

**When Doctrine Divides
Doctrinal Fidelity and Christian Unity**



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Resurrection Church
Aaron Downs**

Purpose

As Christians, we want to be biblical—we want to root our beliefs and practice in the bible. Yet, Christians interpret the bible in different ways and, as a result, find themselves in disagreement on matters of doctrine and conscience. In this class, we will consider how to navigate these important matters while avoiding the twin errors of doctrinal sectarianism and doctrinal minimalism.

Course Schedule

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Lesson 5 | Defining Conscience¹

“Yep, temptations. They’re the wrong things that seem right at the time, but, uh... even though the right things may seem wrong, sometimes, or sometimes, the wrong things [chuckles] may be right at the wrong time, or vice versa. [clears throat] Understand?”

Jiminy Cricket

Introducing Conscience

What comes to mind when you hear the term *conscience issue*? For most, the notion of *disputable matters* comes to mind—an issue not directly addressed in Scripture. Yet, conscience is active in every situation that calls for moral decision-making. Before we can consider different kinds of conscience issues, however, we must arrive at some clarity about the nature of conscience. In other words, we must first define conscience before describing and categorizing *conscience issues*. The burden of this lesson is to do just that—to define *conscience*.

Misleading Images of Conscience

I propose that many, if not most, Western Christians have adopted false images of *conscience*. As a result, biblical interpreters unconsciously project these images onto their reading of biblical texts that reference *conscience*. Consequently, Christians tend to adopt popular, but not genuinely biblical, notions of *conscience* and moral decision-making.

¹ Foundational sources for lessons focusing on doctrine are Gavin Ortlund, *Finding the Right Hills to Die on: The Case for Theological Triage* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Rhyne R. Putnam, *When Doctrine Divides the People of God: An Evangelical Approach to Theological Diversity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020); Matthew Y. Emerson, Christopher W. Morgan, and R. Lucas Stamps, eds. *Baptists and the Christian Tradition: Towards an Evangelical Baptist Catholicity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020). Foundational sources for the lessons for lessons focusing on conscience are Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008); D. Q. McInerney, *Being Ethical* (Sound Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2020); Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

Conscience as Superego

Many popular conceptions of *conscience* derive from Sigmund Freud's investigation into the interaction between the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious parts of the human mind. His studies resulted in the field of psychoanalysis, in which the human mind is described as containing three parts: the id, the ego, and the superego.

The id operates at an unconscious level and drives the human person to survive (*eros*) and to destroy (*thanatos*). The ego operates at a conscious level and keeps the id (base desires) in check. The superego operates at different levels (sometimes more or less conscious) but ultimately encourages social responsibility. The superego considers that which is morally and socially acceptable, informs the ego, and the ego, in turn, restricts the id from operating in ways that would subvert social and moral norms. In this way, the superego acts as a moral informer—a conscience.²

One popular portrayal of Freud's schema involves a person facing a moral dilemma. In the face of a morally vexing situation, the person engages in a conversation with an angel on one shoulder and a red, pitchfork-armed devil on the other.³ The angel (superego) encourages the person (ego) to do what is socially or morally appropriate, while the devil (id) encourages the person to follow their base instincts or desires.



Christians tend to dress each of these figures up with biblical language but smuggle unbiblical conceptions of *conscience* and moral decision-making into their way of life and understanding of the human person (anthropology). The re-figured image includes the “new man” (superego),

² Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson Education, 2011), 127.

³ In Disney's *The Emperor's New Groove*, Kronk is repeatedly faced with moral dilemmas. He consults with his id (the devil) and superego/conscience (the angel). The accompanying image is available at <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/PoYXVo>.

encouraging the Christian (ego) to do what is right and to reject the inclinations of the “old man” (id). Although this description sounds biblical, it projects Freudian categories onto biblical texts.

The biblical portrayal of humanity is as a psycho-somatic (mind-body) whole.⁴ Although the biblical authors refer to aspects of the conscious and unconscious operations of a human person, including emotion, reasoning, bodily function, etc., using a variety of metaphors (heart, soul, strength, etc.), they generally co-opt terms used by their culture. As we will see, the same is true of *conscience*. The biblical authors reference *conscience* not as a substance in a person or a part of them but as a person engaged in a particular moral activity.

Although differing terms allow humans to speak meaningfully about their experiences (e.g., my *heart* hurts), caution is needed against constructing a view of the human person that separates a person into multiple “parts.” The differing terms give language to the experiences of human emotion, reasoning, affections, and activities. Neither the biblical authors nor the most advanced scientific research makes differentiations between the *mind* and the brain, the soul and spirit, etc.⁵

Conscience as Lawgiver

Another popular, but also unbiblical, image of *conscience* is *conscience* as a moral lawgiver. In this conception, *conscience* is an external force that operates on a person internally, adjudicating between right and wrong. Those who listen to their conscience do what is right, while those who ignore their conscience do what is wrong. *Conscience* asserts a moral law and attempts to convince the person to comply with it.

⁴ Although the *spirit* and the *body* are separated at death, this separation is unnatural. It is not proper to speak of humans as a body with a spirit or as a spirit with a body, but as a unified whole—body and spirit. For a helpful introduction to this issue with concern for contemporary confusion about what it means to be a human person, see Nancy R. Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 17-46. For a more philosophical approach (rooted in the cognitive sciences) see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 16-44.

⁵ Peter J. Gentry, “Sexuality: On Being Human and Promoting Social Justice” in *Christian Psychology* 8.1 (2014): 50.

One popular portrayal of *conscience* as a lawgiver is Disney's Jiminy Cricket. The blue fairy assigns Pinocchio a conscience, Jiminy Cricket, to aid him in the quest to become a real boy. She warns that Pinocchio must learn to choose between right and wrong. Confused, he asks how he will be able to know the difference between the two. The fairy replies that his conscience will tell him. Pinocchio



becomes even more confused and asks for a definition of *conscience*. At this point, Jiminy Cricket floats down and instructs, "The conscience is that still, small voice that people won't listen to." Then, the blue fairy woos Jiminy Cricket into becoming Pinocchio's conscience—an external lawgiver that adjudicates between right and wrong. All Pinocchio needs to do is listen to this conscience. He must always let his conscience be his guide—or better yet, his god, arbitrating between good and evil.⁶

Christians tend to adopt this image of *conscience* as something external with godlike authority. Paul's instructions to act in accordance with faith (Rom. 14:23) is re-cast as an exhortation not to sin against *conscience*, which is effectively equated with God as the moral lawgiver. As with the Freudian conception of *conscience*, the lawgiver conception sounds biblical. However, the biblical notion of *conscience* is more closely connected to a lower-court judge who renders verdicts and makes moral judgments but does not have the highest judicial authority. The Lord is the Supreme Court judge (1 Cor.

⁶ This scene from Disney's 1940 *Pinocchio* can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkg6xcetV0>. The accompanying image can be found here: <https://www.artstation.com/artwork/Dqkxn>. Disney's telling of *Pinocchio* departs drastically from Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio*, trans. E. Harden (New York: Puffin Books, 1974). Some critics praise this departure, noting in the Disney edition, "Pinocchio's wish to be a real boy remains the film's underlying theme, but 'becoming a real boy' now signifies the wish to grow up, not the wish to be good." Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott & Co.: Notes on Books and Culture* (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 114. In Collodi's original story, Pinocchio kills Jiminy Cricket with a hammer and the cricket returns as a ghost that functions as Pinocchio's conscience. For an explanation of the way that Collodi's *Pinocchio* forms the moral imagination, see Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue: How Classic Stories Awaken a Child's Moral Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 40-61.

4:4) and the royal lawgiver (Js. 2). Conceptions of *conscience* as the highest judge and lawgiver are frighteningly similar to Adam and Eve’s attempt to become gods by eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gn. 3:1-7).⁷

Those who adopt a Jiminy Cricket view of *conscience* risk the danger of idolizing *conscience*—giving it a moral authority (judicial and legislative) that belongs to God alone, which amounts to an idolization of *conscience*.⁸ They are also in danger of conflating *conscience* with God, particularly with the Holy Spirit. Jiminy Cricket describes *conscience* as a “still, small voice”—a description sometimes used to reference God’s speaking through the Holy Spirit.⁹ Christians may unconsciously conflate Disney’s representation of *conscience* with the Holy Spirit, leading them to equate their moral judgments with those of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰

Toward a Definition of *Conscience*

The two popular misconceptions of conscience surveyed above define *conscience* as a thing—an external (or internal) voice that is separate (but somehow related to) a person. In these conceptions, *conscience* can be referred to as an object (consider the phrase, *my conscience*). However, *conscience* is not a thing—it is a moral action, including the making of ethical decisions and the rendering of moral verdicts.

Although the conscience can be personified (e.g., “my conscience tells me”), it should never be confused with an external object apart from the

⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 200-201.

⁸ Naselli and Crowley note that “No one knows why the conscience feels so much like an independent third party,” and that the conscience feels like an “independent judge” that renders a verdict about our actions in *Conscience*, 23-25.

⁹ I am annoyed by regular descriptions of a “still, small voice” that many Christians suggest is God speaking to them. In these statements, they draw on the description of God speaking to Elijah after his—or better, God’s—victory over the prophets of Baal (1 Kgs. 19:11-13). The New Testament witness regarding the exhorting, comforting, illumining, and confirming work of the Holy Spirit has some resonance with the Elijah scene, but the Holy Spirit is not described in this way. More than that, the “still, small voice” in the Elijah narrative is an actual, audible voice. Most Christians referring to a “still, small voice” are referring to a voice in their head, which is more likely their own thoughts than it is God’s Spirit speaking to them.

¹⁰ Distinguishing between *conscience* and Holy Spirit is somewhat difficult, especially for Christians who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. A good starting place for considering the role of the Holy Spirit is Gregg R. Allison and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Holy Spirit Theology for the People of God* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020).

self. *Conscience* is the self in moral action. *Conscience* is the self speaking to the self about good and evil. That voice in your head either accusing or excusing you *is* you, influenced by your culture, family customs, religious instructions, and innumerable other factors that shape your thinking about particular issues. Once we establish that *conscience* is *you engaged self-consciously engaged in moral reasoning*, we will be better positioned to examine and understand biblical texts relating to *conscience*, whether or not that term is used.¹¹

D. Q. McNerny sets forward a description of conscience that will prepare us for our examination of the term in the Bible. He writes,

Your conscience is simply *you* or, more precisely, it is you as engaged in a particular kind of mental activity. When you act conscientiously, when you exercise your conscience, what you are doing is performing a specific kind of mental act, making an intellectual judgment, which is an evaluative decision whereby you distinguish between moral right and wrong. That is the essence of what we call conscience. To ‘follow one’s conscience,’ then, is simply to behave in accordance with the distinctions made by an intellectual judgment, doing what is morally right, avoiding what is morally wrong.¹²

Notice again that *conscience* is you involved in moral reasoning—it is not something inside you or external to you.

Excurses | *Conscience and Imagination*

Understanding that *conscience* is simply a term for an activity rather than a label for something inside or external to you is a difficult but necessary concept for properly interpreting and applying biblical texts relating to *conscience* and for correct thinking about *conscience* issues. This notion is sometimes obscured by the definite article (i.e., *the*) that usually precedes the term (e.g., *the conscience*), making it seem like a thing rather than an activity. However, *imagination* provides a helpful analogy for communicating the concept.

¹¹ Notice that the term *conscience* never appears in Romans 14-15, though many consider these chapters foundational for a Christian understanding of *conscience*. The term is used, however, in Romans 13. There, the notions of *conscience* as external entity, lawgiver, or superego are clearly not in view. I have put *conscience* in italics throughout to help indicate that it is a *term* for an *action* rather than a *label* for an *object*.

¹² McNerny, *Being Ethical*, 135.

Although the *imagination* is sometimes talked about as if it is a thing inside a person, it is not an object but an activity. No one has an object inside of them called the *imagination*, but everyone has the capacity to imagine. Someone's *imagination* is simply their cognition at work to imagine at a conscious and unconscious level. We can rightly speak of "shaping the imagination," but we must avoid assuming that *imagination* is part of us. *Imagination* is not a thing—it is a term used to designate the activity of imagining. In the same way, *conscience* is not a thing but a term used to designate the activity of moral reasoning.

Conscience in the Old Testament

There is no Hebrew word for *conscience* in the Old Testament. However, the absence of the term does not mean that moral reasoning is not present in the Old Testament. However, when moral reasoning (including the rendering of internal moral judgments) is described, it is generally connected to the *heart*—a term that describes the "roots of our knowing, willing, and feeling."¹³

In the Old Testament, moral reasoning is described as an activity of the heart. Bible translators are faced with questions about how to translate *heart* into languages where the term *conscience* communicates more effectively because the Hebraic language and thought differ from Western thought and the English language.¹⁴ For that reason, some English translations use the term *conscience* anachronistically.

The following examples demonstrate the overlap between the Hebraic conception of *heart* and the Greco-Roman conception of *conscience*.

Genesis 20:5b (CSB): *I did this with a clear conscience...*

Genesis 20:5b (ESV): *In the integrity of my heart...I have done this.*

1 Samuel 24:5 (NLT): *But then David's conscience began bothering him...*

1 Samuel 24:5 (NRSV): *Afterward David was stricken to the heart...*

¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 171.

¹⁴ Peter Gentry comments, "We should note, then, that the biblical language differs markedly from our own in the Western world. For us, the heart is associated with emotions, feelings, love, and esp. Valentine's Day. Conversely, for the Bible, the heart is the centre of our being where we reason and think and make decisions and plans. Today we can speak of people who cannot bridge the eighteen inch gap between the head and the heart. The ancient Hebrews knew no such gap. The heart is the centre of one's being and the place where emotions, mind, and will operate in harmony and union" ("Sexuality: On Being Human and Promoting Social Justice, 51).

Job 27:6 (NIV): *My conscience will not reproach me as long as I live.*
Job 27:6 (NASB): *My heart does not rebuke any of my days.*

In Hebraic terminology, the *heart* renders moral verdicts about guilt or innocence and is involved in moral reasoning that parallels the Western conception of *conscience* (inherited from Greco-Roman thought). Of course, neither the Greco-Roman nor Hebraic concepts speak of a material substance. Instead, they are simply *terms* used to describe the inner self. Peter Gentry explains,

In Hebrew, the word ‘heart’ refers to the core of who you are, the centre of each person. It refers, in particular, to the place where we feel, where we think, and where we make decisions and plans, i.e., emotions, mind, and will.... Thus the heart is the key term in the Old Testament for identifying personhood.¹⁵

John Goldingay clarifies, “In the Scriptures, the heart is the inner person.... The heart is where you do your thinking, form your attitudes, and evaluate what you have done. In other words. The heart covers the mind, the thinking, and the conscience.”¹⁶ In other words, the heart is the self-conscious, inner you. To say that the *heart* condemns, vindicates, hurts, etc., is simply to say that you self-consciously engage in those activities at the core of your being.

Although *heart* is important for Old Testament ethics, it is not central or authoritative for moral reasoning and judgments. Instead, God’s commands and character are central features of the Old Testament ethic.¹⁷ Goldingay suggests,

The important thing then is not to assume you can work things out for yourself (Prov 3:3. In the West we’re inclined to assume that we understand things better than previous generations did. We make that assumption because we do know more about matters such as the working of the physical world, and we forget that we probably know less about (say) personal relationships and wisdom.

¹⁵ Gentry, “Sexuality: On Being Human and Promoting Social Justice,” 51.

¹⁶ John Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics: A Guided Tour* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 60.

¹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 171.

The opposite of trusting Yahweh with our mind (Prov 3:5; 28:26), then, is to assume that we can work things out for ourselves. Our minds have to be open to learning, discipline, rebuke, and even orders.... You can convince yourself that you're an ethical person, but Yahweh knows you better than you know yourself (Prov 21:2).¹⁸

The *heart* as the inner person is important, but it is required to conform to God's commands and character. God required that his people keep his commands in their hearts, indicating that they were not free to construct their own ethics—his command, not their hearts, would be central to a godly life. The *heart* is important but most important is that the *heart* (the whole person) hears, obeys, and loves God (Dt. 6:4-9).

Conscience in the New Testament¹⁹

The New Testament authors don't record Jesus speaking of *conscience*. Instead, his ethical teaching utilized Old Testament language and emphasized love for God and love for neighbor at the center of moral reasoning (Mt. 22:36-40). He articulated a way of life—the truly Good Life—intended to shape his followers (Mt. 5-7) that had himself as its ultimate model. ²⁰He instructed his followers' *hearts/consciences*, calling the whole person to follow him and to adopt his way of life.

Other New Testament authors also adopt Old Testament language to speak of the inner person. For example, the Apostle John encouraged believers that the truth revealed in Jesus Christ will provide assurance *whenever our hearts condemn. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows all things* (1 Jn. 3:19-20). Karen Jobes explains that the Apostle is trying to communicate that "God transcends our hearts in his omniscience, and this makes him the ultimate judge. The inner voice of our conscience is not always a reliable indicator...."²¹ For that reason, we need assurance apart from our inner selves. This assurance is connected to the commands of Christ, specifically the command to love one another.

¹⁸ Goldingay, *Old Testament Ethics*, 61.

¹⁹ For an examination of each appearance of the Greek term for conscience, see Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 32-44.

²⁰ Jonathan T. Pennington, *Jesus the Great Philosopher: Rediscovering the Wisdom Needed for the Good Life* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 66.

²¹ Note that Jobes understands *heart* and *conscience* to be synonymous. Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 167.

Both John and Jesus emphasize the necessity of locating the inner person beneath the commands of Christ, with special emphasis placed on the command to love.

Across the two Testaments, *heart* and *conscience* are virtually interchangeable. For example, the author of Hebrews instructs, *Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience* (Hb. 10:22).²² Both *heart* and *conscience* refer to the inner person. For that reason, an in-depth study of *conscience* would require us to examine every text that refers to the inner person, whether using these two terms or talking about the concept with different terminology. However, our study is necessarily limited, so we will focus on the term *conscience* in the New Testament for the remainder of this lesson.

The New Testament authors never define what they mean by conscience, so we should assume that they are using the term in keeping with its use in their culture and language system. They do, however, use descriptive words (good, clear, weak, seared, etc.). Although our inner-person/conscience/heart has an important role in our ethical reasoning and judgments, these various descriptions emphasize the inability of *conscience* (our inner-persons) to be the center of our ethical directives.

Beyond adjectival descriptions of *conscience*, the New Testament authors describe *conscience* as doing certain things (bear witness, knowing, testify). In other words, the *conscience* can act. But the conscience can also be acted upon (purified, defiled). External factors influence it for better or for worse.

Finally, *conscience* cannot be separated from *consciousness*.²³ When the inner person is engaged in moral reasoning and judgment, it does so with a

²² Schreiner's comments on this verse emphasize that assurance and confidence do not reside in a person, indicating that he considers the references to *heart* and *conscience* as references to the inner person. In addition, he does not draw a distinction between the two terms. The cleansing of the conscience results in a removal of a consciousness of sin, bringing together the notions of conscience and consciousness. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews* Evangelical Biblical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 318.

²³ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians* Zondervan Exegetical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 375-376. Gardner points out that those with weak consciences in 1 Cor. 8-10 did not feel guilty for eating meat in idol temples. Instead, they partook happily. In their moral reasoning, they were in danger of self-consciously worshipping Jesus and idols simultaneously. For that reason, those Christians who were self-consciously aware that the idols were not true gods needed to avoid idol-meat when it would encourage those with weak consciences to continue in their misguided moral

measure of self-awareness or self-consciousness—even if that self-awareness is misguided. If someone operates in keeping with their self-conscious moral judgments, they may have a clean conscience, even if they have acted immorally.

For example, someone might self-consciously (but wrongly) determine that a particular action is good. In keeping with that moral reasoning and judgment, the person acts. To that person’s knowledge (self-awareness, self-consciousness), he has acted ethically. Because his moral reasoning was inaccurate, his clean-conscience action permitted him to commit evil without self-condemnation.

A person’s self-conscious determination of right and wrong may be inaccurate. Someone may wrongly identify evil as good or good as evil (Rom. 2:15-16). In those instances, someone might have an accusing *heart / conscience* but be vindicated by God, while others might have an excusing *heart / conscience* and be condemned by God.²⁴

Throughout the New Testament, *conscience* and *heart* are used in overlapping ways to describe the activity of the inner person, specifically regarding moral reasoning and the rendering of moral judgments. This activity is self-conscious, shaped by outside factors, and needs redemption and renewal.

reasoning that amounted to idolatry. We will consider this situation more in a future lesson, but it should be clear that no one felt guilty for eating meat offered to idols. The issue was not one of self-condemnation either by those who had knowledge or by those new believers who did not. At stake was the self-awareness of those who did not have knowledge, who were coming to believe that Christianity could be added to the broader spectrum of polytheistic worship practices. This situation is quite different from that of Romans 14-15, where the term *conscience* never appears and where the “weak” *did* feel guilty for eating meat.

²⁴ Here, “self-assessment before God” is in view. In Peterson’s explanation of this text, he uses the terms *conscience* and *heart* interchangeably, as I have been arguing throughout. Both terms reference the inner self making a moral judgment. David G. Peterson, *Romans Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020, 150.

Excurses | Implications of the Biblical Use of *Conscience*

Before arriving at a concise definition of conscience, the implications that have surfaced in our brief examination of the biblical use of the terms *heart* and *conscience* need to be summarized and reviewed.

First, *conscience* (and *heart*) refers to the inner self. Most references to *conscience* have to do with self-conscious moral judgments. The *conscience* refers to the inner person involved in moral reasoning.

Second, although *conscience* is important for ethics and moral action, it can never be central to ethical decision-making. It is not an external force that guides. Instead, it is the self that must be shaped by the commands of Christ and compelled by love for God and love for others. The inner self (i.e., *conscience*) cannot establish right and wrong, good and evil. On the contrary, it must *conform* to God's judgments about right and wrong.

Third, because conscience can be misinformed or misguided, it may need to be calibrated. More than that, when a person becomes self-conscious that their moral reasoning is faulty, they should pursue adjustments to that moral reasoning. The goal is not simply to act in conformity with one's moral reasoning / *conscience* (though that is important) but to calibrate that moral reasoning to God's revelation about good and evil.

Christians need to inform their consciences (i.e., themselves), and they need to maintain their consciences. In other words, Christians must regularly shape their moral reasoning according to the Scriptures and sound thinking. A healthy conscience does not happen automatically—it takes education, effort, and, most of all, transformation by the Holy Spirit. It requires that the inner person be renewed daily (2 Cor. 4:16).

Fourth, although popular notions of *conscience* describe it as a guide, the biblical descriptions of *conscience* have to do with moral judgment. The primary function of *conscience* is conscious self-reflection and determination about whether past action was right or wrong. This distinction is important.

Conceptions of *conscience/heart* as a guide are in danger of elevating the inner person as a god. The notions of following one's *heart* and letting *conscience* be your guide are poetic ways of encouraging living according to one's own desires. This way of living has more to do with wisdom from

below than from above. Wisdom from above prioritizes following Christ and embracing him as Lord of your life, commander of your desires, and authoritative guide for moral decision-making.

Fifth, within the community of faith, each person needs to consider the conscience of others in that community of faith. This consideration has nothing to do with being overly scrupulous about ambiguous matters or adopting private, secretive practices to avoid upsetting another person over disagreements about disputed issues. It has everything to do with considering how one's moral action might inform the *conscience*/consciousness of another person (cf. 1 Cor 8-10).

The driving question should not be, "Will this person disagree with me or be judgmental toward me?" Instead, two better (and more biblical) questions should guide behavior: 1) "Will my actions inform this person's *conscience* in a way that disagrees with God's moral judgments?" and 2) "Will my actions unduly pressure this person to take an action that is out of step with their moral reasoning?"²⁵

Conscience Concisely Defined

A working definition of *conscience* needs to take into consideration all of the information that we have examined so far, including:

- The synonymy of *heart* and *conscience* as terms that describe the inner person.
- The activity associated with *heart* and *conscience* relates to moral reasoning and especially to the rendering of moral verdicts regarding a past action.
- The necessity of a person's self-conscious reasoning about good and evil.
- *Conscience* is not the ultimate *source* of morality—it cannot legislate morality; it can only make judgments of moral actions. Judgments about past actions, however, can provide guidance for future actions.

²⁵ Of course, other questions may be helpful when considering matters of Christian liberty. For example, the Feinbergs offer eight questions: 1) Am I fully persuaded that it is right? 2) Can I do it as unto the Lord? 3) Can I do it without being a stumbling block to my brother or sister in Christ? 4) Does it bring peace? 5) Does it edify my brother? 6) Is it profitable? 7) Does it enslave me? 8) Does it bring glory to God? John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 52-55.

When these ideas are brought together, we can define *conscience* as a person's self-conscious judgment about what is right or wrong.²⁶

Conscience and Moral Virtue

Conscience has an important role to play when it comes to virtuous living. However, as we have seen, *conscience* is a person's self-conscious judgment about what is right or wrong. That judgment must be informed by an external source of morality (God, the Scriptures, Natural Law, etc.). It would be a mistake to make *conscience* central to moral virtue. This move essentially makes each inner person his or her own god—a deadly vice that extends back to the garden of Eden.

It should be no surprise that ethicists (and people generally) repeat the failings of the past in their construction of ethical systems. Even well-meaning Christians can unintentionally talk about the individual *conscience* in a way that sounds eerily like they are talking about God. Christians must be wary about replacing God with the conscience in either profession or practice.²⁷

²⁶ This definition is very similar to Naselli and Crowley's definition: "*The conscience is your consciousness of what you believe is right and wrong*" in *Conscience*, 52. The best part of this definition is that it makes clear that the conscience isn't something that is located inside of you—it isn't a thing (like your soul or body or a little cricket that accompanies you wherever you go). Instead, it is a term for an *action*. It is not a thing separate from you but internal to you; it is a moral mental activity. We tend to talk about the conscience as if it is a thing, but we need to understand that the term is simply short-hand for *conscientiousness of what you believe is right and wrong*. Although it may be difficult to break free of imagining that your conscience is an independent authority, any discussion about conscience issues has to be understood as a discussion about individual people making judgments about what is right and wrong.

²⁷ For example, though Naselli and Crowley make plain that God is the lord of the conscience, the remainder of their book communicates that the conscience is the lord of the person, giving it a near-central spot in ethical decision making. Matthew Levering demonstrates the repeated return to a conscience-centered ethic that is foreign to biblical teaching in *The Abuse of Conscience: A Century of Catholic Moral Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2021). He calls for a return to a Thomistic framework where "Conscience was valued, and it clearly had an important place in moral action, within the virtue of prudence. But conscience was not the center of moral life" (7). One of my concerns with Naselli and Crowley's work is that it comes across as placing conscience at the center of moral life because of their emphasis on obeying the conscience (Principle 2), obscuring their directives to make God the Lord of the conscience (Principle 1) (Naselli and Crowley, 30-31).

Inappropriately centering the moral life on *conscience* minimizes the New Testament ethical directives that center the moral life on “the inaugurated kingdom of God, in which the Spirit heals and elevates us in charity while also forming us in humility and prudence and enlightening our perception of the natural law.”²⁸ Although we will continue to consider *conscience* and disputed matters in this class, we should resist the temptation to make *conscience* central to ethics and the moral life. To do so would contradict the moral vision of the New Testament authors and, ultimately, the teaching of Christ.²⁹

Centering the moral life on *conscience* would contradict the moral vision of the New Testament. This contradiction is bad enough because it is a subtle rejection of biblical authority. But it is recognizably self-destructive when the defectibility of the conscience paired with the potential confusion of good and evil is considered.³⁰ Simply stated, *conscience* at center is incapable of holding the moral life together because *conscience* is defective and will be fully repaired only at the resurrection. Although *conscience* is in the business of determining what is good or evil, it cannot define good and evil. All societies, including local church communities, that construct a moral system centered on individual *conscience* are destined for disaster.

Pre-resurrection, even the godliest Christian has a conscience that is defective to one degree or another. The good news is that God did not leave individual persons to legislate morality for themselves. On the contrary, he has spoken definitively in Christ and the Scriptures, giving the inner-person freedom to submit to God’s wisdom and word and freeing the person from relying on the self.

²⁸ Levering, *The Abuse of Conscience*, 13.

²⁹ Richard B. Hays identifies three focal images in the New Testament that arise from the unified, but stratified, Gospel story articulated by the New Testament authors: community (the church), cross (Christ’s death), and new creation (the power of the resurrection. Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 193-205.

³⁰ McNerny, *Being Ethical*, 137. McNerny warns that sincere moral judgments are not sufficient to make an act morally good. “We cannot say with certainty that even the most outrageous historical characters we might name—say Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin—were not acting sincerely, and that therefore they were not, in that respect, following their consciences. This is exactly what they were doing. And that, rather than preventing them from making some abominable judgments, actually enabled them to do so.”

Our task is difficult but practical: “we need to train our consciences, so that they will rejoice in what is really good and condemn what is really evil.”³¹ This task necessarily works itself out in the community of faith, under the authority of the Scriptures, and through the enablement of the Holy Spirit.

This informing, training, and calibrating task requires both conversion and cultivation. A genuinely healthy *conscience* comes about through spiritual conversion. But it requires more than conversion—it requires ongoing formation in virtue, particularly the virtue of prudence. As with any virtue, prudence requires learning, habituation, effort, and experience.³² *Conscience* (your inner person) is not static; it is always developing, being strengthened or weakened, led or misled. For this reason, caring for *conscience* is a life-long endeavor.

Conclusion

In this lesson, we have defined *conscience* and properly located it as important, but not central, to the moral life. More than that, we have identified the significance of shaping conscience (our inner selves and our moral reasoning) according to Christ’s example and the commands to love God and neighbor.

Still, important questions need careful investigation. What should Christians do when there are disagreements related to moral reasoning and judgments? Are there moral actions that qualify as disputable matters, and if so, what should Christians do when they come to different conclusions about those disputable matters? These are the questions that we will take up in the remaining lessons.

³¹ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 363.

³² Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12-15.