

# Conscience

- I. Personal conscience, Human interaction and God's standards<sup>1</sup>
  - a. No one conscience is going to be faultless
  - b. No one conscience is going to perfectly match God's will
  - c. No one conscience is going to be exactly the same

It turns out that neither Anne's nor Bill's conscience perfectly matches God's will. No person's conscience does. Let this truth sink deep into your heart.

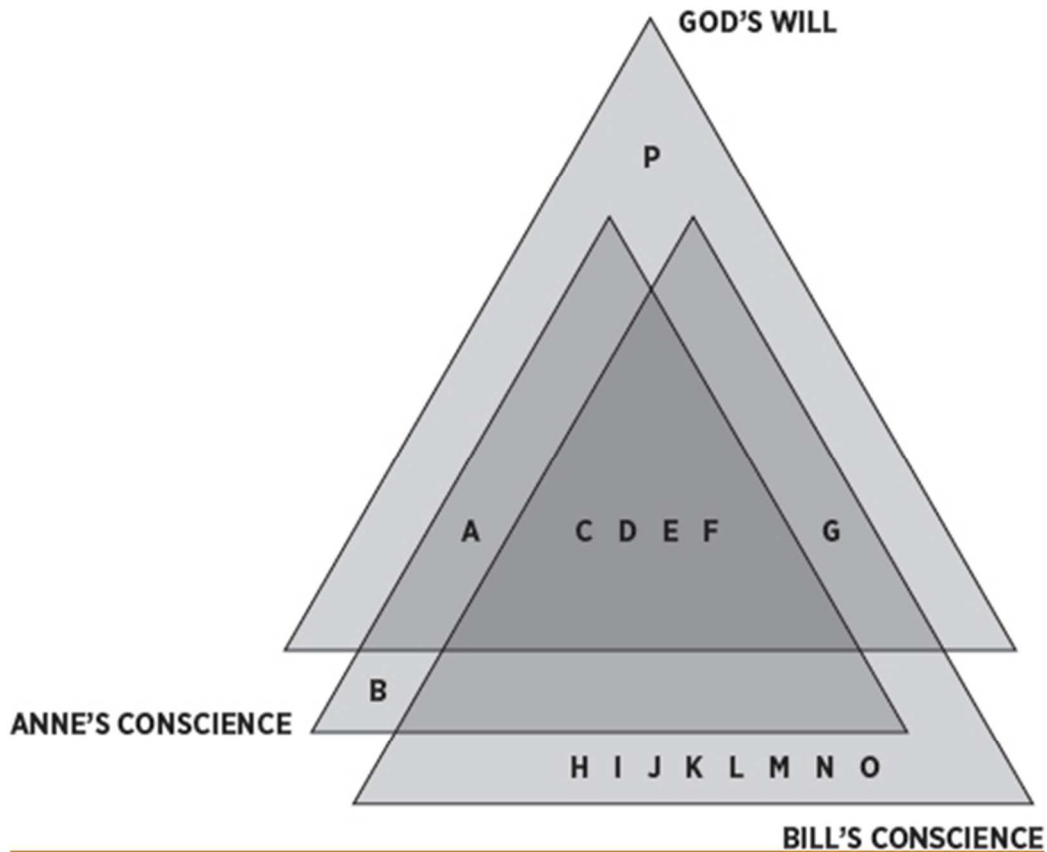


Figure 3. Human conscience and God's standards

Anne needs to realize that buying non-fair-trade coffee (rule B) turns out *not* to be a sin before God, and Bill needs to understand that rules H, I, J, K, L, M, N, and O—including going to the theater and playing video games—are not inherent sins in God's sight. However, Anne better be thinking a whole lot more about rule G since God cares about it. And notice that Bill is wrong to omit rule A from his conscience. And they're both off about P, which doesn't show up on either of their radars. But God thinks it should!

As we come to understand God's revealed will more and more, we will have opportunities to add rules to our conscience that God's Word clearly teaches and weed out rules that God's Word treats as optional. This will take a lifetime, but we have the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the church of God to help us.

<sup>1</sup> The majority of this handout is compiled from Naselli, Andrew David, and J. D. Crowley. *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016. We would encourage you to purchase this excellent book.

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## II. Biblical Passages on Conscience

### a. Romans 14

Romans 14 mentions three specific areas of disagreement:

1. v. 2: "One person believes he may *eat anything*, while the weak person *eats only vegetables*."
2. v. 5a: "One person *esteems one day as better than another*, while another *esteems all days alike*."
3. v. 21: "It is good not to eat meat or *drink wine* or do anything that causes your brother to stumble."

Concerning these differences, Paul refers to two groups of people in the church: the "strong" and the "weak" (Rom. 15:1; see table 2).

ISSUE IN ROMANS 14	THE "STRONG"	THE "WEAK"
1. food (vv. 2, 21)	eat all kinds of food	eat only vegetables
2. holy days (v. 5a)	make no distinction among days	value some days more than others
3. wine (v. 21; cf. v. 17)	drink wine	abstain from wine

Table 2. Three disputable matters in Romans 14<sup>10</sup>

### b. Strong vs. Weak Conscience in Romans 14

- i. A typical church in Paul's day consisted of both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

STRONG CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE
Conscience has confidence to eat meat	Conscience lacks confidence to eat meat
"Everything belongs to God, so we can eat anything we want."	"We want to keep some of our previous food restrictions."
Mostly Gentile Christians	Mostly Jewish Christians

Table 3. The strong and the weak

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- ii. Human nature being what it is, begins to impose their freedoms or scruples on others. Arrogance or judgmentalism result. Ethnic unity in Christ was among Paul's highest concerns.

STRONG CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE
Conscience has confidence to eat meat	Conscience lacks confidence to eat meat
"I have freedom to eat meat, and those who don't eat meat are being unreasonable and are theologically in error."	"It's sinful to eat meat, and Christians who do so are being unfaithful to God."
Arrogance	Judgmentalism

Table 4. Potential conflict between the strong and the weak

- iii. Eventually the early churches began to see not only two overreactions concerning meat and other issues (the two inner columns in table 5) but two potential heresies as well (the two outer columns in table 5).

STRONG CONSCIENCE	STRONG CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE
Strong conscience but carelessly crossing the line into lawlessness and immorality	Strong conscience but looking down on (despising) those with a weak conscience	Weak conscience but judging those with a strong conscience	Weak conscience but crossing the line into legalism
"I have freedom not only to eat meat but to go to parties at idol temples." (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20-22)	"I have freedom to eat meat, and those who don't are being unreasonable and are theologically in error."	"It's sinful to eat meat, and Christians who do so are being unfaithful to God."	"You must follow the Old Testament dietary restrictions if you want to be a Christian."
Heresy	Arrogance	Judgmentalism	Heresy
Distorts the gospel by lawless subtraction	Diminishes the gospel	Diminishes the gospel	Distorts the gospel by legalistic addition

Table 5. Seeds of heresy among the strong and the weak (two outer columns)

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- iv. Paul's threefold solution: Love. Only the three center columns please God and result in unity.

**PAUL'S SOLUTION OF LOVE**

		1			2		3	
STRONG CONSCIENCE	STRONG CONSCIENCE	STRONG CONSCIENCE	STRONG CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE	WEAK CONSCIENCE	
but carelessly crossing the line into lawlessness and immorality	but looking down on (despising) those with a weak conscience	fully persuaded, yet welcoming rather than looking down on those with a weak conscience	but free to be flexible in disputable matters in order to (1) edify fellow believers and (2) advance the gospel	fully persuaded, yet welcoming rather than judging those with a strong conscience	but judging those with a strong conscience		but crossing the line into legalism	
<b>EATS MEAT</b>	<b>EATS MEAT</b>	<b>EATS MEAT</b>	<b>FLEXIBLE</b>	<b>DOESN'T EAT MEAT</b>	<b>DOESN'T EAT MEAT</b>	<b>DOESN'T EAT MEAT</b>	<b>DOESN'T EAT MEAT</b>	
"I have freedom not only to eat meat but to go to parties at idol temples." (cf. 1 Cor. 10:20-22)	"I have freedom to eat meat, and those who don't are being unreasonable and are theologically in error."	"I have freedom to eat meat for the glory of God, but I still welcome Christians who disagree."	"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." (1 Cor. 9:22b)	"I abstain from eating meat for the glory of God, but I still welcome Christians who disagree."	"It's sinful to eat meat, and Christians who do so are being unfaithful to God."		"You must follow the Old Testament dietary restrictions if you want to be a Christian."	
<b>HERESY</b>	<b>ARROGANCE</b>	<b>LOVE</b>	<b>LOVE</b>	<b>LOVE</b>	<b>JUDGMENTALISM</b>		<b>HERESY</b>	
Distorts the gospel by lawless subtraction	Diminishes the gospel	Reveals the gospel	Magnifies the gospel	Reveals the gospel	Diminishes the gospel		Distorts the gospel by legalistic addition	

The goal of every mature believer

**WELCOME ONE ANOTHER AS CHRIST HAS WELCOMED US.**  
ROMANS 15:1-7

Table 6. Paul's solution of love (three center columns)

- v. In most issues, you are probably both weak and strong at the same time in comparison to other people. Think of a spectrum: there is almost always someone to your left and right on any given disputable issue.

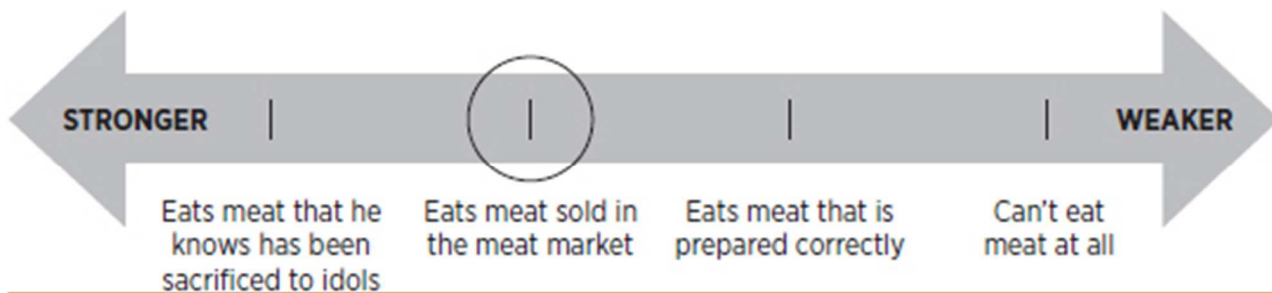


Figure 5. The spectrum of conscience

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## Twelve Principles about How to Disagree with Other Christians on Disputable Matters

1. Welcome those who disagree with you (Rom. 14:1–2).

Don't forget that "faith" here refers not to saving faith in Christ (14:22a makes that clear) but to the confidence a person has in their heart or conscience to do a particular activity, such as eat meat (14:2). The weak person's conscience lacks sufficient confidence (i.e., faith) to do a particular act without self-judgment, even if that act is actually not a sin. To him it would be a sin.

in most issues, you are probably both weak and strong at the same time in comparison to other people.<sup>11</sup> Think of a spectrum: there is almost always someone to your left and right on any given disputable issue.

2. Those who have freedom of conscience must not look down on those who don't (Rom. 14:3–4).

perhaps you were part of a subculture that held relatively strict standards on third-level issues, as both of us were. Many people from our background have weak consciences on several third-level issues, but it's a mistake to assume that they all do. Some people in those subcultures have strong consciences on many issues but intentionally refrain from exercising their liberty in order to edify those around them. They contextualize in order to serve others.

3. Those whose conscience restricts them must not be judgmental toward those who have freedom (Rom. 14:3–4).

Those who have a weaker conscience on a particular issue are always tempted to pass judgment on those who are freer. They may say, "How can those people be Christians and do that? Don't they know they're hurting the testimony of Christ? Don't they know that they are supposed to give up things like that for the sake of the gospel?"

We should qualify again that third-level issues are not necessarily unimportant. We don't mean to trivialize them. It's okay to talk about them. It's okay to preach about them. It's okay to tweet and blog about them. It's okay to mention them on Facebook. But with at least two conditions:

- 1. Have the right spirit. Don't be judgmental toward others who are either more or less strict than you. "Do not adopt a critical spirit, a condemning attitude," to quote D. A. Carson.<sup>12</sup> As a general rule, be strict with yourself and generous with others.
- 2. Have the right proportion. Keep disputable matters in their place as third-level issues. Don't treat them like first- or second-level issues. And don't become preoccupied with them or divisive about them. They shouldn't be so important to you that it's all you want to talk about. They shouldn't be the main reason that you choose what church to join. They shouldn't be issues that you are the most passionate about such that you are constantly trying to win people over to your position and then looking down on them if they decide not to join your side.

People enjoy being with people like them. But sometimes a subculture can develop within a church in which the majority of people hold particular views on a group of third-level issues. Then when someone joins that

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assembly, whether coming from another church background or showing up as a new believer, they may feel pressure to embrace the whole package if they want to be a “good”

4. Each believer must be fully convinced of their position in their own conscience (Rom. 14:5).

This does not mean that your conscience is always right.

5. Assume that others are partaking or refraining for the glory of God (Rom. 14:6–9).

6. Do not judge each other in these matters because we will all someday stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14:10–12).

7. Your freedom to eat meat is correct, but don't let your freedom destroy the faith of a weak brother (Rom. 14:13–15).

the second half of Romans 14 places the bulk of responsibility on Christians with a strong conscience. One obvious reason is that they are strong, so God calls on them to bear with the weaknesses of the weak (Rom. 15:1). Not only that, of the two groups, only the strong have a choice in third-level matters like meat, holy days, and wine. They can either partake or abstain, whereas the conscience of the strict allows them only one choice. It is a great privilege for the strong to have double the choices of the weak.

The concern here is not merely that your freedom may irritate, annoy, or offend your weaker brother or sister. If a brother or sister simply doesn't like your freedoms, that is their problem. But if your practice of freedom leads your brother or sister to sin against their conscience, then it becomes your problem.

So how might your use of freedom bring spiritual harm to other professing believers? Paul isn't clear here, but Doug Moo suggests “two main possibilities”: [1] Our engaging in an activity that another believer thinks to be wrong may encourage that other believer to do it as well. They would then be sinning because they are not acting “from faith” (v. 23). . . . [2] An ostentatious flaunting of liberty on a particular matter may so deeply offend someone that he or she may turn from the faith altogether.

Once again we must emphasize that the stumbling block principle does not teach that we must refrain from an activity that another believer may simply disagree with.

We must never allow the conscience of others to determine our own conscience. But we must always consider the conscience of others when we determine our own actions.

8. Disagreements about eating and drinking are not important in the kingdom of God; building each other up in righteousness, peace, and joy is the important thing (Rom. 14:16–21).

9. If you have freedom, don't flaunt it; if you are strict, don't expect others to be strict like you (Rom. 14:22a).

As we saw in table 5 above, those who are strict may be prone to an even more serious error, namely, insisting that everyone must hold their view in order to be a Christian. When you say that holding a particular view on a disputable matter is essential to be a Christian, you have crossed the line into legalism.

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10. A person who lives according to their conscience is blessed (Rom. 14:22b–23).

11. We must follow the example of Christ, who put others first (Rom. 15:1–6).

Christian freedom is not “I always do what I want.” Nor is it “I always do whatever the other person wants.” It is “I do what brings glory to God. I do what brings others under the influence of the gospel. I do what leads to peace in the church.”

12. We bring glory to God when we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us (Rom. 15:7).

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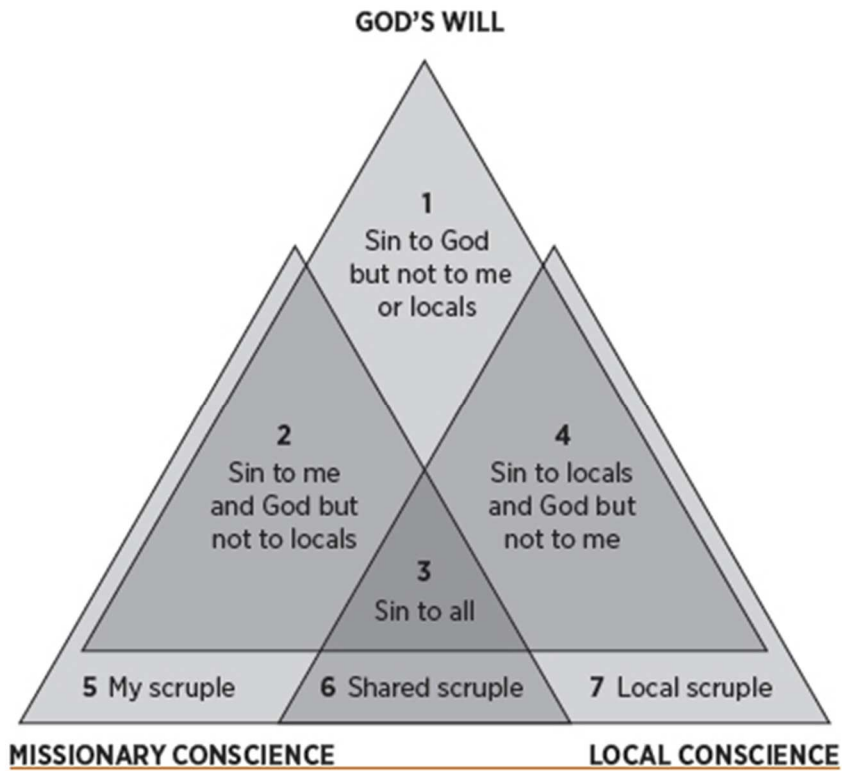


Figure 12. God's will, the missionary conscience, and the local conscience

1. God considers this a sin, but it doesn't show up on the conscience radar of either the missionary or the local person. Many missionaries in Southeast Asia and nearly all locals have no qualms about purchasing pirated videos, though the national laws clearly prohibit such purchases.
2. God and the missionary see these as sins, but not the local person. For example, most locals have never even considered that a thought could be a sin. And they view idolatry as a virtue and drunkenness as something to be laughed at, not mourned. God has definite commands about all three of these issues.
3. God, the missionary, and the local person all agree that these are wrong. We could list many examples in this category. Most Buddhist countries have strict moral rules against abortion, though abortions are still common. Both the missionary and the local would share convictions about this command and dozens of others, such as those against adultery and theft.
4. God and the local person agree that these are sins, but not the missionary. Commandments about stinginess and care of the elderly are much more important in the local conscience than the missionary's, and they rate high on God's list, too (see, e.g., Prov. 28: 22; John 19: 25– 27; Eph. 4: 28; 1 Tim. 5: 8).
5. Missionary scruples. Though we in the West might try to make a biblical case against littering, the Bible doesn't specifically address the issue. It sure doesn't show up on the conscience radar of most people in the majority world.
6. Scruples that both the missionary and the local person share. Many missionaries in Asia have consciences that don't allow them to consume alcohol, even though God's Word doesn't automatically condemn it as sin (Deut. 14: 26). Most Buddhists in Asia share this rule, even though most of them commonly break it.
7. Local scruples. Every culture has its "sins" that God would not consider sins. In some tribes where I work, they consider it incest for two people with the same last name (clan name) to marry, even if they are not at all related. They also embrace many food taboos and other superstitions that do not bother Western missionaries and do not appear in Scripture.