

## “Conscience” in the New Testament

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The term “conscience” can have broad application in various fields of study related to the mind, such as theology and psychoanalysis. Likewise, there is a broad range of meaning given to the term based on which perspective one is speaking from.<sup>1</sup> This paper approaches the study of the term from a strictly theological perspective.

As an introduction to analyzing the term “conscience,” it is appropriate to note that the *experience* of what we term “conscience” is as old as man himself and can be noted in tragedy and comedy. The first recorded usage in “discursive reflection and analytical description,” however, was by Philo of Alexandria (20 B.C. to 50 A.D.). The only other author writing in Greek who employed the term as frequently was the apostle Paul.<sup>2</sup> Since the focus of this paper is upon the biblical usage of the term, Philo’s writings will not be analyzed. Another delimiting factor is that the term “conscience” is never employed in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> The only Hebraic term that approximates the term “conscience” is “heart”<sup>4</sup> and the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed examination of

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Knight correctly identifies differences regarding the nature of man as the reason for differences of interpretation of “conscience” among various disciplines relating to the study of the mind. He states, “Possibly men will always view the conscience differently, for each will interpret it in the light of his orientation about the nature of man” [James A. Knight, “Conscience,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 19 (January 1964): 139]; Joseph Fletcher concurs, “Theological, philosophical and psychiatric students of ethics may vary (and do) in their explanations of *how* conscience comes about, but all are agreed that it *is* a factor in human personality” [Joseph Fletcher, “Concepts of Moral Responsibility,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 6/1 (Spring 1952): 39 (italics original)].

<sup>2</sup> H. J. Klauck, “Accuser, Judge, and Paraclete—On Conscience in Philo of Alexandria,” *Skrif en Kerk* 20/1 (1999): 108.

<sup>3</sup> Ernesto Borghi correctly states that the term is used only three times in the Old Testament *if one considers the Apocryphal writings* as part of the Old Testament cannon. If one rejects such writings from the cannon, then there are no uses of the term in the Old Testament [“La notion de conscience dans le Nouveau Testament,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 10 (Mayo-Noviembre, 1997): 86].

<sup>4</sup> Helen Costigane, “A History of the Western Idea of Conscience,” in *Conscience in World Religions*, ed. Jayne Hoose (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1999), 3–4; Knight, 132; Wayne Barton,

## COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

each usage found in the Old Testament. Thus, this paper focuses upon New Testament usage of the term "conscience."

The format used to research this topic relies heavily upon the New Testament itself, where the term "conscience" (*συνείδησις*) is used thirty times, the majority of them found in the Pauline pastoral epistles<sup>5</sup>; additionally, the verb form (*συννοιδά*) is used four times in the New Testament.<sup>6</sup> While non-biblical articles are included in the process of investigation, the foundation of this paper is based on exegesis of the text as found in the King James Version and the Greek New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

While the primary purpose of this investigation is to broaden and enhance the author's knowledge in this field, the results of this investigation may also be useful for others.

### "Conscience" in the New Testament

**The Greek Term *συνείδησις*.** The Greek term for "conscience" (*συνείδησις*) derives from the two Greek words *συν* (meaning "together with") and *οἶδα* (meaning "I know"). Thus, the term *συνείδησις* literally means "I know together with."<sup>8</sup> In Greek society, its usage was usually limited to those cases that involved civic or societal relationships and was rarely used in reference to an individual alone.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the limited application found in non-biblical Greek literature, the usage of the term *συνείδησις* as found in the New Testament allows for a more comprehensive application, especially in relation to the believer and God. To properly understand the breadth of its usage in the New Testament, those passages that employ the term will be analyzed.

**New Testament Passages Employing the Terms *συννοιδά* and *συνείδησις*.** There are three basic categories into which the New Testament passages referring to "conscience" may be divided. The first, describing the function of "conscience," includes the following passages: Acts 5:2; 12:12; 14:6; 23:1; 24:16; Rom 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor 4:4; 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27–29; 2 Cor 1:12; 2:4. The second category, referring to the types of "conscience," can be

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"The Christian Conscience in an Age of Crisis," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 4/2 (April 1962): 100.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Stepien, "Syneidesis: La Conscience dans L'Anthropologie de Saint Paul," *Revue D'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 60/1 (January–March 1980): 1; Borghi, 88; So also, Roy B. Zuck, who insightfully notes, "If the 'Adulteress Pericope' (Jn. 7:53-8:11) is not accepted as part of the original manuscript of John's Gospel, then the number of occurrences is 29" ["The Doctrine of Conscience," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126/504 (October–December 1969): 329].

<sup>6</sup> Zuck, 330.

<sup>7</sup> Kurt Aland et al, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, third corrected edition (Stuttgart: Bibliadruck, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Costigane, 3; Zuck, 329; Barton, 101; Paul W. Gooch, "'Conscience' in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10," *New Testament Studies* 33/2 (April 1987): 244.

<sup>9</sup> Costigane, 6.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

further subdivided into the categories of a “good” conscience (2 Cor 5:11; 1 Ti. 1:5, 19; 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3; Heb 13:18; 1 Peter 2:19; 3:16, 21) and an “evil” conscience (1 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:15). The third category describes the process of how the “conscience” can be cleansed and includes Heb 9:9, 14 and 10:2, 22.

**The Function of Conscience.** There are four occurrences of the Greek verb *συννοῖδα* in the New Testament, three of which clearly indicate an *internal process of thought*. In Acts 5:2, Sapphira, the wife of Ananias, is described as “being privy” to the sale of some of their land. A more literal translation would be “she knew along with him about the sale of the land.” Similarly, in Acts 12:12, when Peter had been led out of his prison cell by an angel, the Bible says that “when he had considered the thing [his release], he came to the house of Mary.” Likewise, in Acts 14:6, when Scripture describes the apostles when they faced an angry mob of Jews and Gentiles intent on killing them, it says that they “were ware of it, and fled” (a more modern rendering would be, “when they realized [within themselves] it, they fled”). In each of these verses, the Greek verb *συννοῖδα* is used and reflects the idea of “internal thought, or consideration,” or even an “internal awareness.” These usages coincide perfectly with the Greek definition of the term and could easily be translated as “[he, she, they] knew within [himself, herself, themselves] of this thing.”<sup>10</sup>

The one verb usage remaining, in 1 Cor 4:4, poses a slightly more difficult challenge in translation. The KJV reads, “For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord.” The Greek text employs the perfect tense of *συννοῖδα* with the reflexive pronoun *ἐμαυτῷ*, which equates the verb actually being used as a substantive form (*συνείδησις*, rather than *συννοῖδα*). Thus, a more accurate translation would be that of the RSV, “I am not aware of anything against myself,” or even, “My conscience is clear.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, from analysis of the verb forms used in the New Testament, “conscience” may rightly be understood as “an inner awareness, or knowledge of something.” In order to capture more fully the intricate functions of “conscience,” it is helpful to exegete the remaining biblical passages that use the substantive form (*συνείδησις*) in describing the role of “conscience” as it relates to the individual.

**Acts 23:1.** In order to better understand the significance of Acts 23:1, it is necessary to briefly recount the events that preceded it. The historical context of this occasion<sup>12</sup> reveals that Paul had entered the temple the day before to complete the days of purification according to Jewish law. Several of the Jews from Asia had roused other Jews and brought the charge against Paul that he had been teaching men in opposition to Jews, to the law, and to the temple. In response, Paul obtained permission from the Roman chief captain to speak to the Jews

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<sup>10</sup> Zuck, 330.

<sup>11</sup> Zuck, 330.

<sup>12</sup> Acts 21:15–22:30.

COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

who had gathered before the temple. Paul gave his testimony in Hebrew, bearing testimony in favor of Christ and the Christian way. The whole city responded in an uproar, and the Roman chief captain brought Paul into the castle for protection. The following day, Paul appeared before the Sanhedrin (συνέδριον), the highest Jewish council in civil and religious matters.<sup>13</sup>

This verse reveals several elements related to the idea of "conscience." First, Paul relates the Greek verb πολιτεύομαι (to live, to conduct one's life<sup>14</sup>) to the term *συνείδησις* (conscience) when he states, "I have lived in all good conscience." The textual idea brought forth from the Scripture implies that the role of "conscience" is in *relation to the conduct of one's life*. Ernesto Borghi elaborates further by stating, "The syntax *πᾶσα συνείδησις ἀγαθὴ* explicitly reveals the individual faculty of discernment between good and evil."<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Paul introduces another element into this understanding. Not only is "conscience" related to how one lives, but it is also *how one lives* "before God." In this phrase there is the subtle hint that links the conscience to the divine sphere. This is not to say that the conscience is a divine element in man, nor the voice of God,<sup>16</sup> but it suggests that since God is the Creator of man, then He is the Originator of the conscience in man as well.<sup>17</sup> As Allen Verhey consistently argues from a philosophical perspective, "A person's conscience is the product of the inescapability of God."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Aland, 172.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Borghi (90), "le syntagme *πᾶσα συνείδησις ἀγαθὴ* explicite pleinement la faculté de discernement personnel du bien et du mal."

<sup>16</sup> Larry Gates states, "It is a psychological truth that conscience is perceived by many as the voice of God. The faithful take inner moral imperatives as divine and consider them to be more important than any merely human wishes" ["Conscience as the Voice of God: A Jungian View," *Journal of Religion and Health* 31/4 (Winter 1992): 282]. In contrast, Alfred M. Rehwinkel states, "That the voice of conscience stands in some relation to God is true," but if conscience were the voice of God then "conscience would have to be infallible" [*The Voice of Conscience* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 7, cited in Barton, 101; Zuck (331) concurs with Rehwinkel and Barton. For additional comment on this point from Ellen G. White, see Appendix A at the end of this paper.

<sup>17</sup> Barton, 99; Don E. Marietta, Jr., describes how, even in non-biblical literature, the conscience was referred to as being divine in origin ["Conscience in Greek Stoicism," *Numen* 17 (December 1970): 181].

<sup>18</sup> Allen Verhey, "The Person as a Moral Agent," *Calvin Theological Journal* 13/1 (April, 1978): 12. James A. Knight (133), commenting on "conscience" from a theological point of view, states "Conscience is the voice of moral man speaking to himself as a moral being and making moral judgments. This voice was placed by God in man at his creation, and man cannot rid himself of it. . . . God created man to be a moral being. Thus, he endowed him with the faculty to be moral"; Barton (101) likewise, states, "Whereas we secure the content of conscience from various sources, it was God who created this capacity for self-knowledge." J. Olbert Kempson concurs, "It appears, however, that conscience can be defined as a God-given capacity, which, when developed in an adequate, healthy manner, can enable the individual to choose a course of direction in achieving a degree of wholeness" ["Comments on Structure of the Conscience," *The Saint Luke's Journal of Theology* 4/1 (Lent 1961): 15].

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Moreover, since the context of this verse reflects the *conflict* between a group of men recognized as having authority to judge in religious and civil matters and an *individual* (Paul), the idea is introduced of *individual accountability before God*. Paul here demonstrates that it is to God alone that the individual must answer for the conduct of his life. Significantly, this passage clearly establishes that in matters of belief, and especially of conduct based on those beliefs, *the ultimate arbiter is God*.

Last, and perhaps the insight that strikes most strongly upon the subject of “conscience,” is that in this instance, Paul was confronted by those with whom he had once associated. At one time he had believed, advocated, and zealously defended the traditions and teachings of his Jewish upbringing.<sup>19</sup> However, having met Christ on the road to Damascus, he was converted to Christianity. This conversion experience of Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle offers insights into the subject of “conscience.” Consider for a moment, based on Paul’s conversion, the following points. 1) Conscience can be a faulty guide. His experience teaches that one can sincerely follow one’s conscience and yet be sincerely wrong in God’s view.<sup>20</sup> Saul thought he was sincerely serving God when he persecuted Christians.<sup>21</sup> As John M. Espy comments on Paul’s conversion, “Full consciousness of sin came only on the Damascus road, where the charge of persecuting God’s people, and the Son of God Himself, brought him face to face with his rebelliousness against God—and, after a fashion, with the Law.”<sup>22</sup> 2) An educated conscience does not necessarily mean a converted conscience. Paul had received a formal education in the rabbinical schools and had even been taught by Gamaliel,<sup>23</sup> one of the most prominent religious leaders among the Jews in Paul’s day,<sup>24</sup> yet he did not know Jesus.<sup>25</sup> 3) It is the role of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God to convict the conscience, as when Jesus spoke to Paul, saying, “It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks (Gk., κέντρον, literally “goads,” but translated as “pricks” in KJV).” When one compares the term “goads” of Acts 9:5 and 26:14 with the “goads” of Ecclesiastes 12:11, it is

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<sup>19</sup> Galatians 1:13, 14; Philippians 3:4–6;

<sup>20</sup> Barton (106) argues that one can be true to oneself by following one’s conscience, and yet be false with God and one’s fellow man. Additionally, Frank Mobbs posits that one can even sincerely follow one’s conscience and still be wrong. He states, “If I have good reasons for my belief, then it is true. Now all sorts of reasons can make a belief true. But of one thing I can be certain—the fact that I believe something is not a reason that makes it true [“Conscience and Christian Morality,” *St. Mark’s Review* 160 (Summer 1995): 33 (italics his)];” Jeong Woo Lee further notes, “Conscience, of course, is not the ultimate standard of righteousness [“To Every Man’s Conscience in the Sight of God,” *Kerux: A Journal of Biblical-Theological Preaching* 15/3 (December 2000): 17].”

<sup>21</sup> Acts 26:9–12.

<sup>22</sup> John M. Espy, “Paul’s ‘Robust Conscience’ Re-Examined,” *New Testament Studies* 31 (1985): 175.

<sup>23</sup> Acts 22:3.

<sup>24</sup> Acts 5:34.

<sup>25</sup> Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:15.

COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

evident that it refers to the writings of Scripture that serve to instruct the wise. From these verses, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit was convicting Saul from the Scriptures of his wayward course, but he was stubbornly resisting such promptings.

**Acts 24:16.** Acts 24:16 is a continuation of Paul's previous defense. By the usage of the Greek term ἀσκέω ("to endeavor, to do one's best"<sup>26</sup>; KJV "I do exercise"), the concept of the "will" is introduced as the volitional force that follows the dictates of "conscience." From this verse, it is evident that the "will" is not to be confused with the "conscience," yet the two are inter-related. The conscience is the "bull's eye" to which the "arrow" of the will must fly. Paul states that he "exercises," "endeavors," or "does his best" to have always an ἀπρόσκοπον (blameless, faultless; inoffensive; clear [of conscience]<sup>27</sup>) συνείδησιν. Roy B. Zuck, commenting on Paul's statement, says, "*Disciplining himself he strived deliberately and continually to avoid known sin.*"<sup>28</sup>

By introducing the concept of the "will," the corollary of "choice" also enters the discussion of "conscience," which in turn involves the action of rationalization, or reason. Realization of this point aids in establishing that, from the Scriptures studied thus far, the conscience is linked to both the will and the rational faculty within man. Of further significance, this understanding is foundational to the vindication of God's judgment of each person. Since man is created with not only reasoning ability, but also with the moral faculty of conscience, he is therefore accountable for the life he lives, and God is justified in the judgment rendered toward each person.

Additionally, when Paul states "to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men," the spectrum of the "conscience" is broadened to include not only a man's relation to God, but also to his fellow men. The implications of this point are significant in the formulation of "conscience," especially from the perspective of societal ethics. To what extent is a man's "conscience" to be educated or influenced by his fellow men? What criteria should guide in this process? While the answers to these, and related questions, lie beyond the scope of this paper, the focal point of "conscience," and thus the individual's religious experience, in relation to one's fellow men mitigates against the common notion of isolationism in the Christian's walk with God. Vast territory is here opened with respect to the biblical subjects of ecclesiology (the individual Christian in relation to the community of fellow believers) and religious liberty (the individual Christian in relation to society and government).

Furthermore, as Paul uses the term "conscience void of offense", or "blameless" (ἀπρόσκοπον συνείδησιν), the text implies that "conscience" fulfills a *role of judgment* toward the individual. Roy B. Zuck even goes as far as defining

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<sup>26</sup> Aland, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>28</sup> Zuck, 340 [italics mine].

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

one function of the conscience as “that of a judge.”<sup>29</sup> When one lives in harmony with one’s conscience, one may state that one is “without blame.” Contrariwise, if one lives in opposition to one’s conscience, then one is worthy of blame.

**Romans 2:12–16.** In Romans 2:12–16, based on the grammatical construction in verse 15, the idea of *the law in relation to “conscience”* is introduced. This observation implies a standard, the law, to which the conscience is oriented.<sup>30</sup> Elaborating this point further, Douglas Straton refers to the primary principles of conduct that are found “in all of the major cultures of mankind, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Zoroastrian, Greek, Judeo-Christian, [and] Islamic.” He concludes by stating,

Finding the main content, then, of *the last five of Moses’ commandments*, the ethical “laws,” or close parallels to them, widely throughout human civilization, constitutes strong historical or empirical evidence *that basic qualities of conscience, or ideas of moral law, are similar or native to mature human life on a universal scale.*<sup>31</sup>

Roy B. Zuck succinctly concludes, “Therefore, based on ethnology and New Testament usage, the conscience can be defined as ‘the inner knowledge or awareness of, and sensitivity to, some moral standard.’”<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, Paul here refers to the Gentiles who do not have the law, as do the Jews or Christians. Paul seems to introduce the idea of an “active conscience” apart from conversion. This very point has been the subject of much debate among Protestant and Catholic theologians, the former group emphasizing the consequences of Adam’s fall upon his posterity (referred to as “total depravity,” and thus affecting our mental and moral faculties to the extent that we need the divine revelation of God as an act of grace and mercy to make known the divine will),<sup>33</sup> and the latter group contending for a concept of “natural law,”

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<sup>29</sup> Zuck, 333.

<sup>30</sup> Zuck, 333; William E. May, “The natural law, conscience, and developmental psychology,” *Communio* (Spring, 1975): 10; John Coulson cogently argues, “To disobey the moral law is to disobey our natures, since they are created by God, the author of that law, and this is perhaps how the metaphor of conscience as an inner voice or dialogue arises.” He further contends (157), “To admit the claims of conscience is to admit the existence of a law which has conditioned that conscience and of a law-giver, the author of that law” [“The Authority of Conscience,” *The Downside Review* 77/248 (Spring 1959): 151]; Verhey (5, 6) argues the same point; V. A. Rodgers even refers to the relationship, in non-biblical literature, between the gods and men, and [divine] law and men’s uneasiness when approaching death for not having kept it [“Συνεσις and the Expression of Conscience,” *Greek-Roman-and Byzantine-Studies* 10/3 (Autumn 1969): 248].

<sup>31</sup> “The Meaning of Moral Law,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* (January 1965): 31 [italics mine].

<sup>32</sup> Zuck, 331.

<sup>33</sup> Raymond E. Peterson, “Jeremy Taylor on Conscience and Law,” *Anglican Theological Review* 48 (July 1966): 250–253; T. James Kodera, “Reshaping of Conscience: Religion, Education, and Multiculturalism,” *Anglican Theological Review* 78/3 (Summer 1996): 475, 476; George F. Thomas identifies five areas for consideration regarding divine revelation: “(1) principles of authoritative revelation are found in the Bible, not in moral philosophy; 2) biblical revelation requires a

### COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

by which they argue that we all have the ability to discover the righteous claims of God's law through reason alone (apart from divine revelation through the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit).<sup>34</sup> A more detailed deliberation that would set forth both views more fully is beyond the scope of this paper<sup>35</sup> and would be tangential to its purpose, but suffice to say, for the purpose of this paper, that both groups concur that all men have a conscience that is amenable to God's law,<sup>36</sup> whether it be through revelation of the Holy Spirit, or whether through reason alone.

Furthermore, the "conscience" is here referred to in a way that distinguishes it from the individual. Paul states, "their conscience also bearing witness," not "they bear witness," inferring that while the conscience is a part of the individual, yet it is not the individual *en toto*. Rather, "it integrates a whole range of mental operations," including such mental faculties as reason, emotion, and will.<sup>37</sup> While "conscience" is not to be equated with the individual, it should not be viewed as autonomous, nor as an absolute authority unto itself, either.<sup>38</sup>

Moreover, "conscience" is also distinguished from the "thoughts" of the individual, since Paul refers to them separately.<sup>39</sup> Thus, "conscience" cannot be simply the memory, although there is a direct relationship between the memory and "conscience," since they are both associated in the role of accusing or excusing the individual. Exploring the relationship between thoughts and the role

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Christian to 'use reason fully in determining its meaning and implications for his life'; 3) revelation is 'mediated through their moral experience'; 4) 'Christian ethics is inseparable from the Christian faith that God has revealed His will in Christ'; and 5) in examining the facts of moral consciousness 'the Bible must be accorded a privileged position'" [*Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy*, 373–375, quoted in I. G. Whitchurch, "A Forum for Conscience," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 22 (March 1969): 65, 66].

<sup>34</sup> May, 5, 6.

<sup>35</sup> For a comprehensive comparison and analysis of both views, see Robert M. Zins, *On the Edge of Apostasy: Evangelical Romance with Rome* (Huntsville: White Horse, 1998), 31–65, 82–87; James G. McCarthy, *The Gospel According to Rome*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995), 21–121; James R. White, *The Roman Catholic Controversy* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1996), 39–44, 130–138; William Cathcart, *The Papal System*, Watertown: Baptist Heritage, 1989 [originally published in Philadelphia by Ferguson and Woodburn, 1872], 261–262; John Armstrong, *The Catholic Mystery* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1999), 42–43; John Armstrong, *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 76–77; and "Original Sin," and "Of Justification" in J. A. Wylie, *Papacy* (London: Hamilton, Adam, 1867), 271–285; 286–293.

<sup>36</sup> Stepien, 11, 12; Marcelino Zalba, "Papel de la conciencia en la calificación de los actos morales," *Gregorianum* 62/1 (1981): 142, 143; Harold J. Berman, "Conscience and Law: The Lutheran Reformation and the Western Legal Tradition," *The Journal of Law and Religion* 5/1 (1987): 181–182.

<sup>37</sup> William C. Spohn, "Conscience and Moral Development," *Theological Studies* 61/1 (March 2000): 123.

<sup>38</sup> Stepien, 10; Gooch, 246.

<sup>39</sup> Zuck (333) observes that the Greek does not equate the conscience with the condemning and approving thoughts.



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

of “conscience” to a further degree, Page Lee adds that “conscience” embraces not only activity regarding past actions, but also is active with respect to *future, contemplated actions not yet performed*.<sup>40</sup> William C. Spohn describes the same idea, but with different terms, when he states, “The term is used in two senses: ‘anterior conscience’ for all the searching and deliberation that leads up to a moral decision, and ‘subsequent conscience’ that reflects back on decisions we have made.”<sup>41</sup>

**Romans 9:1.** In Romans 9:1, Paul describes the role of the “conscience” as supporting the truth he has spoken. The Greek verb used here to describe the action of the “conscience” is *συμμαρτυρέω*, which can be translated as “to show to be true” or “to give evidence in support of [something].”<sup>42</sup> This indicates that the “conscience” fulfills the role of bearing witness to an individual’s *conscious thought and action*.<sup>43</sup>

What is even more enlightening is that Paul declares that such action performed by the “conscience” is done “in the Holy Ghost” (*ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ*), thus defining the role of the “conscience” as the medium through which the Holy Spirit speaks to an individual.<sup>44</sup> John Webster emphasizes this point by explaining how a correct understanding of “conscience” must be established upon recognition of God’s initiative and man’s response as a created being:

In speaking of conscience by speaking of God, Christian moral theology will emphasize (1) that conscience is a *created* reality. As such, it is contingent, not necessary; limited, not infinite; first of all a hearing, rather than a form of speech. Above all conscience is not a form of autonomy, a kind of moral *possessio sui*. We have conscience, as we have reason and will, in our creatureliness; and thus we have them spiritually, in the event of the grace of creatureliness. We have conscience by the gift of the Father.<sup>45</sup>

To take this analysis a step further, Paul describes the role of the “conscience” and the accompanying work of the Holy Spirit in the context of telling the truth. This implies various levels of activity within the mind. On one level, Paul knows that what he is saying is truth, so he speaks that truth. On another level, Paul is also conscious of the work of his “conscience” bearing witness to himself that what he is saying is the truth, and on a third level, that the Holy Spirit has confirmed to him, through his conscience, that what he speaks is indeed the truth. To take the opposite view for a moment, we may hypothetically

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<sup>40</sup> “‘Conscience’ In Romans 13:5,” *Faith and Mission* 8/1 (Fall 1990): 88; Borghi (91) concurs.

<sup>41</sup> Spohn, 122.

<sup>42</sup> Aland, 170.

<sup>43</sup> Stepien, 11.

<sup>44</sup> Page Lee (90–91) correctly states, “In Romans 9:1, Paul made an explicit connection of conscience with Christ and the Holy Spirit. The behavioral consequences of this transformation of the context of conscience amount to a revolution in the ethical role and significance of conscience.”

<sup>45</sup> “God and Conscience,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 33/1 (April, 1998): 117.

COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

state that an individual can assess the truthfulness or falseness of an item before stating it, corresponding to level one of mental activity. Next, he may decide to speak falsely and the Holy Spirit, through his conscience, will counter the activity of level one by reminding him that what he is about to speak is a falsehood. If he decides to speak falsely anyhow, then the Holy Spirit performs the work of convicting him of his guilt for having lied, and the consequent result is guilt for the sin committed.<sup>46</sup>

By the association that Paul makes between his "conscience" and his heart (τῆ καρδία μου, v. 2), the "conscience" fulfills a role of bearing witness to one's feelings and emotions. Zuck elucidates this point: "Here his conscience indicated internally to Paul himself that his statement about his felt grief for Israel was in accord with his actual feelings. If Paul had been speaking falsely when he expressed his deep concern for Israel, his conscience, like a witness in a court trial, would have called his attention to his falsehood."<sup>47</sup>

**Romans 13:5.** From the context of the passage (Rom 13:1–5), Paul is referring to the civil duties expected of Christians. As pertaining to our study of the "conscience," this passage distinguishes "conscience" from other motivating factors, such as fear (v. 5). It implies that even in the absence of motivating factors based upon feelings, "conscience" fulfills a role that could be appropriately termed "duty" or "obligation." "Rehwinkel calls this prompting action the "obligatory" aspect of the conscience,<sup>48</sup> and Strong calls it "the claim of duty, the obligation to do the right."<sup>49</sup> This suggests that while feelings are valid motivational factors, they are not to be confused with "conscience." Duty takes precedence over feeling. Obligation to God is paramount to self-concern.

Additionally, the idea of "submission" to "just authority" is evident in this passage.<sup>50</sup> Taking into account this understanding, it follows that in order to

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<sup>46</sup> Zuck (332) cites Rehwinkel and other authors in support of a three-fold function of conscience: "1) it distinguishes the morally right and wrong, 2) it urges man to do that which he recognizes to be right, and 3) it passes judgment on his acts and executes that judgment within his soul." The position taken in this paper concurs with the view set forth by Zuck, et al; however, the point of distinction is that, based on the Scriptural passage, the Holy Spirit has a much more active role than is acknowledged by Zuck, et al. To overlook this point means: 1) denial of the Scriptural description of the work of the Holy Spirit in relation to the conscience, as brought forth in Romans 9:1, and 2) to imply that man is a moral monitor unto himself, apart from the activity of God, a position that approaches Pelagianism and traditional Roman Catholic teaching on moral theology regarding the "natural law" theory.

<sup>47</sup> Zuck, 333.

<sup>48</sup> Alfred W. Rehwinkel, "Conscience," *Baker's Dictionary of Theology* (136), quoted in Zuck, 332.

<sup>49</sup> Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (498–99), quoted in Zuck, "The Doctrine of Conscience," 332, 333.

<sup>50</sup> Torleiv Austad, "Attitudes Towards the State in Western Theological Thinking," *Themelios* 16/1 (October–November 1990): 20; Stanley E. Porter, "Romans 13:1–7 as Pauline Political Rhetoric," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 3/6 (November 1990): 126–127; Robert H. Stein, "The Argument of Romans 13:1–7," *Novum Testamentum* 31/4 (October 1989): 334; Paul D. Feinberg, "The Chris-

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

submit to a just authority so that the demands of “conscience” can be fulfilled, the individual must exercise his reasoning, or rational, powers. Thus, the relationship between “conscience” and rational faculties of the mind are inseparably linked.<sup>51</sup>

**1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12.** The central idea reflected in 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12 is that of Christian influence among believers, with special emphasis upon concern for those newly converted whose “conscience” is weak. Those believers who have the knowledge that there is only one true God can eat food sacrificed to idols without their conscience becoming guilt stricken. When those believers who don’t have this knowledge, referred to as having a “weak conscience,”<sup>52</sup> eat food sacrificed unto idols, their conscience is defiled because they think they have worshipped other gods.

From the perspective of “conscience,” the most solemn point this passage teaches is that it is a sin to violate one’s own conscience (the weak brother perishes), and an even greater sin to lead another person to violate his conscience (“when you sin so against the brethren”). Since only one of the scholarly works consulted for this paper addressed this issue,<sup>53</sup> it is proper to develop it further. By the usage of the term “sin,” the concept of “conscience” is moved from the area of *human* ethics to *divine* ethics. *Realization of this truth establishes the*

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tian and Civil Authorities,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 10/1 (Spring 1999): 98; James D. G. Dunn, “Romans 13:1–7—A Charter for Political Quietism?” *Ex Auditu* 2 (1986): 67–68; and Susan I. Boyer, “Exegesis of Romans 13:1–7,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 32/4 (Autumn 1987): 215, who all argue for submission to “a just state,” one that does not assume the prerogatives of God by attempting to control man’s conscience or deny the civil rights of its citizens. Charles Hodge speaks of the “legitimate design of government” as not including the “abuse of power by wicked men” [*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (rev. ed., 1886; thirteenth printing, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 407].

<sup>51</sup> Stepien, 11; Straton, 31–33; Verhey, 9–11; and Walter Redmond, “Conscience as Moral Judgment: The Probabilist Blending of the Logics of Knowledge and Responsibility,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26/2 (Fall 1998), *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> Zuck (338) refers to the “weak conscience” as “one that is overscrupulous or oversensitive.”

<sup>53</sup> Paul W. Gooch (248, 249) argues that the passage does not refer to an issue of “moral conscience,” since the unenlightened brother is the one who “has a defective apprehension of Christian moral principles which requires alteration.” While this observation is true, it nonetheless overlooks the stated fact in Scripture that such action by the enlightened brother is termed “sin.” In order to resolve this apparent paradox, it seems that while the issue in this passage does relate to an “overscrupulous” brother who needs correction by knowledge of the truth, Paul is primarily concerned with the *timing* of when such correction should occur. Until I have informed my brother of the knowledge I have that allows me more liberty than he practices, I should refrain from any course of action that would encourage him to act in violation of his conscience. This interpretation is more in harmony with Paul’s emphasis upon “charity [love] that edifies” rather than “knowledge that puffs up” (Borghesi, 89–90). Thus, the central point brought forth in this paper is still valid: the conscience of an individual in relation to God is so sacred that not only a correct knowledge of the truth should be shared with him, but also the proper timing regarding when to do so should so modify my practices that I do not “wound” his “weak conscience.”

### COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

*sacredness of the relationship between God and each person, a relationship so sacred that no person is held guiltless who violates it.*

Additionally, this passage introduces the idea of "an informed conscience." Paul refers to those believers who had knowledge about the one true God in contrast to those who did not. Not only does this reiterate the relationship existing between "conscience" and reason, but it establishes how a "weak conscience" may be made strong. Since the knowledge that Paul refers to is about God, and thus based on the Scriptures, the Bible plays a central role in strengthening the conscience of the believer.<sup>54</sup>

When Paul speaks of an emboldened conscience," the term used is "οἰκοδομεω" ("to build up, to edify, to encourage").<sup>55</sup> From the context of this passage, it seems that Paul teaches that a person's "conscience" can be influenced by *external factors*, such as the practices of a fellow believer. This insight affords an even broader understanding of "conscience" than developed in this paper thus far. While it is evident from the passage that Paul admonishes those "with knowledge" to accommodate those "without knowledge" by not living according to the liberating truths they know, yet the idea is introduced regarding how the Holy Spirit can effect transformation in the life of fellow believers. When a Christian takes the time to become informed about biblical truth and lives by it, the Holy Spirit can influence the life of another believer to search out the truth for himself so that he may not have a "wounded" conscience. Of course, in harmony with Paul's counsel, one must act at the proper time (i.e., adapting my lifestyle practices to the beliefs of another believer until I have had time to inform him of the knowledge I possess).

**1 Corinthians 10:25, 27, 28, 29.** Since 1 Cor 10:25, 27–29 is a continuation of the issues set forth in 1 Cor 8,<sup>56</sup> only two other points will be addressed here. First, the passage raises the idea of differing levels of growth regarding "conscience" among believers.<sup>57</sup> Basing the interpretation of this passage with 1 Cor 8, Paul offers practical ideas of how to deal with issues that could be viewed differently among fellow believers. Perhaps the comment of O. Hallesby is appropriate here: "conscience is an individual matter. Conscience sits in judgment on oneself and ought not therefore properly to sit in judgment on anyone else."<sup>58</sup>

Second, Paul addresses the issue of Christian contact with non-believers. The practical counsel he gives teaches that the best method of "enlightening the conscience" of non-believers is to wait for them to make a statement that opens for discussion matters of Christian faith. Also, the passage plainly establishes the need for believers to adhere steadfastly to the truth once it is introduced.

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<sup>54</sup> Zuck, 338.

<sup>55</sup> Aland, 124.

<sup>56</sup> Zuck, 338.

<sup>57</sup> In the Greek text, the plural tense is used when referring to "you" in verse 27: "and if ye (plural) be disposed to go," or "and if all of you desire to go."

<sup>58</sup> *Conscience*, (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1950): 30, cited by Barton, 101.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Once the issue in question is evident to the non-believer, Paul admonishes, “Eat not for his sake that showed it.”

**2 Corinthians 4:2.** Since Paul states that the apostles commended themselves “to every man’s conscience” (2 Cor 4:2), the most evident teaching from this passage regarding the conscience is that the “conscience” is innate and every person possesses one. Paul indicates this same idea when he refers to his “conscience” and that of a fellow believer (1 Cor 10:25, 27–29).<sup>59</sup> It is true that some people act as if they did not possess a conscience, and this idea will be dealt with further in the section on 1 Tim 4:2.

**2 Corinthians 1:12 and 2 Corinthians 5:11.** In both of these passages (2 Cor 1:12; 5:11), Paul speaks of the “conscience” as a “witness” or “testimony.” Of note here, Paul first speaks of the “conscience” of himself and other apostles (see 2 Cor 1:19) as bearing witness to their joy in service to the Corinthian church. More significantly, Paul describes how his and the other apostles’ ministry was “made manifest” to the Corinthian church. The idea that Paul presents here is that the church at Corinth *in collective capacity* performs a role of judging the ministry of the apostles. While this insight does not provide sufficient basis for supporting the teaching of absolute ecclesial authority, yet it does establish the ecclesial prerogative to review the apostles’ performance in ministry.

**Types of Conscience**

**A “Good” Conscience (Hebrews 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16, 21).** In each of these passages (Heb 13:18; 1 Peter 3:16, 21) the basic idea of a “good” conscience is the believer in relation to God. In Heb 13:18, Paul concludes his letter appealing to his readers to pray that he may live in harmony with God, based on the terms of the New Covenant that he wrote about in the epistle.<sup>60</sup> In 1 Peter 3:16, 21, Peter emphasizes the individual’s relation to God<sup>61</sup> and the resurrection of Jesus as the basis of that relationship.<sup>62</sup> It is when one experiences such a relationship that he can have a “good” conscience that will bear the reproach of all ungodly people.<sup>63</sup>

**A “Good” Conscience and Faith (1 Timothy 1:5 and 1 Timothy 1:19).** Both 1 Tim 1:5 and v. 19 intimately link “faith” with a “good conscience”<sup>64</sup> (συνειδήσεως αγαθῆς; ἀγαθὴν συνείδησιν). The implication of this point with respect to the “conscience” of every person clearly distinguishes between those who are Christians and those who are not. The complexity of this point as it relates to Romans 2:12–16 can hardly be emphasized. How can those who

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<sup>59</sup> Zuck, 331; Stepien (4) argues the same conclusion, not from 1 Cor 10, but from Rom 2:15, where Paul speaks of “those without law” who have an active conscience.

<sup>60</sup> Borghi, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Borghi, 95.

<sup>62</sup> Stepien, 17.

<sup>63</sup> Zuck, 337.

<sup>64</sup> Stepien, 14, 15.

COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

have no faith in God still have a conscience guided by "natural law" that is acceptable to Him? This is an area of investigation that can be pursued perhaps by another scholar.

**A "Pure" Conscience (1 Timothy 3:9 and 2 Timothy 1:3).** In 1 Tim 3:9 and 2 Tim 1:3, Paul refers to the ἐν καθαρῶ (pure, clean, innocent)<sup>65</sup> στυγνείῃσει in relation to service to God. In the first instance, he refers to the qualification of a deacon and in the second, he refers to his own service to God.<sup>66</sup> Paul here refers to the "conscience" as "a norm for the Christian life,"<sup>67</sup> and more importantly, the need for "irreproachable service to God."<sup>68</sup>

**A "God-like" Conscience (1 Peter 2:19).** Although there are many possible interpretations of 1 Peter 2:19, the two most likely are that it refers to believers coming into such close relation to God that they manifest the divine characteristics of submission to suffering, even in the face of death, because of the example of Christ set before them.<sup>69</sup> The second interpretation is that the verse refers to believers faithfully adhering to the obligations resulting from their relationship with God, which results in persecution.<sup>70</sup> In either case, the central issue is based on the individual's "conscience" in relation to God. For the purposes of this paper, this verse suggests that one way for the believer's conscience to mature enough to manifest the Christian graces is to spend time in close relation to God. It further indicates that the Christian path is not free from suffering if one faithfully follows one's conscientious convictions based in the Word of God.

**A "Defective" Conscience (1 Timothy 4:2).** The most basic teaching of 1 Tim 4:1-3 provides an explanation of how one's conscience may become defective. Paul first speaks of such people as "speaking lies in hypocrisy" (ἐν ὑποκρίσει<sup>71</sup> ψευδολόγων<sup>72</sup>). Based on the Greek text, Paul links the idea of seducing spirits and doctrinal error resulting in believers who live hypocritical lives and speak lies. Those who succumb to such influences eventually have a "seared conscience" (κεκαυστηριασμένων τὴν συνείδησιν). The verbal idea expressed here is in the perfect participial tense, meaning that what Paul describes here is a *fixed continuous result*. In other words, those who arrive at this condition will continue to live in hypocrisy and lies with no possibility of being re-converted. The verbal idea correlates perfectly with the verb that Paul chose to use here, which is καυστηριάζω (to burn with a hot iron so as to deaden to feeling).<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Aland, 89.

<sup>66</sup> Zuck, 337.

<sup>67</sup> Borghi, 93.

<sup>68</sup> Stepien, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Borghi, 94.

<sup>70</sup> Stepien, 20.

<sup>71</sup> Aland, 189.

<sup>72</sup> Aland, 200.

<sup>73</sup> Aland, 98.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

As this passage relates to “conscience,” it is first evident that the conscience can become so deranged by sin that it renders one incapable of responding to the Holy Spirit. Second, the passage teaches the importance of doctrinal truth to fortify the conscience against the influence of demonic spirits. Third, it teaches the fearful truth about a person reaching the “point of no return.” For this cause, it is vitally important for one to promptly resist any influences that would lead contrary to convictions based on the teachings of God’s Word and to just as promptly follow the convictions of the Holy Spirit as it leads one in the way of truth.

**Titus 1:15.** In Titus 1:10–16, Paul again associates a “defiled conscience” (v. 15) with unsound doctrinal beliefs and with a lack of faith. Paul is here describing the condition of believers who have succumbed to the wrong influences of those who teach falsehoods. He describes such believers as βδελυκτοί (detestable, vile),<sup>74</sup> ἀπειθεῖς (disobedient, rebellious),<sup>75</sup> and ἀδόκιμοι (failing to meet the test, disqualified; worthless; corrupted [mind]).<sup>76</sup> With such a horrid description of a defective and defiled conscience, it is essential to focus the remainder of this paper on how one can have a pure conscience.

**How to Have a Pure Conscience (Hebrews 9:8–14; 10:2, 22).** The overall theme of the book of Hebrews addresses the deficiencies of the Old Testament Covenant and priesthood. In contrast, Paul presents the “new and better” way into the Heavenly Sanctuary by the sacrifice and mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ as the High Priest of the New Covenant. It is against this background that Paul addresses the subject of how the Old Testament cultic ritual could not provide cleansing from sin. As Gary Selby observes, “The old system, because it was primarily external and ceremonial, was not able . . . to resolve a problem that was internal and spiritual—a guilty conscience.”<sup>77</sup> Rather, it served to continually remind the worshippers of their sins. Under the New Covenant, Paul refers to the “dead works,” which actually refers to “sin,”<sup>78</sup> that the believer needs to be cleansed of. The hope brought out by the New Covenant is based on the shed blood of Jesus and His role as Mediator of that covenant. As Selby further states, “. . . because Jesus’ sacrifice cleanses the conscience, it allows for *unhindered access to God* (εἰς τὸ λατρεύειν θεῶ),”<sup>79</sup> thus making it far superior to the old system. Ernesto Borghi takes the benefits of the New Covenant even further: “By consequence of such a union with the Lord, every notion of

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<sup>74</sup> Aland, 32.

<sup>75</sup> Aland, 18.

<sup>76</sup> Aland, 4.

<sup>77</sup> “The Meaning and Function of Συνείδησις in Hebrews 9 and 10,” *Restoration Quarterly* 28/3 (3<sup>rd</sup> quarter, 1985/86): 150.

<sup>78</sup> Stepien, 19.

<sup>79</sup> Selby, 150 [original italics]; Jeong Woo Lee (18) concurs with Selby when he states, “In Jesus Christ, the time of external, ceremonial cleansing is superseded by the time of internal, efficacious cleansing of one’s conscience.”

### COOK: "CONSCIENCE" IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

evil, with all wicked conscience, can be removed from man."<sup>80</sup> Thus, God has provided the solution to man's guilt-stained conscience. It is through the High Priestly ministry of Jesus Christ that man may have a clean conscience and be able to enjoy fellowship with God.

#### Summary and Conclusion

From this study, the term "conscience" may be defined as "an inner knowledge about oneself." The function of "conscience" is above all related to the ethical conduct of an individual in relation to God and his fellow man. While the "conscience" is distinguished from such mental faculties as the will, memory, and reason, it is associated with them in its performance. The "conscience" serves as judge and witness regarding the individual and is active in man's conscious thought. It is the moral faculty placed in all men by God that holds them amenable to His divine law and is the medium through which the Holy Spirit convicts men of sin and effects their conversion.

There are various types of conscience, varying from weak to strong, as well as from good to evil. The central element of the good conscience is faith. The primary characteristic of an evil conscience is unbelief. For one to have a "strong conscience," one must take the time to study the Scriptures and follow their teachings. The danger of tampering with one's own conscience by not heeding the promptings of the Holy Spirit is that one becomes "deadened" to the Holy Spirit's influence.

For the Christian, it is necessary to take into account the various levels of conscience among believers, especially those new to the faith. For such ones, it is necessary to instruct them patiently in the way of truth and to abstain from any lifestyle practice that might be misinterpreted, as lawful as it may be, until such new believers have had the time to become fully informed of the principles related to the practice in question. Above all, the conscience of each person in relation to God is of such importance as to be regarded as sacred and inviolable.

The solution that God has made available for us to have a "clean and pure" conscience is faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus is more than sufficient to wash away the sins of each repentant, believing individual. By His sacrifice, Jesus takes away the believers' guilt, thus making it possible for them to approach God in full assurance of faith.

#### Appendix A

Ellen White seems to support the view that "conscience" is the voice of God, *contrary* to Rehwinkel and Hallesby. A word search of the CD-ROM containing all of her published works, finds the term "conscience" appearing 2,476 times. The combination of "conscience" and "voice of God" yields 26 total hits, with only 11 of them being originally cited (the other 15 are quoted from the

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<sup>80</sup> Borghi, 91.



*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

original 11). **Of these 11 usages, there are 4 references** where she equates “conscience” with the “voice of God” (“Conscience is the voice of God” 5T 120.1; “the voice of duty” as “the voice which speaks from God” 1 SM 27.3; “strong promptings and the conviction of duty” as “the voice of the God that bids me shake off the lethargy of the world” RH, September 19, 1893; and “that I seem to feel almost conscience-stricken and inquire, Am I in the way of the Lord? I expect to hold myself in readiness to obey the voice of God and do the bidding of the Lord”—Letter 95, 1890, p. 1. (To W. C. White, July 17, 1890.) {8MR 125.1}). **In 2 other references**, she uses a grammatical structure that parallels “conscience” with the “voice of God” (“Satan uses his influence to drown the voice of God and the voice of conscience” {1MCP 320.3}; “The conscience becomes less and less impressible. The voice of God seems to become more and more distant” {TMK 243.3}). **In 4 other statements**, she indicates that the “voice of God” is heard through the voice of God’s messengers, the Word of God, and in one instance, through the weekly income, which obligates the individual to tithe ({Sept. 11, 1894, paragraph 4}; {GC88 93.1}; {RH January 17, 1893, paragraph 7}; {4T 474.2}). **In a solitary use**, she does not make a parallel reference to “the voice of God” and the “conscience.” (She refers to an individual whose “conscience has lost its sensitiveness,” and therefore, his “voice no longer echoes the voice of God, or gives expression to the music of a soul sanctified through the truth” {ST, June 27, 1900 par. 3}).

An explanation of her position could be based on the theological foundation from which she wrote. As a Methodist converted to Adventism, her theological perspectives were grounded in Methodism. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was influenced by James Arminius. According to Arminius, each man is endowed with a moral conscience at birth through the work of the Holy Spirit. While he did not equate this with conversion, he nonetheless acknowledged the work of God not only in creating each person, but also in providing each one with moral faculties by which he was enabled to respond to the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

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