

# Strength for the Weaker Conscience

## Romans 14:14

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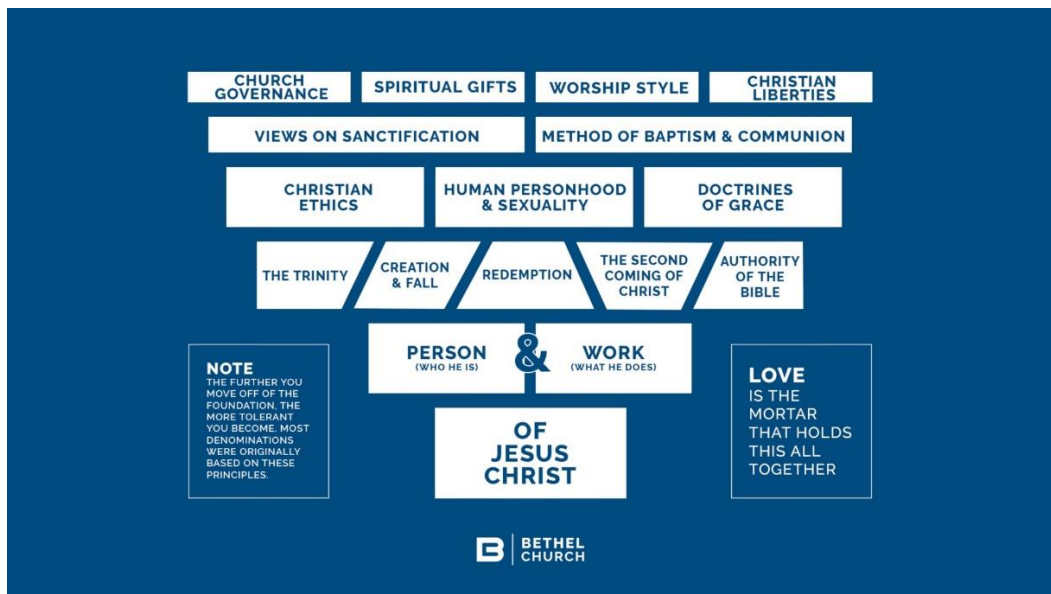
It's probably been many years since most of us did the required high school reading of Edgar Allen Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart*. Remember the guy who lived with an old man who had an eye that looked at him funny? He finally couldn't take it anymore and murdered the man and hid him under the floorboards. When the police come to investigate, the man hears a heartbeat from the under the floorboards that gets louder and louder until he can't take it anymore and confesses to the murder and shows them the location of the body.

Perfect reading for a 15-year-old, don't you think? Why do we have children read this? What was that heartbeat that drove the man crazy? Louder and louder it became. He thought it was the dead man's heart, but it was his own. His own heart pounding because of the crime he had committed.

What Poe called the beating heart; the Bible calls the conscience. Conscience is front and center in Romans 14. Not in clear matters like murder, but disputable matters of lifestyle and religious practice in which Christians vary in their opinions and approach. What do we do about these?

Just say "Romans 14" in the future and it could be a kind of code for our church. *Oh, we're talking about non-essential matters Christians disagree on.* Indeed. There are many of them, and interestingly, they change over time. I asked Pastor Gary Butler, our Pastor of Care and Family Ministries who has pastored for 50 years, and he confirmed, what people dispute now is much different from when he started.

Romans 14 has urged us to see these disputable matters as opportunities for love and grace, not judgment or condescension or division. How? By keeping the important and essential things central and allowing less important matters to be spaces where God's people can disagree and still love each other (see the chart below).



I got quite a bit of feedback on this and questions. I hope it's helpful. Please remember that these are not exhaustive at all. They are representative of essential, urgent, important, and not-so-important things. When we go to war about a non-essential, we are giving it a higher priority than it deserves. It also disrespects the gloriously essential gospel truths for which we should reserve our greatest passions.

## The Conscience: God's Moral Compass in Me

Today we are focusing in on a key theme in Romans 14, which is our conscience. Paul calls the extra-sensitive and scrupulous conscience the "weak in faith" and the broader and mature conscience the "strong in faith." Both are completely sincere and trying to please God in their convictions, but they see things differently. There are two verses in this chapter that focus on the conscience:

- *"I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean"* (Romans 14:14 ESV).
- *"But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin"* (Romans 14:23).

Notice that the word "conscience" isn't actually used. It is prevalent elsewhere though: twice in Acts, twenty times in Paul's letters, five in Hebrews, and three times in 1 Peter.<sup>1</sup> Paul is describing how the conscience functions within us. ***Our conscience is the internal moral compass that holds us to account for the decisions and directions of our lives.*** Paul says, *"They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them"* (Romans 2:15).

The "they" in this verse is unbelievers. So, we see here that conscience is rooted in our image-bearing. When God made us in his image, he placed in us a moral understanding and a moral watchdog. Our conscience doesn't make decisions, but it tells us when we do something against our understanding of what is right and wrong. Our understanding may be wrong, as in the case of the weaker brother here. Yet, the conscience holds us to our inward standard.

I'm sure all of us know that voice inside us. It's largely silent if we live consistent with our moral understanding, but it shouts at us when we violate something we believe to be wrong. Cue *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

- *"Conscience tells people when they are out of harmony with their own best judgments or acting inconsistently with what they would approve in others."*<sup>2</sup> (George M. Marsden)
- *"An educated, sensitive conscience is God's monitor. It alerts us to the moral quality of what we do or plan to do, forbids lawlessness and irresponsibility, and makes us feel guilt, shame, and fear of the future retribution that it tells us we deserve, when we have allowed ourselves to defy its restraints. Satan's strategy is to corrupt, desensitize, and if possible, kill our consciences."*<sup>3</sup> (J.I. Packer)

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<sup>1</sup> See Andy Naselli & J.D. Crowley, *Conscience: What it is, How to Train it, and Loving Those Who Differ*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 35.

<sup>2</sup> George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 469.

<sup>3</sup> J.I. Packer as quoted by John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, (Word, Inc., 1994), 35.

Our conscience is our friend and ally in God's will in our lives. It is a very good thing, even if it's not always accurate.

### Four Types of Christians on Liberty Issues

When we come to Romans 14, we must realize that Christian liberty issues are not about clear moral standards in Scripture. Christian liberty applies to disputable matters. Let me make something very clear. We are not talking about moral matters that God has made clear or the obvious application of those moral commands. I once talked with a woman in our church. She said, "I am so glad you have been teaching on the Christian liberty stuff. I have a Christian friend who is excited. She has recently been going into hotels that offer free breakfasts to their guests. She's not a guest, but she walks in, eats, and leaves. She thinks this is great and is a Christian liberty issue." That is not a Christian liberty issue; that is stealing! Christian liberty issues are gray areas where there are no clear directives from God and where culture, wisdom, and maturity often create differing opinions.

Years ago, I read *Lifestyle Evangelism* by Joe Aldrich.<sup>4</sup> In it he describes four different types of Christian on any disputable matter. This has helped me immensely and I want to share it with you.

- *Professional Weaker Brother* – You are not a good Christian if you participate
- *Susceptible Weaker Brother* – I am not a good Christian if I participate
- *Non-participating Mature Brother* – Godly Christians can participate, but I choose not to
- *Participating Mature Brother* – Christians are free to participate, and I do

Both of the weaker faith categories don't participate but they don't for different reasons. The *Professional Weaker Brother* knows it's wrong for him and thinks it's wrong for everybody else. This person will often weaponize their conscience and project it on the whole church. *If this is how I feel about it then this is the standard all must abide by.* The *Susceptible Weaker Brother* is less a warrior and is more unsure. His hesitation stems from an indefinite conscience. He or she takes the better safe than sorry approach.

On the stronger faith side there is the *Non-Participating Mature Brother* and the *Participating Mature Brother*. The *Non-Participating* doesn't think it's wrong but chooses not to exercise freedom anyway. This could be for a number of reasons, but they don't judge those who participate. On the outside, they may look like the *Susceptible Weaker Brother*, but they aren't. They simply choose not to participate.

For example, in my life there are disputable things I don't participate in simply because I am a pastor. I serve a wide range of opinions on such things, all of whom I want to encourage and none of which I want to cause to stumble. Further, with social media as it is, if I did participate it would likely be posted in three seconds by someone also at the party, wedding, or hip hop dance lessons. *Professional Weaker Brothers* love to weaponize social media to suggest hypocrisy. Am I free in Christ to participate? Yes. If I can do other things with my wife, I'm certainly free to dance with her, as one example of the irrationality of some of these things. I have to choose my participations carefully and these have changed over time.

I went years here preaching every Sunday in a coat and tie because that was expected by many. I haven't preached in a tie in I don't how long and I'm glad for that. It's hard to talk with a noose around your neck. If I preach at a church I'll often ask, what Bible translation

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<sup>4</sup> Joe Aldrich, *Lifestyle Evangelism*, (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Press, 1981), 44.

should I use? What should I wear? What is the culture of the church? My preferences are easily set aside for what helps people hear the message. *Non-Participating Mature Brother*.

And finally, there is the *Participating Mature Brother*. Hopefully, they don't think they are godlier because they participate. Rather, they enjoy God's gifts, God's way, for his glory.

Romans 14 is written to keep the *Professional Weaker Brother* Christians from judging the *Participating Mature Brother* Christians and the *Participating Mature Brother* to not cause the *Susceptible Weaker Brother* to participate against his conscience.

To give you an example of this, let me apply it to a similar issue at the church at Corinth, which was a disagreement about eating meat that had previously been offered in worship to idols. This is 1 Corinthians 8-10. The strong didn't care. The weak were horrified.

Can you hear the strong in the Corinthian church foyer after the service? "Frank, wasn't that steak at the temple Chop House awesome? That was some shindig. Are you and Lois going this Friday? I hope to see you there!" Meanwhile, there is a little huddle of weaker brothers listening and watching. The *Professional Weaker Brother* says, "Look at them reveling in their idol meat eating. The pastor needs to do something about this!" That guy's wife says, "They weren't raised right. I just know our kids won't play with their kids. They might have leftovers of idol meat for lunch, and feed that corrupting food to our precious little Jimmy."

And standing next to them listening is the person Paul has in view: The *Susceptible Weaker Brother*. He's not the hard-core, judgmental *Professional Weaker Brother*. He admires the stronger brothers and wants to be like them, but his conscience grips him at the thought of eating idol meat. It just doesn't feel right, but maybe I should if they do...Hmm....

Disputable matters come and go. Much of it is cultural. The gray areas are different on the East Coast then on the West Coast. Go to a church in Europe or Africa and the liberty issues are entirely different. Real spirituality is much deeper than outward lifestyle choices in gray areas. Real godliness gets past the "I do" or "I don't" to what would be best for my brother or sister in Christ; best for missional living; best for the kingdom of God.

### **If Our Conscience Says It's Wrong, for Us It's Wrong (Even If for Others It's Right)**

- "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (Romans 14:14).
- "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

This may sound confusing. How can something be wrong for one person and okay for another? It's not that the activity itself is subjective in God's eyes. Rather, when I violate my conscience, I'm no longer acting according to what I actually believe is pleasing to God.

"Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." Faith here is that quality of assurance and confidence that something is in God's will. It's okay with God. Whatever does not proceed from a moral confidence is sin. It's a sin to violate your conscience. As Mark Dever succinctly puts it, "Conscience cannot make a wrong thing right, but it can make a right thing wrong."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Dever as quoted by Naselli & Crowley, *Conscience*, 72.

Let me share a story here from my past. I know to some this will sound perhaps silly and I certainly don't want to assume all have freedom here so I'm not encouraging you to violate your conscience. But here is an example from my life. I grew up in a conservative home with convictions about certain activities. One of them was that Christians shouldn't go to the movie theater. I was the conscientious oldest son, so I didn't. Then I went to a Christian college that included in its lifestyle statement that we wouldn't attend movies. I believe I had to sign my name. Again, I was conscientious about things and I conformed. So, by the time I graduated from college at 22, I had never been to a movie theater in my whole life.

I went away to Phoenix, Arizona to go to seminary and a Christian movie came out that I really wanted to see. I was living out west, on my own, and was ready to spread my wings, but I struggled with whether to go see this Christian movie at the movie theater. I decided to go. You know what happened while I was sitting there? *The Tell-Tale Heart*. My heart was beating inside me as I tried to watch the movie. I felt so guilty. As I recall, I left early I was so miserable. I knew in my mind that this was morally neutral to God. But my conscience wasn't there yet.

Years later I came to enjoy the experience, but then I came to Bethel Church 23 years ago. At that time, there were some Christians for whom going to a movie was not appropriate. What did I do? My memory is that I didn't go to a movie, in our area at least, for many years. Why? Different reason. I had gone from a *Susceptible Weaker Brother* to a *Participating Mature Brother* to a *Non-Participating Mature Brother*. My conscience was my guide, and then it transitioned to whatever would be best for the church, at least for where it was at that time.

Culture changes. Different Christian cultures have different consciences. I'm told that there was an international missions conference where many American missionaries were upset by the Europeans drinking alcohol and many Europeans upset that the Americans were drinking soda pop, which is so unhealthy and poor stewardship of the body.

We see so many of our assumptions are less tied to Scripture and more tied to our culture. Our upbringing. The example of some key person in our life.

### **While We Shouldn't Violate Our Conscience, We Can Change It**

We should all want to be mature in everything. To grow. Growth means change. Certainly, a church filled with mature conscience Christians is to be desired. Andy Naselli wrote an excellent book on the conscience. Here's a great quote on changing our conscience,

*"This means that the second principle (obey conscience) has one critical limitation. If God, the Lord of your conscience, shows you through his Word that your conscience is registering a mistaken moral judgment and if you believe he wants you to adjust your conscience to better match his will, your conscience must bend to God.... If your conscience is so sacrosanct that it's off-limits even to God, that's idolatry."<sup>6</sup>*

Don't disobey your conscience, but don't bow to it either. Our consciences are not the voice of God. They are broken and they can be changed and redeemed. How?

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<sup>6</sup> Naselli & Crowley, *Conscience*, 31, 33.

## **Compare your position with the Word of God**

This is always first. Our consciences are not infallible guides, but the Word of God is. Therefore, we must seek to inform our consciences with God's Word. If I feel guilty over something that God says is okay, why do I feel that way?

Study what the Bible says either implicitly or principally. Meditate on key related passages. Strive for a renewed mind in that area. I am amazed at how many people get extremely irate over an issue but don't have a clue what the Bible says on the matter. Go back to the Word. The Bible is my final authority, not my tell-tale heart.

## **Return to key doctrines like the authority, inspiration, and sufficiency of Scripture and our freedom in Christ**

As you struggle with an area that feels wrong, but you recognize that it isn't wrong by God's standard, return to key doctrines regarding the Word of God. It is inspired. It is reliable. It is all that we need.

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Meditate on that truth. Preach that to yourself. Repent of judgmental attitudes toward others in non-essential areas.

## **Wait for conscience clearance before participating**

If you do steps one and two, and can't have a clear conscience about something, don't do it. Wait. Perhaps that will change, but if it doesn't, don't violate your conscience. Pray and ask God for wisdom and wait for the internal green light.

Whether you are strong or weak, participating or not, remember the main goal: *In essentials, unity. In non-essentials, liberty. In all things, charity.*

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