1. Paul does not allude to the Jerusalem decree concerning this matter.
2. The Greek emphasis upon conscience came after the collapse of the city-state and its external authority. With no external authority, men fell back on their own conscience as the only authority.
3. As this and the "severe letter" seem to indicate, the external authority of the Corinthian Church, and perhaps even of Paul were in dispute. Paul therefore meets the Corinthians on their own ground.<sup>39</sup>

The natural interpretation of I Corinthians 10:25 and 27

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<sup>38</sup>Infra, p. 48.

<sup>39</sup>Pierce, pp. 76-77.



is: "because of conscience avoid asking questions."<sup>40</sup> So that you don't even give your conscience a chance to bother you, don't ask questions about where the meat comes from. Verse 29 briefly repeats what has already been presented in the I Corinthians 8:7-12 section: it is all right to eat the meat, but if it would cause a brother to be led into a compromising situation, forego your liberty.

In all of these occurrences of *συνείδησις* in these two sections of I Corinthians there has been no specific modifying adjective to indicate that *συνείδησις* is morally bad. It has been used absolutely, but it can clearly be seen that in this context "conscience" is something that is to be avoided, both for ourselves and for others in so far as we are able to influence it. We are to keep from causing another person to have conscience, that is, an accusing conscience, from following our example and doing something that he is not sure is all right. We are to guard against arousing our own conscience by not asking any questions which would later raise doubts in our own minds as to the legitimacy of eating a certain piece of meat.

While Paul's use of *συνείδησις* in the Corinthians

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 75.



letters was "forced" because of its use by the errorists,<sup>41</sup> he subsequently makes a place for it in the concept of his theology as can be seen from his usage of the term in Romans.<sup>42</sup>

Romans 2:15 is perhaps the most well-known passage of Scripture in which the concept of conscience is used. Paul not only acknowledges the reality of conscience within even the pagan, but lists triple proof that the gentiles are a law unto themselves and thereby at least partially cognizant of a natural moral law:

1. Their overt acts show some standard of conduct.
2. They suffer pain, conscience, which warns them that they have done, or are doing, some moral wrong.
3. Reason also passes judgment on their conduct,

*συμπεριφορῆς*, perhaps referring to their logical evaluation of things or discussion with others which arrive at conclusions

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<sup>41</sup>"St. Paul took the Greek idea of conscience into Christianity because he had no choice; it was an element of the urgent problem at Corinth. His first reaction had been immediately to perceive both the liability of conscience to error through defective knowledge of the moral quality of acts, or through environment and habit, and its major defect as in ethical norm, its negativity. The disturbance at Corinth had been sufficient to indicate these; and to make him, while granting the point to the Corinthians, a little harsh in his treatment of the subject; so that he tried in his last surviving letter to them to introduce a conciliatory softening of it." Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 64-66.



of right and wrong.<sup>43</sup>

Conscience and reasoning powers are presented as two separate functions within man. Sometimes these reasoning powers agree with conscience in accusing the man--at other times they will go against the accusations of conscience and

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-86. "He has written 'the works of the law' in their hearts so that if they do otherwise in the concrete situation, they are aware that they have done evil. 'Their conscience also bears witness.' . . . When they act contrary to the right and seek to justify themselves before others or even before themselves, they know within themselves what the fact really is. The heathen conscience stands as an objective witness beside him, showing that he actually knew that he did wrong. So Paul also speaks of the heathen. If, when he has done something good and right, he be accused as if it were evil, his thoughts rise up to defend him against the charge; and if the evil he has done be approved, he may maintain a good exterior, but his inmost thoughts accuse him nonetheless. These are the three that bear witness: (1) the act which shows that 'what the law requires' is written in the heart; (2) conscience; and (3) accusing or excusing thoughts." Andres Nygren, Commentary on Romans, translated by Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), p. 125.

"This phrase is almost exactly repeated in Ch. ix. I *συμμερε. μοι τῆς συνυιδ. μου*. In both cases the conscience is separated from the self and personified as a further witness standing over against it." William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, The Epistle to the Romans: The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), p. 60.

"There is a triple proof that Gentiles, who are regarded as not having law are a law to themselves. (1) The appeal to their conduct . . . ; (2) the action of conscience . . . ; and (3) their thoughts. . . . The construction in ix. I suggests that the *συυ* views the witness of conscience, reflecting on conduct, as something added to the first instinctive consciousness of the nature of an action." James Denny. St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Expositors Greek Testament, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans Publishing Co., 1951), II, 598.



try to excuse the conduct.

In Romans 9:1 Paul appeals to conscience absolutely as a witness that he is not lying. He is saying in effect that he is not conscious of any internal pain that accuses him of falsehood. This, however, does not say anything positive, so Paul calls up two witnesses, Christ and the Holy Spirit, who by Their indwelling must quicken the sensitivity of conscience and provide a proper knowledge basis for its judgments.

Paul's third absolute use of *συνείδησις* is in Romans 13:5. It supports the thesis that the absolute use of *συνείδησις* implies moral badness. It is used here in a parallel construction with the Wrath of God which stands ready to execute judgment upon the wrong doer: *οὐ μόνου τῆν ὀργὴν ἀλλὰ καὶ διὰ τῆν συνείδησιν*. Even as civil power punishes a man for disobedience to civic laws, and as physical distress comes to those who violate physical laws, so also moral pain comes to those who violate moral laws.<sup>44</sup> Against the background of Romans 13:5 the meaning of *συνείδησις* is clear: it is the pain a man suffers when he has done wrong. The

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<sup>44</sup>Pierce, p. 84. Pierce also quotes an inscription from a Thyatiran tomb stone to the effect that anyone who disturbs the grave "will be under the wrath of God, who judges the living and dead, and his own conscience; he shall in addition be liable to be fined by the city of Thyatira." Pierce feels that the evidence is sufficient to regard this as a Christian grave which perhaps has Romans 13:5 as the prototype for the inscription. Ibid., p. 72.



passage could be paraphrased thus:

It is your duty to God to be subject to the power: to rebel is not only illegal therefore, it is also morally wrong. It is not simply punishment by society which awaits the rebel, the fear of which should deter him, it is also, for the law can be broken on occasion with impunity, the more terrible and less avoidable--for it is within him--pain of conscience. And both are parallel manifestations of God in action to maintain the order of things: the one is the Wrath external and mediated by society, the other is its internal counterpart.<sup>45</sup>

In I Timothy 4:2 Paul refers to men in whom the conscience has been rendered ineffective. The word *καυτηρίσθησαν* refers to the application of extreme heat with a hot iron with the result that there is a loss of sensitivity. When the conscience is seared it is no longer able to pain the person when he transgresses the norm.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>46</sup>"The course of action in point is a deliberate rejection first of the faith, then of God, and next of truth and honesty . . . they have known the Truth . . . they will be 'ex-Christian.' Thus this course of action must be expected to result in agonizing [sic] reaction of conscience unless prior action has been taken to anaesthetize the capacity for so suffering--hence the use of the perfect participle . . . such a career could not be embarked upon unless . . . they had with a hot iron completely destroyed the 'nerve-endings.'" Ibid., pp. 91-92.

An interesting alternate interpretation is given by Newport J. D. White: "or it may mean that these men bore branded on their conscience the ownership marks of the Spirit of evil, the devils seal (ctr. II Tim. ii. 19)." Newport J. D. White, The First and Second Epistles to Timothy and The Epistle to Titus, The Expositors Greek Testament, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1951), IV, 121.



In Titus 1:5, as in I Timothy 4:1, Paul refers to the effect of sin upon the function of conscience. Here, disregarding the pain of conscience is not considered as a single act, but as a habitus. Taking these two passages as commentaries on each other, Paul points out what happens when the conscience is repeatedly seared--it finally becomes all scar and no longer a functioning conscience. When conscience is completely defiled, Paul says in Titus, man becomes completely reprobate since his mind also is useless to properly direct him: it directed him to commit sin in the first place. The mind always was subject to errors of knowledge, and conscience, even though it is a negative thing, is the last line of defense.<sup>47</sup> The distinction between mind and conscience, thereby also the complete reprobation, are indicated by the double *Kai*. The perfect is the only way his condition can be expressed.<sup>48</sup>

The writer of Hebrews also uses *συνείδησις* absolutely

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<sup>47</sup>Infra, p. 71 for a discussion on the function of conscience on the basis of unconscious knowledge.

<sup>48</sup>Pierce, pp. 92-94. "It is an impure thing, even when lawful, in the case of 'them that are defiled.' And for this reason their intellectual apprehension (*νοῦς*) of these things is perverted by defiling associations; 'the light that is in them is darkness'; and their conscience has, from a similar cause, lost its sense of discrimination between what is innocent and what is criminal. . . . While conscientious scruples are to be respected, yet, if the conscience be defiled, it dictates [?] and instincts are unreliable, false as are the song efforts of one who has no ear for music." White, p. 190.



in Hebrews 9:9 and by the context clearly indicates that it carries a morally bad meaning. There is only one balm for the pain of conscience and that is the forgiveness in Christ. All of the Old Testament sacrifices could not free the worshipper from pain which comes from his transgressions.

Analyzing the absolute use of *συνείδησις* in the New Testament we can see that in each instance it carries with it a morally bad or painful meaning, and in no instance is it used as prompting to good action or as exerting a positively good moral force.<sup>49</sup> The absolute use of the word determines the basic meaning which is then modified by various adjectives and adverbs or context. Even when so modified, this basic meaning must be remembered so that the correct emphasis of the modification is understood.

#### Morally Bad Normal

The only use of *συνείδησις* in the MBNorm. classification is in Hebrews 9:14 and 10:22. We will briefly comment on them

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<sup>49</sup>While the term *συνείδησις* does not occur in the Gospels, its use in the apocryphal addition to John (John 8: 1-11) is significant. Even though the term itself does not even occur in the best texts of this passage, the very fact that it was used in such a way at approximately the same period makes it useful for our study. Whoever wrote this section most assuredly understood this word in the MBA sense. Although the men mentioned in the text could objectively point to the external law, their own conscience convinced them that they were doing wrong. The pain of conscience was too great for them to bear and so they left.



now, and return to them again when we view the progressive use of the term in Hebrews.

Hebrews 9:14 speaks of the blood of Christ purifying the conscience from dead works. The context of the term as it is used here carries with it the bad connotation since it needs to be purified and is associated with "dead works" which are against the will of God. Conscience has been serving the wrong ends; now it is purified to serve Christ, to keep the Christian aware of what is truly sin and not mere dead works, and the need of repentance.

Hebrews 10:22 continues the idea of a guilty conscience in need of cleansing so that we can approach God.

In these two passages the contextual association and specific adjectival modification presents conscience as an accusing function.

#### Morally Bad Negative

A second modification of the basic meaning occurs with the addition of a negative or positive particle to the construction to form what Pierce has classified as MBNeg. In this classification a negative or a positive word is used to modify the basic absolute meaning with the result that a neutral or non-painful state of the conscience is postulated. We will begin with the one instance where a definite negative is used.



In I Corinthians 4:4 Paul uses as a cognate of *συνείδησις* the older form *οὐδὲν ἔμμευτῆ<sup>ς</sup> συνείδα*. Paul is not aware of any pain of conscience, but he hastens to point out that his conscience, even while active and sharp, is not in itself an infallible judge of right and wrong. God is the final authority for right and wrong and the absolute judge of conduct. In this verse Paul

penetrates immediately to the great defect in conscience as a moral safeguard . . . : inaccurate knowledge of the quality of the act, habit, environment, imperfect awareness of Christ as judge, and the standard which he embodies and by which he judges, and of insufficient quickening of the inner man by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. . . . The defect of conscience as an ethical norm is common to every man; even if in all other respects it is "functioning perfectly" it still remains negative only. Conscience comes into operation when the moral limits of a man's own nature are transgressed, but the simplest way to avoid walking over an edge is to stand still. The demands of God are positive, according to St. Paul--standing still is rebuked as sternly by Jesus in the Parable of the Talents as gross sin [Matt. 25:14-30]. Even if--perhaps per impossibile--the "silence" of conscience can be taken to mean that a man has done nothing wrong, it can never be assured from it that he has been accounted righteous.<sup>50</sup>

The idea of "having something against oneself" is the basic concept which is then negated with the resultant "good conscience" which Paul speaks about in other passages.

In the Pastoral Epistles, Paul uses such terms as *αὐτοχρῆστες* (I Tim. 1:6), *ἀπώσμενοι* (I Tim. 1:19), *μεμίδετοι* (Titus 1:15), and *κεκαυτισμένοι* (I Tim. 4:2)

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<sup>50</sup>Pierce, pp. 88-89.



to indicate the interplay of conscience with faith.

In I Timothy 1:5 Paul declares that love must proceed from a sincere faith, and, on the moral side, from a pure intention and its negative aspect the avoidance of anything that would produce conscience: that is, a good conscience.<sup>51</sup> Paul then lists a number of things which must be avoided if one is to have a good conscience.

Faith and conscience are again matched in I Timothy 1:19, and the double use of these concepts in the same context lets us see more clearly, as was mentioned above, that the refusal to pay attention to the accusations of conscience (which is to bring about repentance) leads to a loss of faith.

In both I Timothy 3:9 and II Timothy 1:3 *συνείδησις* is modified by *ἐν καρδίᾳ*. I Timothy 3:9 states that faith must be held *ἐν καρδίᾳ* and in II Timothy 1:3 Paul claims that he serves God *ἐν καρδίᾳ συνείδησίν τε*. In neither case is it easy to postulate conscience as prompting either the faith or the good works, but rather that since both faith and the work is in accord with what the person knows is correct, conscience is not accusing them of any wrong-doing: that is, conscience is "clean." In both of these letters to Timothy

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<sup>51</sup>It is interesting to note, in connection with our brief survey of the concept of heart as a synonym of conscience in the Old Testament (Supra, p. 35), that both terms occur here. Is this merely Semitic parallelism or are these conceived as two different functioning agents of moral man?



"a good conscience is the absence of this pain from the man who has the capacity to feel it."<sup>52</sup>

Both II Timothy 1:3 and Acts 23:1 have caused some difficulty for various commentators in view of the fact that Paul lays claim to a good conscience in spite of the fact that he once persecuted the disciples of Christ. Some try to explain Paul's statement as referring only to his conduct since becoming a Christian, but the emphatic way in which he made the claim, and the context in which he spoke would indicate that he was referring to his whole life. If the thesis which we have been examining is correct, then Paul is saying that at all times in the past he has acted with what he believed to be the will of God; since he has always done this, he has not been bothered with the pains of conscience. This does not mean that he was always correct in what he did, but only that he has always acted in accord with what he believed to be correct. He is not standing before the representatives of the Jewish court and claiming that as he once blamelessly served God as a Jew, so now he is still faithfully serving the same God as a Christian. He has full knowledge of all the aspects of the case, and his conscience is not accusing him of any wrong action.

The difficulty of his persecution of the church of Christ

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<sup>52</sup>Pierce, p. 97.



would be explained by the fact that at the time that he persecuted the church he was also acting with a clean conscience based on what knowledge of God he had. Conscience does not operate on the basis of God's Moral Law, but on the basis of what the individual knows in and of himself and what he has decided is right or wrong. When Paul was brought to faith in Christ and a complete knowledge of God and His will, he then continued to serve with a clear conscience. Although the works were different, in both cases they were done with a clear--not an accusing--conscience.

Proceeding to the I Peter 3:21 occurrence of *συνείδητος* we see something bad being cleansed through the merit of Christ even as water removes dirt. When that which is bad (dirty) is removed from conscience, then the conscience can be called clean--but at best it is not neutral and there is no indication of any motive force because it is now clean. A clean conscience is not something which we can earn or secure by our own efforts. An accusing--dirty, bad--conscience can only be cleansed by God through forgiveness which is in Christ. A clean conscience is a result, not a force.

Briefly glancing at Hebrews 10:2, we see a very good example where the concept is tied up directly with a realization of sin, an accusing sense of wrong which can only be soothed by the blood of Christ. We will touch on this passage in Hebrews again a little later.



Our examination of the passages which fit into the MBNeg. classification shows no passages which would invalidate the thesis that *συνείδησις* has only a postfacto accusing function; and most of them clearly support it. There remains, however, several occurrences of *συνείδησις* which Pierce feels either might be exceptions to the rule, or which might invalidate the rule altogether: these are the three passages which are classified, at least tentatively, as MGP.

#### Morally Positively Good

In all of the Pauline passages thus far examined, Paul has made consistent use of *συνείδησις* to express a feeling of pain because of some infraction of a known moral imperative. In II Corinthians 1:12 his use borders on a positively good sense, conscience is "testifying"; but at best it can be said that *συνείδησις* here is "testifying" that Paul has done nothing wrong. *συνείδησις* has not in any way been the motivating force in a positive sense for Paul's holy and godly behavior. *συνείδησις* is said to be "testifying" to something good by the fact that it is not actually accusing Paul of wrong behavior. This usage stretches the concept to the limit, but it has not changed its basic meaning.

While Pierce lists I Peter 3:16 as a possible MGP usage, he does so for the purpose of being as completely objective as possible. Where there was any possibility that



a use was outside the rule which he has discovered, he wanted to give it the benefit of the doubt. It seems, however, that in this instance Pierce has been too generous. This occurrence seems to fit very well within the MBNeg. classification. It speaks only of living carefully according to faith and repentance which results in a Christ quieted conscience.

#### Conscience in the Letter to the Hebrews

In considering the Hebrews 13:18 passage, we will first of all trace the whole usage of *συνείδησις* in Hebrews, for in Hebrews we can see a definite, precise use of the concept. *Συνείδησις* is used only five times in Hebrews, but it is used progressively through all the various modifications found in the koine Greek, culminating in this Hebrews 13:18 adaptation.

Hebrews 9:9 is a very good example of the MBA usage of *συνείδησις* since the context clearly indicates that the term itself carries accusing significance. Both the Clarendon Bible and Moffatt in the International Critical Commentary, ad loc. insert either "sin" or "guilt" in order to make the meaning clear.<sup>53</sup>

Pierce comments on Hebrews 9:14:

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<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p. 100.



Christ's sacrifice, in contrast, has done away conscience of dead works, so that in him is offered the assurance that those shall be delivered from their frustrations, who are incorporated in him.<sup>54</sup>

In view of the concern with Old Testament Law in Hebrews it is natural that the writer would touch on this aspect in regard to conscience as he does in 10:2. Pierce comments:

Against the background of this assured future deliverance from, or negation of, conscience, the futility of the repetition characteristic of the Old Ritual is emphasized. So long as the worshipper seeks negation by these useless means he is doomed to remain under the pain of the MBNorm. conscience.<sup>55</sup>

Pierce sees in Hebrews 10:22 an explanation of how a good, clean conscience is acquired:

Once, however, by submitting to Christian initiation, he has fully appropriated the benefit of Christ's passion, he can look back with thanksgiving on his former MBNorm. conscience from which he is now happily delivered. He can embark on that new and living way, [10:20] by which he has open access to God in worship.<sup>56</sup>

Pierce then comments:

With great skill the writer presses on to the upper limits of the possible uses of conscience in 13:18. In Christ the pain is, from the first, done away, and, in him, the Christian, as he grows, may hope that its place may be taken more and more by joy. The writer, however, is not prepared to press, even now, beyond the borderline: he is content to show that the Christian life moves steadily away from the pain of conscience. Thus while he uses the epithet good Εκαληγυγ, he qualifies the whole sentence with we are persuaded--words expressing something less

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.



than final certainty, but rather, in hope and faith, a sober confidence; and good itself he qualifies with a parenthesis which, by the use of desiring, indicates that to live honestly in all things is one of intention and aspiration rather than of accomplishment. Further, the whole sentence is introduced by for, following a request for prayer on his behalf. In fact, he knows conscience too well, and has already used it too decisively as MBA, to claim unequivocally that it can ever be a positive and pleasurable index of virtue; but at least it no longer besets him, and he has the joy of open access to God in worship at last.<sup>57</sup>

In summarizing our study of the New Testament usages of the term *συνείδησις*, we can best turn to Pierce's closing comments:

Conscience in the New Testament . . . is the painful reaction of man's nature, as morally responsible, against infringements of its created limits--past, present by virtue of initiation in the past, habitual or characteristic by virtue of frequent past infringements. It can be secondarily depicted as his capacity so to react, and this capacity in turn can be represented in terms of a near personal metaphor. Because man's created nature as morally responsible is also rational, it can react wrongly; for wrong information can mislead. Environment also has considerable influence for good or ill; and environment which purveys a mistaken view as to the moral quality of a certain act, if it predisposes a man to assume a right, or neutral, act to be wrong, will influence his nature to react against such right or neutral act as if they were wrong, and vice versa. Habit, which is, of course, subject to the influence of environment, can also affect conscience: for habit can take on almost the force of the created limits themselves, so that breach of habit will frequently cause a reaction hardly to be distinguished from conscience, even where there is no moral significance.<sup>58</sup>

Pierce continues:

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 102-103.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 108-109.



St. Paul would have granted that, for all its liability to error, conscience must be obeyed: but he would never have added "for man has no other guide." He is definite that conscience only comes into play after at least the initiation of a wrong act; when it does not come into play, it may mean that the act committed is not wrong, but equally it may mean that the reactions are defective--either handicapped by wrong information, wrong environment or wrong habit, or made sluggish by sin, repeated and unrepented. In any case it can never mean that the action was more than "not wrong"--that it was "right" in the sense, even, of the only or best possibility in the circumstances; still less can conscience have anything to say directly about future acts.<sup>59</sup>

Since this last paragraph seems to point up one of the areas in which present day discussions about the functions of conscience seem to differ, we want to emphasize this point that Pierce has made. A man may learn by past experience that some action brings conscience, that is, an accusing conscience, and his reasoning warns him about what will happen if he does this action again; but conscience, per se, does not say anything until after the act has at least been decided upon or initiated.<sup>60</sup>

Pierce concludes:

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>60</sup>"The usage of St. Paul corresponds accurately to that of his Stoic contemporaries, but is somewhat more restricted than that which obtains in modern times. Conscience, with the ancients, was the faculty which passed judgment upon actions after they were done (in technical language the conscientia consequens moralis), not so much the general source of moral obligation. . . . See on the whole subject a treatise by Dr. P. Ewald, De Vocis *ἔννοια* apud scrit. N. T. vi ac potestate (Lipsiae, 1883)." Sandy and Headlam, pp. 60-61.



Conscience is the reaction of the whole man to his own wrong acts. It is a moral reflex action, parallel, but also akin to those reactions that make a man drop a red hot poker or spew out a poison long before conscious reasoning has been brought to bear upon those objects. The absolute pitch of the trained musician is likewise akin to the moral "absolute pitch" of the trained Christian: the wrong note--be it ever so little wrong--causes immediate pain.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 113.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE CONCEPT OF CONSCIENCE IN PSYCHOLOGY

Psychiatric-psychoanalytic investigation confirms the consoling intuitive belief of humanity that everyone has an inner conscience and is constantly under the influence of that inner department of the personality. A feeling of guilt follows every person like his shadow, whether or not he knows it.<sup>1</sup>

But while psychiatric-psychoanalytic investigation might confirm the existence of that department of personality called conscience, we also "must come to the conclusion that little is known about the workings of the inner conscience."<sup>2</sup> While there are a great many articles and discussions about the formation of conscience and the therapy for problems of conscience, the function of conscience in the normal person has not received much attention. D. B. Klein, already in 1930, noted that psychologists had not written about the motivational aspect of conscience,<sup>3</sup> and a review of articles on "conscience" and "super-ego" in Psychological Abstracts<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edmund Bergler, The Battle of Conscience (Baltimore, Md.: Monumental Printing Co., 1948), p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>D. B. Klein, "The Psychology of Conscience," The International Journal of Ethics, 40 (January 1930), 247.

<sup>4</sup>Psychological Abstracts, Vols. 1 through 38:4 (Washington, D. C.: The American Psychological Association, 1927 through August, 1964).



indicates that the situation has not changed much since then.

### Conscience in Freudian Psychology

Since most of what has been written about conscience has its roots in the psychology of Sigmund Freud, we will first of all examine the role of conscience in his theories.

As Freud developed his theoretical model of Id, Ego, and Superego, he identified conscience as a function of the Superego. In Freud's construct, as man evolved from more primitive stages, the animal instinct energies of the Id became partially controlled by the evolutionary development of the Ego, that part of the psychic structure of man which consciously directs the energies of the Id in socially acceptable patterns. As Homo sapiens continued to develop, a third psychic element evolved which internalized the demands and prohibitions of the environment. This third psychic element Freud called the Superego.

The Superego has at least two functions according to Freud. One of these functions is called the Ego-Ideal which is developed by the influence of those who critically direct the person's life--including public opinion. It holds up for the person those actions which are deemed most worthy of emulation.

A second function, the conscience, acts as a watchman on



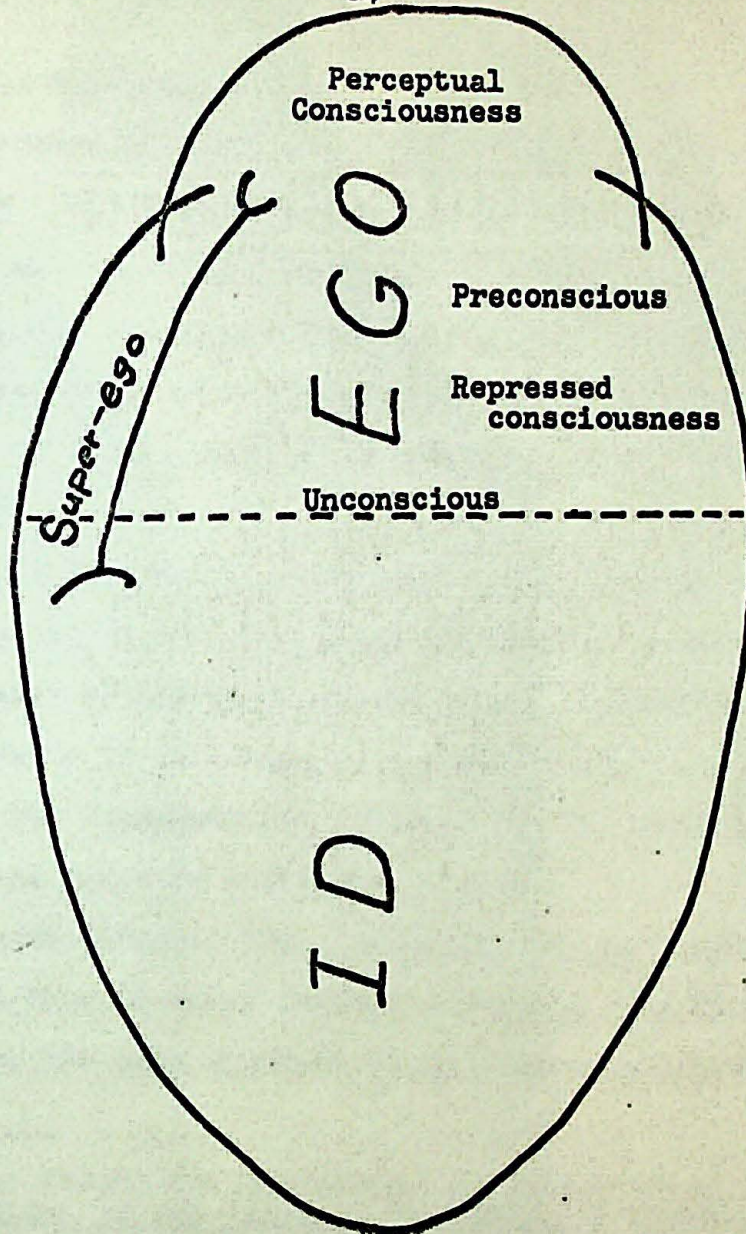


Figure 1. Freud's Model of the Psychic Nature of man\*

\*Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," The Major Works of Sigmund Freud, The Great Books of the Western World, LIV (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952), 839.



behalf of the Ego-Ideal.<sup>5</sup>

As a product of evolution, present day man has a potential Superego, and therefore a potential conscience; but since the content of norm of the Superego is derived from the environment, the conscience does not begin to function until later in life. "The role which the Superego undertakes later in life, is at first played by an external power, by parental authority."<sup>6</sup>

Curiously enough, the strength of the conscience in Freud's findings is not materially influenced by the severity or the leniency of the parents; and in its development the "Super-ego seems to have made a one-sided selection, to have chosen only the harshness and severity of the parents, their preventive and punitive functions. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Freud does indicate that conscience can have a motivating influence in that it warns against something, but it seems that he views the main function of conscience as punitive.

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<sup>5</sup>Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), XIV, 96.

Sigmund Freud, "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis" (Lectures 31 and 32), The Major Works of Sigmund Freud, The Great Books of the Western World, LIV (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc., 1952), 833-834, 839.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.



Conscience, he says, is the voice of guilt.<sup>8</sup>

I feel a temptation to do something which promises to bring me pleasure, but I refrain from doing it on the grounds that my conscience will not allow it. Or I allow myself to be persuaded by the greatness of the expectation of pleasure into doing something against which the voice of my conscience has protested. After I have done it, my conscience punishes me with painful reproaches, and makes me feel remorse for it.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem that perhaps Freud is not clearly differentiating the various functions of the Superego. If there are only two functions, the prohibition would appear to be a function of the Ego-Ideal instead of a function of the conscience. Ernst Blum in his analysis of Freud's concept of the Superego, points to a third function, that of "Introspection."<sup>10</sup> In the process of Introspection, a proposed action is evaluated as to whether it would violate the Ego-Ideal and thereby incur the action of conscience.

While the basis upon which the conscience acts is internalized from the environment, the conscience is not easily changed or influenced by the apparent reasonable demands of the immediate situation. In a word, conscience is irrational.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ernst Blum, "Freud und das Gewissen," Das Gewissen (Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1958), pp. 181-182.

<sup>9</sup>Freud, "New Introductory Lectures," p. 831.

<sup>10</sup>Blum, "Freud und das Gewissen," pp. 177ff.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., pp. 180-181.



Conscience is the internal perception of the rejection of a particular wish operating within us. The stress, however, is on the fact that this rejection has no need to appeal to anything else for support, that it is quite "certain of itself." This is ever clear in the case of consciousness of guilt--the perception of the internal condemnation of an act by which we have carried out a particular wish. To put forth any reason for this would seem superfluous: anyone who has a conscience must feel within him the justification of the condemnation, feel the self reproach for the act that has been carried out. The same characteristic is to be seen in the savage attitude toward taboo. It is a command issued by the conscience: any violation of it produces a fearful sense of guilt which follows as a matter of course and of which the origin is unknown.<sup>12</sup>

Every movement of the ego is

watched by the severe Super-ego, which holds up certain norms of behavior without regard to the difficulties coming from the Id, and the external world; and if these norms are not acted up to, it punishes the ego with feelings of tension which manifest themselves as a sense of inferiority and guilt.<sup>13</sup>

Since Freud does not specifically discuss the function of conscience as a prae facto motivater, it is not possible to come to definite conclusions. It would seem, however, that his identification of two functions, and perhaps even three or more functions, of the Super-ego would indicate that the function of conscience in the personality of man could be restricted to a single sphere, that of passing judgment and condemning infractions of the moral code. The Ego-Ideal

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<sup>12</sup>Sigmund Freud, Totem and Taboo (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), pp. 67-68.

<sup>13</sup>Freud, "New Introductory Lectures," p. 839.



would carry the function of motivation.

### Conscience in Jungian Psychology

An outgrowth of the Freudian School of Psychoanalysis is the school of Analytic Psychology founded by Carl Gustav Jung. While Jung was originally a pupil and follower of Freud, he soon became dissatisfied with the Freudian explanation of the psychic nature of man. In his clinical experience, Jung came across many cases which could not be fully understood by the Freudian hypotheses with its overwhelming "sexuality," and incomplete and inadequate explanation of various psychic factors. Through clinical experience and a vast amount of research into different cultures, both contemporary and historic, Jung developed a totally different model of the psychic nature of man.

The most significant difference between Jung's psychic model and the model of most other psychologies, including Freud's, is the existence of the Collective Unconscious. Just as there are certain basic physical characteristics which distinguish man from other creatures and which are passed on biologically from one generation to another, so also there are certain psychic characteristics which are actually inherited from our parents--characteristics which are basic to humans throughout the world and which have been transmitted with little change since the "evolution" of man.



In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is a thoroughly personal nature, which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually; but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents.<sup>14</sup>

The Archetypes which are inherited as a part of the Collective Unconscious do not have psychic content, but rather are forms or scaffolding upon which we structure our empirically derived knowledge. Basic to the Collective Unconscious are such Archetypes as the "Mother," "Father," "God," "Child," "Persona," and so forth. The common presence of these Archetypes in all humans will predispose a more or less common estimation or apperception of elements in the conscious sphere: that is, everyone more or less has the same ideas about what a mother is or should be.

Between the Collective Unconscious and the conscious Ego in Jung's model is the Personal Unconscious. It receives its contents from the individual's interaction with his environment: things which have fallen from consciousness, things which have been suppressed, and subliminal perceptions. In the psychic processes, the Archetypes from the Collective

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<sup>14</sup>Carl G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1959), p. 43.



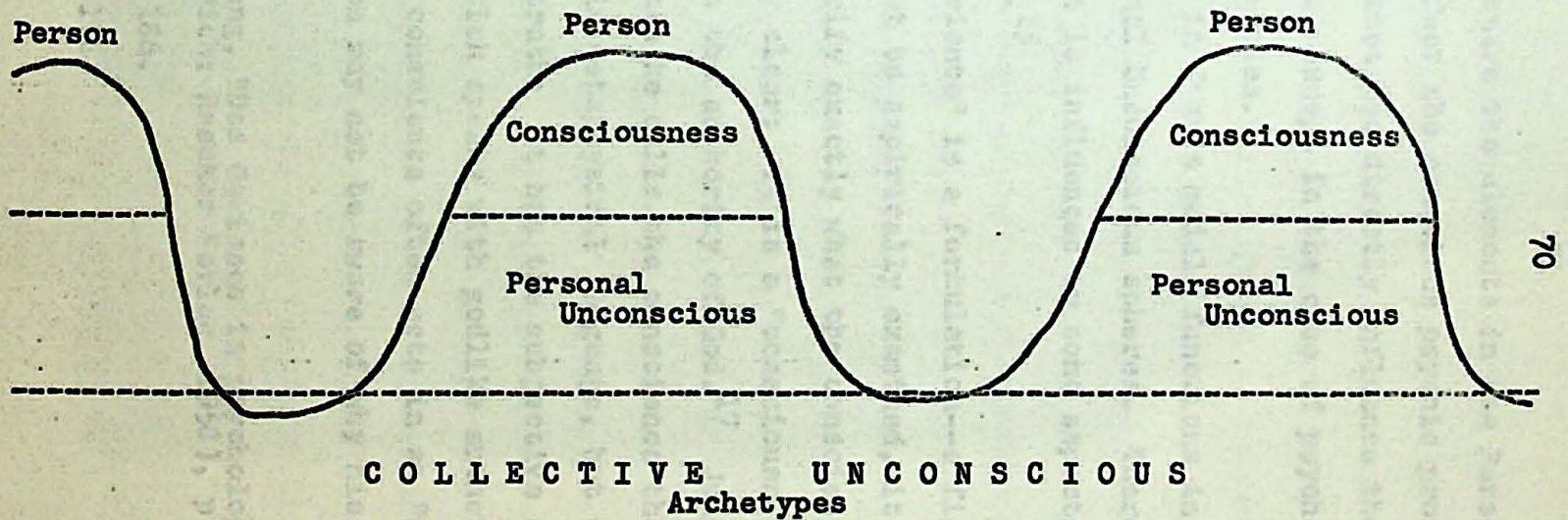


Figure 2. Jung's Model of the Psychic Nature of Man\*

\*Class Notes



Unconscious structure the elements in the Personal Unconscious, which in turn affect the conscious psychic processes. Very rarely do the Archetypes directly influence the conscious psychic processes, except in the case of psychotics and some very primitive peoples.

Conscience, in Jung's model, functions in both the conscious and Personal Unconscious spheres. There is also reason to assume that it is influenced by some aspects of the Collective Unconscious.<sup>15</sup>

Since "conscience" is a formulation--a figure of something which cannot be empirically examined, it is very difficult to specify exactly what the conscience is. What it does is fairly clear: it is a "consciousness of sin,"<sup>16</sup> which speaks with the authority of God.<sup>17</sup> Jung is quick to point out that when he calls the conscience the vox dei, he is not engaging in metaphysical language, but only expressing a psychological truth: it has the subjective character of an inner voice which speaks with godlike authority.

Because the conscience often acts in an "unconscious manner" the person may not be aware of why his conscience is

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<sup>15</sup>Carl G. Jung, "Das Gewissen in psychologischer Sicht," Das Gewissen (Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1958), p. 196.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 186.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 194.



troubling him. One of the great difficulties in discussing the unconscious function of conscience is its inaccessibility to study. We do not know its boundaries, how it is modified, how it co-operates with the conscious aspects of conscience, what it has by nature, or how it can be helped. We can discover these aspects only through dream analysis.<sup>18</sup>

It is also possible to have a delayed reaction to the perception of conscience: the norm is established relatively early in life, because of various circumstances the norm is transgressed about the middle of life without the subject being conscious of any reaction of conscience (although the conscience has registered its protest, the protest is repressed), still later in life something happens to reactivate the voice or conscience or make the person aware of the voice of conscience with the result of a consciousness of a guilt feeling without a clear realization of what specifically is troubling him.<sup>19</sup> The conscience may speak to the person through a dream, but without psychiatric therapy he may not be able to free himself of the conscience. He must be helped to understand the unconscious norm upon which the conscience is functioning and needs to recognize the act to which it is speaking.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 189-190.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 201-202.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., pp. 185-189.



This is particularly difficult when the unconscious content of conscience is in error, producing an erring conscience which operates in the unconscious sphere. The difficulty is increased when this erring conscience comes into specific conflict with some law of society or religion which is encountered many years after the error was internalized.<sup>21</sup>

Jung's contribution to our understanding of the functioning of conscience, like Freud's, does not specifically help us in determining whether conscience can, or does, ever influence a person in a praefacto manner, to do or not do an act. Judging from silence as to this aspect of the function of conscience, and taking the extended concern with the judgmental and punitive functions of conscience as an indication, it would seem that Jung's psychology would not invalidate the view that conscience functions only in a postfacto accusing or punitive role.

D. B. Klein, while holding that conscience definitely exercises a motivational influence on conduct,<sup>22</sup> explains that this motivational influence is negative in character, inhibiting the person from doing some action because of the pain of conscience on previous similar occasions. It carries out this "motivation" secondarily through the emotions:

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., pp. 191-193.

<sup>22</sup>Klein, p. 247.



Conscience thus represents a conditioned emotional reaction to situations involving moral disapproval [*Italics in original*]. . . . When conscience impels or motivates us to right a wrong, the motivating energy comes from the aroused emotion.<sup>23</sup>

The psychic function of memory comes into play in speaking about conscience being a motivating force: remembering the discomfort which followed a similar previous occasion:

One answers the admonition of the "still small voice" by vowing never to be guilty of a similar breach . . . in the future.<sup>24</sup>

Sandor Rado, writing for The Journal of Psychology, takes the opposite view:

Conscience is a system of self-restraining and self-prodding mechanisms that adjust the action-self to the standards of its social environment. . . . The healthy function of conscience is the attainment of such self-rewards as self-respect, sense of self-realization, and moral pride.

Being contingent upon detection, fear of the consequences is but a fear of being caught: it is no substitute for conscience.<sup>25</sup>

While none of the psychologies studied specifically answer the questions raised in previous chapters about the possibility of conscience actually praefacto motivating to good action, their treatment of the subject would seem to

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., pp. 255-256.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Sandor Rado, "From the Metapsychological Ego to the Biocultural action-self," The Journal of Psychology, 46 (October 1958), 284.



indicate that if there were any motivation it would involve only a sense of prohibition and not a positive motivation to good moral action. For all of them, the concept of conscience implies a command which is at least intellectually violated in that one decides to do something. This violation results in a sense of "sin" which cannot be mitigated by rational argument. Both the command and the act may be below consciousness when the conscience is finally heard, with a resultant need of psychiatric help in uncovering the cause of the guilt feeling.



## CHAPTER V

### AN EVALUATION OF THE CHANGED MEANING AND FUNCTION OF CONSCIENCE

Up until the time of Cicero, Livy, the Younger Pliny, and the writing of the New Testament, the only type of conscience known was that of a bad or accusing conscience. In all four of these approximately contemporary writings the concept of a good conscience appears as a negation of the bad conscience. This concept of a good conscience prevailed until the time of the Reformation. Luther viewed the good conscience in two senses: the first sense was the good conscience which a man received with the forgiveness of sins in Christ; the second sense described the conscience of a man who was acting under the forgiveness. After the Reformation, during the periods of pietism and rationalism, conscience took a still different form as it became an authority that was almost equal to the authority of Scripture. In the latter days of protestant thought, conscience has become a superior authority to any external criteria--including Scripture.<sup>1</sup> A further development has assigned to the conscience the role of

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<sup>1</sup>Hans Schär, "Das Gewissen in protestantischer Sicht," Das Gewissen (Zürich: Rascher Verlag, 1958), p. 132.



motivating good action:

Conscience holds us to comply in practice with those moral principles our mind has recognized to be binding upon us. However, we may distinguish between conscientia praeveniens and conscientia consequens.

Conscientia praeveniens.--Before the act there is in our heart the distinct feeling that we ought to do what we believe to be right, and thus conscience is that inward urge to drive toward right action and conduct; or there is the feeling that we ought not do what we believe to be wrong, and thus conscience is that inward monitor that would keep us from doing evil.<sup>2</sup>

What is the proper understanding of the function of conscience?

There seems to be no disagreement about conscience being an integral part of every man. While the psychologist does not concern himself with its origin, except to say that it is a product of evolution the same as man, the Christian definitely postulates that conscience has been given to man by God as an integral part of the "rational soul."

There seems to be general agreement that the function of conscience is to pass moral judgment upon the activities of the individual. This judgment is independent of the reasoning powers of man, and is not under rational control. The conscience is able to impress man with its judgment despite and against any and all rational arguments, although it is

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<sup>2</sup>Edward W. A. Koehler, A Summary of Christian Doctrine (Second Revised Edition by Alfred W. Koehler, Oakland, California: n.p., c.1959), pp. 17-18. Supra, Chapter II, particularly pp. 12-18.



possible for the individual to successfully ignore the voice of conscience in much the same way in which a person is able to sleep through the ringing of an alarm clock.

The norm upon which conscience passes judgment is an internal norm which has been developed consciously and unconsciously during the individual's development, particularly from the example of parents, but also from the general environment in which he grows up. The norm is not the Moral Law of God, although the natural knowledge of the Law is an inborn part of that norm.<sup>3</sup>

The postfacto accusing function of conscience in relation to wrong actions is accepted by all, and the Christian writers are agreed that the only way in which such a bad conscience can be changed to a good conscience is through faith in the forgiveness of sins through Christ.

Disagreement begins when one tries to determine whether conscience has a praefacto function which judges before any action is taken--including the action of deciding, or whether this judicial function operates only postfacto.

As part of this disagreement, the question arises whether there is a praefacto motivational function in which conscience suggests and positively motivates the individual to take some

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<sup>3</sup>Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Natural Law and the Natural Knowledge of God and Their Relation to Conscience" (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1928), pp. 166-173.



good action.

Taking this latter part of the disagreement first, we need to acknowledge that only God knows definitely what the function or functions of conscience actually are. We at best can only isolate and describe what we observe to be the case, with the Scriptures guiding and limiting our interpretations. The symantical aspects also need to be kept in mind--are we merely using words but not actually differentiating anything real?

From the psychological point of view, it would seem that we need to recognize a variety of psychic functions in man's rational soul. One of these functions is what we call conscience. In seeking to be precise (and thereby at least scientifically intelligible if not acceptable), it would seem that this term should be applied to only one function, and not to a group of functions; or else, we should clearly differentiate and identify the various sub-functions of this constellation of functions which we identify as conscience, that is conscience as postfacto judge, or as praefacto motivation. Freud has identified this constellation of functions as the Superego involving the Ego-Ideal, Conscience and probably the function of Introspection. Freud uses the term conscience in a praefacto manner, but in an imprecise context. Jung comments on conscience only as a postfacto judgmental psychic function of man.



Theologically, from the Lutheran distinction and application of Law and Gospel in the moral life of man, it would seem that the praefacto motivation to good moral action would not be the function of conscience which operates on the norm of internal moral law. Caemmerer observes that "the execution of the natural law is effective chiefly negatively; it is restraining rather than motivating. . . ."4 It would be possible to postulate that the Gospel activates the conscience to examine the moral convictions of the person and suggest and/or motivate compliance with these convictions; but it would be equally valid, and perhaps more in accord with our desire to be psychologically precise to assign this function to another aspect of man's psychic nature.

Scripture does not specifically answer our questions since we have already demonstrated how all the good conscience passages can be understood as negations of a bad conscience.

At best the case for a morally good motivational role for conscience is inconclusive and questionable. There is no doubt that such a motivational force exists in man's psychic nature, but this--Scripturally and psychologically--can be distinguished as something different from conscience and more adequately recognized and discussed with a different term.

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 174.



Probably the greatest case against the praefacto motivation to good moral action function of conscience is its overwhelming association with the postfacto judgmental aspect. While this writer often came across references to the conscience motivating to good moral action, he does not recall or have recorded any illustration of such function which the sources gave in support of their comments. Neither the Scriptures nor the writings of the ancients were cited. On the other hand, in discussing the "terrors of conscience" there were extensive references and elaborations as to its function in this judgmental and accusing capacity, the way in which it made itself known, how it carried out its activities, and how it could be silenced. Everyone seems to know the accusing force of a bad conscience, but no one seems to be able to describe the conscience which motivates or moves someone to good moral action.

It is also interesting to note that this praefacto motivation to good moral action function of conscience is a relatively new concept. While the terminology of a good conscience has been used for about two thousand years, these early writers evidently at most had in mind the good feeling which accompanies good moral action. It is significant to note the independent studies of this subject which arrive at the same conclusions regarding the character of a good



conscience being the negation of a bad conscience.<sup>5</sup>

The preponderance of evidence would seem to indicate that while there is a psychic function in man which praefacto motivates to morally good action, this function has not until recently been ascribed to conscience. While the changing character of language would allow us to re-define what we mean by conscience, it would seem best to remain consistent with the terminology and meaning of Scripture and be more psychologically precise in assigning only one function to what we call conscience: that is, the judicial function.

Differentiating between the praefacto and postfacto judicial functions of conscience is even more difficult. When a person contemplates an act, does the conscience enter into the "inner discussions" regarding the advisability or permissibility of the act, or does conscience remain silent while a separate psychic function, such as Freud's Introspection function of the Superego--evaluate the advisability or permissibility of the act? When a morally wrong action is contemplated, does the conscience present to the person the accusing voice even before the decision, or is it a function of memory which recalls a previous similar occasion which evoked the accusing function of conscience?

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<sup>5</sup>Yrjö Alanen, Das Gewissen bei Luther (Helsinki: Suomal. Kirjall. Seuran Kirjapainon oy, 1934), p. 63. C. A. Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament (London: SCM Press LTD., 1955), passim. Schar, passim.



Pierce contends that conscience does not begin to function until after the action has at least been decided upon.<sup>6</sup> His observations are substantiated by Sandy and Headlam in their commentary on Romans.<sup>7</sup> Others who limit the function of conscience to the judicial realm could be interpreted as at least allowing conscience to voice its judgments prior to a decision. On the other hand, consistency with some of the other things which they say would indicate that even they limit the function of conscience to a postfacto judicial relationship.

While no conclusive evidence can be adduced, this writer feels that the evidence warrants a conclusion that conscience functions only in a postfacto judicial role.

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<sup>6</sup>Pierce, pp. 42-45. Supra, pp. 28-29.

<sup>7</sup>William Sandy and Arthur C. Headlam, Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans (Fifth Edition; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), p. 61. Supra, pp. 28-29.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE ROLE OF CONSCIENCE IN THE CHURCH

"Each man must do as his conscience dictates!" In one form or another, this concept is being espoused in defense of a wide variety of ethical actions. It is stated in the face of all rational arguments and even in defiance of Scripture. It is claimed that it is a sin to go against one's conscience --even if the norm upon which conscience is supposedly to function is wrong!<sup>1</sup> Conscience as a praefacto judge and motivation to action has assumed the authority of god within us--and the popular language of our society and of the members of the church reflect this exalted view of the function of conscience.

Assuming the conclusions of the previous chapter to be

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<sup>1</sup>"Shall we insist that a man give up his sinful practice even before he is convinced, or shall we let him continue in his sin until we have convinced him? By no means should we advise such a one to act against his conscience, for that also would be a sin, and it would tend to destroy his moral character, inasmuch as thereby we break down in him that very power which urges him to do what he believes to be right. Besides, if we teach him to disregard his conscience when it prompts him to worship his idol, he may learn the lesson so well that he will with equal ease disregard his conscience when it prompts him to worship the true God." Edward A. Koehler, A Summary of Christian Doctrine (Second Revised Edition by Alfred W. Koehler, Oakland, California: Rev. A. W. Koehler, c.1959), p. 34. Supra, pp. 12 and 15.



valid, it is necessary to re-assess both our language and the basis upon which we defend our ethical actions.

C. A. Pierce argues that the distinction needs to be drawn between the function of conscience and the function of choice in Christian ethics.<sup>2</sup> Choice is prior to an action and does not carry with it the aura of external absolute authority which seems to characterize our appeals to conscience; it is the decisions reached by our rational processes and not the vox dei in us. When the choice is consistent with our moral norm, conscience does not react--we can claim to have a good conscience in doing the action. Where conscience does react, we can assume that the choice was wrong according to our own moral code, and the action should be abandoned immediately. Even though conscience is fallible, says Pierce, it is the last warning system we have, and its warnings must not be ignored or violated.

Actually, the concept of conscience which is set forth in this thesis would not necessitate a great change in the practical ministry of the church. While there are many expressions about conscience which would indicate a praefacto motivational character, for the most part we use the more natural concept of conscience as a postfacto accusing voice,

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<sup>2</sup>C. A. Pierce, Conscience in the New Testament (London: CSM Press Ltd., 1955), pp. 125-127.



in our actual practice. The same is true of specific articles on conscience which detail the prae facto motivational aspect which conscience is supposed to have: although they explain what it is supposed to be and do, they usually do not illustrate it or draw any implications from it.

One implication of this limited post facto judicial concept of conscience for the practical ministry is the dethronement of the claim that the conscience should execute absolute power and be assumed to have judged correctly according to God's Law. While conscience is a very necessary and important part of our psychic system, its fallibility needs to be clearly realized. The authority of Scripture as the determinant criteria for our moral norm needs to be re-emphasized. The fact that conscience speaks clearly and forcefully does not necessarily mean that the norm upon which it judges is correct. Only when we are certain that the norm upon which conscience is judging is consistent with the Word of God can we in any way acknowledge that judgment of conscience to be infallible-- and then it only tells us infallibly that we have already done (at least incipiently) something wrong, which needs to be stopped immediately and repented of.

From this it follows that the Law of God needs to be taught clearly and forcefully in our churches. While we are not under law, but under Grace, the New Testament very adequately demonstrates a concern that the followers of the Lord



know well what the Lord expects in terms of the Christian life. It is not enough, however, to know the bare precepts of the Law, the Christian must also know the spirit of Love by which the Law is to be interpreted.

In view of the man made restrictions of some denominations, the Christian also needs to realize what is not a part of God's will and what is adiaphora.

Conscience cannot even warn us that we have sinned and thereby bring about true repentance unless our moral norm has been fully developed according to Scripture. Because man often understands incorrectly, forgets, or develops warped interpretations of God's Word, even the parochial school graduate in the congregation needs to take part in discussions about what God expects of the Christian.

The function of conscience upon unconscious norms suggests some implications for pastoral counseling and the need for referral of some cases to trained psychologists and psychiatrists. It also holds some interesting implications for memorization of materials.

Not only do the precepts of the Law need to be taught, but the wrath of God over sin needs to be emphasized. In that the conscience functions, psychologically speaking, as vox dei, the true vox dei in regard to sin needs to be taught so that the "terrors of conscience" are sufficiently meaningful so as to bring about true repentance.



In addition, it is not sufficient to have a mere knowledge of the law. Man must recognize its binding force. In short, man must be fully aware of the definite obligation which the law of God places upon him.<sup>3</sup>

Since environment determines both the content of our moral norms and also influences our reaction to the voice of conscience, the church needs to maintain for herself the best possible environment where sin is met and dealt with in a firm but loving way. If the congregation does not seriously deal with sin through church discipline, the individual member will become hardened to, or used to, the voice of discipline in his own life. A sharp conscience can be aided, or dulled, by the environment. It is the task of the church to do all that she can to sharpen the reaction of conscience so that it will react at the slightest transgression with sufficient strength to arrest the sin at the point of inception.<sup>4</sup>

What is true of the environment of the church is true also of the home. For this reason the various aspects of

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<sup>3</sup>L. C. Wuerffel, "Conscience--Its Essence, Functions, and Nature," Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Convention of the Atlantic District of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (n.p., 1955), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup>"Conscience is the reaction of the whole man to his own wrong acts. It is a moral reflex action, parallel, but also akin, to those reactions that make a man drop a red hot poker or spew out a poison, long before conscious reasoning has been brought to bear on those objects. The absolute pitch of the trained musician is likewise akin to the moral 'absolute pitch' of the trained Christian: the wrong note--be it ever so little wrong--causes immediate pain." Pierce, p. 113.



parental discipline become a great concern for the church in its educational program.

Appeals to conscience as a motivation for doing something, such as "give as your conscience tells you," or "doesn't your conscience tell you to do more?" or "Let your conscience be your guide," need to be recognized for what they are: the use of the law, the dread of having a bad conscience if the action is not complied with. If the person is expected to wait for his conscience to motivate him in the proper sense, he can honestly say that he doesn't feel compelled to do the action, although he may regret it later.

### The Sin Against Conscience

In much of the literature which has been written regarding conscience, a recurring interpretation of Romans 14:5,22-23, insists that "to go against conscience" is sin, even if conscience urges the person to commit an act that God has declared to be sin. Thus the person sins in either case, he sins if he obeys conscience but disobeys God.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Supra, pp. 12,15,84. Even Luther comments: "To act contrary to conscience is equivalent to acting contrary to faith and sinning grievously;" and "The Holy Spirit withdraws from those who have fallen into sins against conscience; for the Holy Spirit cannot live in a man who is guilty of gross sins of any kind against conscience." Ewald M. Plass, What Luther Says (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1959) I, 334.



Both the Phillips paraphrase and the New English Bible's translation of Romans 14:22-23 assume this interpretation and even use the term conscience although it is not found in the Greek. Phillips paraphrases:

Your personal convictions are a matter of faith between yourself and God, and you are happy if you have no qualms about what you allow yourself to eat. Yet if a man eats meat with an uneasy conscience about it, you may be sure he is wrong to do so. For his action does not spring from his faith, and when we act apart from our faith we sin.<sup>6</sup>

The New English Bible translates:

If you have a clear conviction, apply it to yourself in the sight of God. Happy is the man who can make his decision with a clear conscience! But a man who has doubts is guilty if he eats, because his action does not arise from his conviction, and anything which does not arise from conviction is sin.<sup>7</sup>

The emphasis in both of these versions, and particularly that of the New English Bible, equates faith *πίστις*, with conviction of what is right and wrong, and this in turn is linked to conscience as judge.

Two things need to be noted in the interpretation of this passage:

1. From the standpoint of our definition of conscience as functioning only in a postfacto judgmental role, "to go

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<sup>6</sup>J. B. Phillips, The New Testament in Modern English (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1956), ad loc.

<sup>7</sup>The New English Bible, The New Testament (Oxford University Press, 1961), ad loc.



against conscience" can only mean either: (a) If, after deciding to do the action, your conscience bothers you, don't continue the action and thereby go against its warnings; or (b) Because you remember that you suffered the torment of conscience over the same or similar action on a previous occasion, you should not do this action since it will bring on another attack of conscience.

2. A word study of Paul's use of *πίστις* shows that if Paul actually meant "conviction of what is right and what is wrong" and not "faith in Jesus Christ," then this is the only time that Paul uses the term *πίστις* in an absolute way in this sense; in all other instances it definitely implies or states that it refers to "faith in Christ."

It is interesting and perhaps significant that Walther Bauer's Greek Lexicon, translated and adapted by William Arndt and Wilbur Gingrich, have put the *πίστις* references of these two verses into a special classification: "*πίστις* gains from the context the meaning freedom or strength in faith, conviction."<sup>8</sup>

It would seem that the passage needs to be more carefully

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<sup>8</sup>Walter Bauer, Griechisch--Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literature, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek--English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, c.1957), p. 669.



studied in the context of Paul's use of the concept of *πίστις*. In contradiction to what appears to be the general interpretation, it may be that Augustine in Contra Iulianum, iv, may be correct in saying that whatever does not proceed from faith in Jesus Christ is sin.<sup>9</sup>

Romans 14:23 would then be interpreted to say: He who doubts that the contemplated action (eating certain foods) is in harmony with his faith in Jesus Christ, but who continues with the action regardless, is condemned, because he is not acting from the motivation of faith in Christ, but is disregarding this faith; for whatever actions do not proceed from faith in Jesus Christ are sinful.

While it is definitely psychologically unwise for the Christian to ignore the warning of conscience because he thereby establishes the principle whereby he can ignore it on other valid occasions, it is questionable whether we can categorically say that a person commits sin when he continues to go against his conscience--particularly when he seeks to carry out the will of God as this is expressed in Scripture but is bothered by his conscience which is still functioning upon an old pre-conversion--perhaps even unconscious--norm which has not as yet been corrected.

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<sup>9</sup>William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1902), p. 394.



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