

Conscience and freedom of conscience: maybe not what you think

GiST team, February 2022

Part 1

The public health measures put in place in Australia in response to COVID-19 have prompted a range of responses from Christians. In discussions about how to respond the ideas of 'conscience' and 'freedom (or liberty) of conscience' often come up. In this four-part series, the GiST team takes a fresh look at conscience and liberty of conscience, and asks the question, "Are they are Christian ideas?"

In this, the first part of this series, we ask the question...

What is 'conscience' in the Bible?

*Conscience is moral self-awareness – my knowledge of myself as standing in God's presence*¹

Paul writes about conscience in Romans 2:14-16.

"¹⁴ For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. ¹⁵ They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them ¹⁶ on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus."

The background to this passage is that God's general revelation of himself demonstrates that He is good, and that He requires goodness from all people. For the Jews, God's requirements were made explicit in the moral laws of the Old Testament. However for the 'Gentiles' (non-Jews) God's requirements are 'written on their hearts' (v.15a) and their conscience bears witness as to whether or not they have met God's requirements in any particular area or action (v.15b-16).²

In the Bible's view then, conscience is not the voice of God speaking in my heart. Rather, it bears witness within me as to whether or not my actions (or thoughts or words) are in line with what I understand God's requirements to be.

My conscience is not always right but must be informed by God's word

In 1 Corinthians 8 the apostle Paul deals with the issue of food offered to idols. He makes it clear from the start that there *is* a right answer to this question:

"Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'an idol has no real existence,' and that 'there is no God but one.' (v.4)

Therefore, in 1 Corinthians 10, Paul can say to the Corinthians, "Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience" (v.25). The twin reasons for this

¹ The first half of this definition is from Christopher Ash, 'Pure Joy: Rediscover your conscience' (IVP, 2012), p.18; the second half is from JI Packer, 'Among God's Giants: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life' (Kingsway, 1991), p.141, quoted in Ash, p.20.

² 'Conscience', in IH Marshall, AR Millard, JI Packer, DJ Wiseman (eds.), "New Bible Dictionary" (IVP, 1996), p.222.

are (a) “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (v.26) and (b) that the idol to which the food has been offered has “no real existence” (8:4).

However, some Christians in Corinth, through their former participation in idol worship, did not understand this. “But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” (8:7) In other words, if one of these ‘weak conscience’ Christians eat food that has been offered to idols, their conscience accuses them, since it is operating on the (erroneous) assumption that idols have real substance as ‘gods’.

There is more to what Paul says in this passage, but the point to see here is that my conscience, if not informed accurately by God’s Word, can be wrong. We must therefore do all we can to instruct our conscience according to God’s Word.

It is dangerous to ignore my conscience but sometimes I must put it in its place

It is important to see that in the previous example (from 1 Corinthians 8) Paul doesn’t condemn the ‘weak conscience’ Christian who, on the basis of an uninformed conscience, abstains from eating food offered to idols. In fact, in a similar passage in Romans 14, Paul is explicit that the Christian who, having a weak conscience in this area, ignores his/her conscience and eats anyway, sins by doing so. “But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith.” (Rom.14:23) This is because sin has to do not only with actions but with motivation: we can do the ‘right’ thing from the wrong motives and it is still sin. Conscience is able to take motive into account, and hence we ignore it at our peril.

Having said that, if we know that something is acceptable for us to do according to God’s Word and yet our conscience still ‘pricks’ us when we do it, making us feel guilty, then conscience must be put in its place. To refrain *out of conscience* from doing something which we know God’s word permits, or to do *out of conscience* something which we know God’s word forbids, is also sin, since it puts the conscience above the authority of God’s Word. To do this can even imperil our connection to Christ (c.f. Galatians 5:2-4).

A Christian conscience not only convicts but reassures

A big advantage Christians have in relation to conscience is that through the gospel, and despite our sins, our consciences are cleansed. The apostle Peter puts it this way:

“Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ...” (1Pet.3:21)

In other words, despite our sins – which are like dirt on our conscience (c.f. Heb.10:22) – the merits of Christ’s death and resurrection make us clean before God, as symbolised in baptism. There is now no need for our conscience to accuse us, since our faults have been admitted, and paid for by Christ.

Our conscience will, of course, still ‘bear witness against us’ when next we do the wrong thing. But we will not be left in our guilt, once we (having confessed our sin) look to Christ’s death and resurrection and are reassured of our forgiveness, cleansing, and ongoing relationship to God. This indeed is a ‘good conscience’.

Part 2

The public health measures put in place in Australia in response to COVID-19 have prompted a range of responses from Christians. In discussions about how to respond the ideas of 'conscience' and 'freedom (or liberty) of conscience' often come up. In this four-part series, the GiST team takes a fresh look at conscience and liberty of conscience, and asks the question, "Are they are Christian ideas?"

In this, the second part of this series, we ask the question...

What is 'liberty of conscience' in the Bible?

Any discussion of 'liberty of conscience' in the Bible ought to be set in the context of 'liberty' in the Bible generally. In short, in the Bible Christian liberty is the freedom to live life according to God's ways, free from the ruling power of sin in this life and the condemnation of God in the next (c.f. Luke 1:74-75, Gal.5:1,13, 1Pet.2:16). This is not an unrestricted (antinomian) freedom, but rather freedom within God's good boundaries – the kind of freedom a fish experiences by being 'restricted' to water.³

A key summary passage on liberty of conscience in the Bible is Romans 14:1-15:6. While the phrase 'liberty of conscience' does not appear in the passage, the concept is very much there. Christians with a better-informed conscience (the 'strong' 15:1) are not to despise or fail to include Christians with a lesser informed conscience (the 'weak' 14:1-3, 15:1), nor are they to do anything that might cause their weaker-conscience fellow Christian to stumble in his or her faith (14:13). Specifically for the 'strong' in this passage, this means voluntarily restricting their freedom to eat, in order to prevent the perception on the part of weaker-conscience Christians that the strong are endorsing idolatry.⁴ The weak, in turn, are not to pass judgement on the strong if they do see them eat (14:3-4).

It is important to note though that the voluntarily laying down of freedoms by the strong has limits. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, where weak-conscience Christians have gained a position of strength in the church, they seek to impose on the strong restrictions that are additional to God's Word. In that case the weak are actively to be resisted (Galatians 2:3-5) since to submit to such restrictions *as if they were God's commands* (i.e. out of conscience) actually undermines God's truth – in this case (and most importantly) the truth of the gospel.⁵

³ See for example 'Liberty, Christian' in Walter A. Elwell, "Evangelical Dictionary of Theology" (Baker, 2001), p,688-689. Also Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), Chapter 20.1.

⁴ This is the teaching 1Cor.10 as well (see esp. v.27-29a): that the strong are called to use their freedom to love others, which may mean giving up their freedom temporarily so as not to lead others astray, and to give them time to mature. This has a corollary in Paul's decision to circumcise Timothy (voluntarily, on Timothy's part) for the sake of reaching Jewish people (Acts 16:3).

⁵ In contrast to the issues of food and circumcision, which are taught about clearly in the New Testament, the observance of special days (Rom.14:5) is somewhat less clear. Certainly, observance of special days other than the Lord's Day is taught about very clearly (Gal.4:8-11 i.e. they are not required to be observed). However genuine Christians differ on what God's Word says about Lord's Day observance, hence this may be an example of an issue about which Christians should allow liberty of conscience in an ongoing way. The appropriate age for baptism might be another contemporary example.

In summary then, liberty of conscience in the New Testament is freedom to act according to conscience, without being despised, caused to stumble, condemned, or not welcomed by your fellow Christians. It is the freedom we receive from our fellow Christians to act in accordance with our conscience even when it is still poorly informed, since the shaping of people's consciences by God's word takes time. It is the freedom we extend to our fellow Christians by voluntarily laying down our freedoms in Christ for their good. However, our freedom in Christ must not be laid down when restriction of it is imposed as if such restrictions were the command of God.⁶

Liberty of conscience and the Westminster Confession

It is important to see that in both Romans 14-15 and 1Cor.8-10 the context is the church. Later Christian thinkers though, and from the Enlightenment onwards increasingly secular thinkers, sought to apply the concept of liberty of conscience not only in the church but to society more broadly.

Published in 1646, the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)⁷ addresses liberty of conscience, retaining a focus on the church but also drawing out implications beyond it. The key sentence is in WCF 20.2, which reads, "God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship."

In saying this the WCF divides life into two areas – or rather, one all-encompassing area ('any thing') and one sub-area ('matters of faith or worship'). England in 1646 was in the midst of a civil war (or a series of civil wars) which had been sparked, in part, by the Roman Catholic tendencies of King Charles I under whose rule a creeping tendency towards various Roman Catholic practices had progressed in the English church. There were also present in England at that time a variety of Protestant ideas, including those of extreme sects (e.g. radical sects and groups) and those of more mainstream thinkers (e.g. congregationalists). In that context, 'matters of faith or worship' can be taken to mean: (a) religious doctrines (i.e. what we believe about God, Christ, salvation, etc.) such as those in statements of faith like the WCF; and (b) what happens in public worship (i.e. church).

In the 'all encompassing' area the WCF is saying that Christians are free (have liberty) from obedience to any command (from anyone, including civil governments) which is against God's Word. This is straightforward – Christians "must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) In the sub-area of 'matters of faith or worship' Christians have the additional freedom (liberty) not to believe a doctrine and not to obey a command unless it is taught or commanded in God's Word. That is, according to the WCF, in 'matters of faith or worship' Christians are only required to believe doctrines that God Himself has taught in His Word, and only required to do things in church that God has commanded.

'Liberty of conscience' in the WCF then focuses less on the freedom extended by Christians to one another in the church so that each one may act in accordance with even an uninformed conscience, and more on freedom from imposition of human rules by government (whether civil

⁶ It's important to see that there are some issues on which liberty ought not to be granted e.g. in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul calls on Christians to exclude from their fellowship people who flagrantly engage in sinful behaviour. To use a humorous example, we ought not to grant liberty of conscience to Christians whose conscience does not trouble them about robbing a bank!

⁷ The WCF is the statement of faith of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, and the historic statement of faith of Presbyterian churches generally.

government or church government) so that Christians may believe and practise Christianity according to God's Word.

Finally, it is worth noting that the scenarios outlined in WCF 20.2 do not cover every situation a Christian encounters. Specifically they do not cover the command of a lawful authority about something that is neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word. In that situation the WCF says that Christians are required to obey such commands, even if they don't agree with them, out of conscience (WCF 20.4, 23.4).⁸ That is, the WCF is saying that conscience requires Christians, except in the scenarios outlined in WCF 20.2, to submit to the ruling authorities (Romans 13:5).

⁸ "It is the duty of the people to pray for magistrates, to honour their persons, to pay them tribute and other dues, to obey their lawful commands, and to be subject to their authority, for conscience' sake. Infidelity, or difference in religion, doth not make void the magistrate's just and legal authority, nor free the people from their obedience to him..." (WCF 23.4) "And because the powers which God hath ordained, and the liberty which Christ hath purchased, are not intended by God to destroy, but mutually to uphold and preserve one another; they who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, shall oppose any lawful power, or the lawful exercise of it, whether it be civil or ecclesiastical, resist the ordinance of God." (WCF 20.4)

Part 3

The public health measures put in place in Australia in response to COVID-19 have prompted a range of responses from Christians. In discussions about how to respond the ideas of ‘conscience’ and ‘freedom (or liberty) of conscience’ often come up. In this four-part series, the GiST team takes a fresh look at conscience and liberty of conscience, and asks the question, “Are they are Christian ideas?”

In this, the third part of this series, we ask the question...

How did ‘conscience’ and ‘liberty of conscience’ change in modern times?

Conscience

A significant development in the idea of conscience came with Immanuel Kant in the 18thC. Kant saw conscience as the final arbiter of moral truth for the individual; this is a considerable change from seeing God’s Word as the final arbiter of moral truth.⁹ Consistent with this, rather than conscience simply being a witness to God’s requirements and an ‘urger’ towards the good, which ought in certain circumstances to be put in its place, conscience came to be seen as in *authority* over the individual.¹⁰

Liberty of conscience

Liberty of conscience became particularly important in light of the European wars of the 16th & 17th centuries, in which religion was (at least) a justifying factor. Religious freedom in society (originally meaning toleration of Christian denominations other than the national one) was argued for on the basis of liberty of conscience. John Locke was a key ‘hinge point’: any objection to the doctrine of toleration, he wrote,

“...would be settled if the law of toleration were once so settled that all churches were obliged to lay down toleration as the foundation of their own liberty and that liberty of conscience is every man’s natural right equally belonging to dissenters as to themselves: and that nobody ought to be compelled in matters of religion either by law or force.”¹¹

Such toleration was later extended to Roman Catholics and atheists, on the same basis. Thomas Jefferson put it this way:

“But our rulers can have authority over such natural rights only as we have submitted to them. The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God. The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are

⁹ Christopher Ash, ‘Pure Joy: Rediscover your conscience’, p.193-195. Oliver O’Donovan traces the theological development of this change (O’Donovan, ‘The Ways of Judgement’, 2008, p.307), which combines the ‘immediacy’ of Luther’s view of conscience (which included in its focus the individual’s personal encounter with God) with scholasticism’s limitation of conscience to the objects of practical reason. Conscience therefore, in the latter half of the 17thC, comes to be described as God’s ‘deputy’. It’s not much of a jump from this to Kant’s view of conscience as the final arbiter of moral truth in the individual.

¹⁰ For example, James Madison (4th President of the United States) sees conscience as “an imperious sovereign” and “its demands experienced as ‘dictates’”. (W. Cole Durham Jr, ‘Religious Liberty and the Call of Conscience’, 1992; quoted in Rex Adhar & Ian Leigh, ‘Religious Freedom in the Liberal State’, Oxford, 2013, p.46.)

¹¹ John Locke, ‘First Letter Concerning Toleration’, quoted in Marian Hillar, “Radical Reformation and the Struggle for Freedom of Conscience” (Outskirts Press, 2019), p.194 (Kindle Edition).

injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god.”¹²

Liberty of conscience in modern thought then is no longer simply the freedom extended by Christians to one another in the church so that each one may act in accordance with even an uninformed conscience, nor just freedom from government interference so that Christians can believe and practise Christianity according to God’s Word. Rather, liberty of conscience in modern thought is freedom from government interference so that all people in society can obey the dictates of their conscience, in all matters religious and moral, provided they do no harm to others. Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) puts it this way: “Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion”, a right which is “subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.”¹³

Conscience, liberty of conscience, and Christianity

Is conscience a Christian idea?

If what is meant by that question is, “Is conscience an idea we find in the Bible?” the answer is most definitely ‘yes’. As outlined above conscience is an important New Testament idea. The current renewed focus on conscience is a welcome development.

However there are important differences between the Bible’s idea of conscience and modern ideas of it. Conscience in the Bible is a ‘witness bearer’ to God’s requirements, urging us towards them. In contrast to the modern idea, conscience as understood in the Bible is not an authority in and of itself, since conscience can be wrong. Conscience must therefore be submitted to the authority of God’s Word and instructed by it.¹⁴

Is liberty of conscience a Christian idea?

If what is meant by that question is, ‘Is liberty of conscience an idea we find in the Bible?’ the answer is ‘yes, but...’ As outlined above, liberty of conscience is dealt with in the New Testament. However the New Testament treatment of liberty of conscience is quite limited and the idea significantly different from the modern political idea of it. It is true that the biblical idea of liberty of conscience is part of the philosophical context out of which the modern political idea grew, but political thinkers have extended liberty of conscience well beyond the New Testament idea of it.

That is not to say the modern political concept of liberty of conscience has nothing to recommend it; on the contrary! But it is to say that it is not the same idea that we find in the New Testament.

¹² Thomas Jefferson, ‘Notes on the State of Virginia’, quoted in Hillar, “Radical Reformation”, p.196 (Kindle edition). When Jefferson says ‘the rights of conscience... we could not submit’ he is referring to inability to submit conscience to rulers, not refusal. In other words, since external coercion cannot change the conscience, people are not able to submit conscience to rulers, even if they wanted to.

¹³ Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Further, liberty of conscience is seen to cover “all ethics and values a human being cherishes...” (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/faith4rights-toolkit/Pages/Module1.aspx>) Australia is a signatory to the ICCPR however its requirements have not been legislated here.

¹⁴ Even further away from the New Testament idea of conscience is Sigmund Freud’s view that conscience is no more than “the interiorization of the norms of parents and society” which therefore has even less to do with objective right or wrong. (Ash, ‘Pure Joy’, p.195-196.)

Part 4

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In this, the final part of this series, we ask the question...

What dangers might we need to beware of?

Since there are differences between the biblical and modern political ideas of conscience and liberty of conscience, what potential dangers might there be for Christians seeking to apply these ideas in their lives?

One danger (and temptation) is for Christians to use these ideas as a 'shield' for preventing others from questioning or persuading them about their views or choices. The modern idea of conscience is that it is a 'commander', dictating to us what we must or must not do. It is therefore seen as unquestionable, by the individual or others. However the Christian idea of conscience is that conscience *must* be open to question, persuasion, and learning or it (effectively) becomes a 'god'. As Christians we cannot invoke 'liberty of conscience' to shut down discussion about beliefs we have or choices we have made. This is especially important since even views grounded in biblical principles can also be influenced by improper motives or thinking (e.g. self-righteousness, or the desire to be independent of all authority; also unthinking compliance or exaggerated fear). Christians must be free from coercion from our fellow Christians, but Christians are not free from our fellow Christians persuading us and/or teaching us so that our views better align with God's Word.¹⁵

A second danger for Christians is to endow views on issues of wisdom with the status of views held on the ground of conscience. There are many decisions Christians are called upon to make which fall under the heading of 'wisdom', in relation to which God does not require the choice of one particular option over another. For example, should your children attend Christian schools? Which political party should you vote for? Christians hold strong (and varying) opinions about such things. Yet they are not matters about which Christians are required by God to choose one particular option or another.¹⁶ They are not matters of conscience, since conscience bears witness to what the individual understands God's requirements to be. When Christians see matters of wisdom as matters of conscience they will tend to see others who make different choices as sinful in making those choices. They risk therefore becoming modern-day Pharisees, 'teaching as doctrines the commandments of men' (Mark 7:7).

¹⁵ Nothing in this paragraph of course rule outs the use of the 'keys of the kingdom' within the church (Matthew 16:19), which have commonly been taken to mean exclusion from the Lord's Supper and then (later) exclusion from the church itself (c.f. Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5:11). Christians must be allowed to believe and act in accordance with a weak conscience, but ongoing stubborn placement of oneself outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity, in belief and action, has consequences for our membership of, and participation in, the church.

¹⁶ Of course there would be some options in these areas which a Christian would be required by God not to choose e.g. voting for the National Socialist (i.e. Nazi) party!

A third (and related) danger is for Christians to ‘sanctify’ the expression (and manner of expression) of their views on wisdom issues, as if they were conscience issues. Martin Luther rightly expressed his conscience view at the Diet of Worms: “I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other.” Yet Luther was speaking on issues to which God’s word speaks directly and profoundly; he was not speaking on issues God has left to human wisdom. The kingdom of God is not a matter of wisdom issues (c.f. Rom.14:17). Christians are not free to express their views on wisdom matters in ways which are destructive to the faith of their fellow Christians nor to the peace and unity of the church (c.f. Rom.14:20,15:2).¹⁷

Conclusion

Conscience is a wonderful gift from God given to each person on this earth. It is a ‘witness bearer’ – a kind of alarm that is tripped when we are about to transgress (or have transgressed) one or more of God’s good boundaries. To value it and cultivate it is part of growing in godliness.

Liberty of conscience too is a wonderful biblical idea, intended in the first instance to help Christians maintain fellowship with one another even when they disagree over what God requires. Granting liberty of conscience to one another allows time and space for God to work in the lives of our fellow Christians when some of the requirements and freedoms of his word have not yet trickled down to people’s understanding or conscience.

This is the same time and space that the Lord Jesus extends to each one of us his people, who often get things wrong in both our understanding and practice of following Him. Praise God, the merits of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection cover our missteps and slowness to grow. Where would any of us be if Christ did not extend this freedom to us?

Through the influence of Christianity over the centuries these ideas ‘overflowed’ to societies in which Christianity was strong. However they did not do so without undergoing some changes. It is hoped that this series of articles has helped those who read them to grow in their discerning use of these important concepts.

¹⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith 20.4 also speaks pointedly to this issue, reminding Christians that they are under the authority of church government (i.e. Sessions, Presbyteries, etc.) in relation to their expression of such opinions.