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THE ESSENTIAL MORALITY OF IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF  
THE CONSCIENCE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

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by  
James Ferguson Mong

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**APPROVAL SHEET**

THE ESSENTIAL MORALITY OF IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF  
THE CONSCIENCE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

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To my Redeemer, Jesus Christ: you continue to be  
merciful to me, the sinner (Luke 18:13).

To my wife, Susannah: one of my greatest joys is living  
on mission with you (Prov 12:4; 1 Cor 3:9).

To my children, Selina, Ryle, O'Shea, Keanan, Eliana, and Dane: you make  
me more and more amazed at the good gifts of God (Ps 127).

To my parents, Bill and Gloria Mong: any gladness  
is a fruit of your prayers (Prov 10:1).

To my parents-in-law, Bart and Lorraine Bryant: your joyful sacrifice  
shines brightly for Jesus Christ (2 Cor 12:15; Phil 2:15).

“Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, for the sake  
of your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps 115:1 ESV).

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## PREFACE

In God's wisdom, he led me to Southern Seminary to pursue further research under a gifted counselor, professor, and friend, Dr. Jeremy Pierre. I am thankful for Dr. Pierre's high and sometimes daunting expectations for this project. I am also thankful for God's raising up Southern Seminary to be an encouraging and supportive environment for practical research for the glory of Jesus Christ.

Jim Mong

Ann Arbor, Michigan

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

“Who am I?” This self-directed question, one of the most basic questions of human existence, also tends to be one of the most difficult questions to answer. A person’s occupation, schooling, family, place of origin, abilities, and accomplishments may be significant factors in identity formation, yet they prove to be insufficient answers when considering the essential reality of a person’s core identity. Where can someone go to find a deeper answer to this vital question?<sup>1</sup> A person’s emotional and spiritual health, perceived purpose in life, and potential for intimacy in relationships all stem from his or her sense of self. Indeed, a person’s understanding of him- or herself impacts every aspect of one’s life, and personal flourishing only emerges from an accurate answer to this question. Therefore, a consideration of the proper source of identity is of utmost importance for both personal and societal well-being.

In pursuing an understanding of personal identity, one quickly moves into the realm of values and morality. The question “Who am I?” inevitably leads to the questions

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<sup>1</sup> Most considerations of Identity Theory in modern discourse restrict identity formation to mere social construction. However, the argument of this dissertation is that a focus limited on the socially constructed aspect of identity misses a vital point in identity formation and restricts identity theory to shallow considerations of identity. For an example of Identity Theory’s approach to identity, see Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stats, eds., *Identity Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). They write,

What does it mean to be who you are? An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person. . . . People possess multiple identities because they occupy multiple roles, are members of multiple groups, and claim multiple personal characteristics, yet the meanings of these identities are shared by members of society. Identity theory seeks to explain the specific meanings that individuals have for the multiple identities they claim. (3)

In contrast to Identity Theory, Dick Keyes argues that a Christian perspective is “that as humankind reflects God’s character, we thereby realize our own true character, identity, and individual selfhood. Ours is not a manufactured identity but an identity derived from our maker.” Dick Keyes, *Beyond Identity* (Zurich: Destinee Media, 1998), 32.

“Am I who I am supposed to be?” and “Am I good, worthy, and acceptable?” As philosopher Charles Taylor writes in his masterful book on the shaping of modern identity, “To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand to the good.”<sup>2</sup> Taylor is pointing to the essential link between morality and identity. This important connection between morality and identity in the human understanding of oneself converges in the conscience God has placed in each human soul. God designed the conscience as an internal witness to an individual’s relation “to the good”; therefore, the conscience is an essential element in the shaping of human identity and a flourishing life.<sup>3</sup> A thick association exists between identity, morality, and the internal workings of the human conscience.

### **Thesis**

This dissertation will focus on understanding the centrality of the human conscience for a recovery of accurate identity formation and human flourishing in our secular age. In each human heart, God has designed and placed the conscience as a testimony to both his covenantal-relational nature, his law, and the moral framework in the world. Four main activities in the human heart achieve God’s design for the conscience. First, the proper forming and conditioning of personal conscience occurs through a knowledge of the truths, standards, laws, and gospel promises of God’s Word. The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is necessary for an accurate understanding of

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27. Taylor elaborates, “To be adequate, any description of the self must acknowledge the extent to which human identity is deeply intertwined with our understanding of the good” (105).

<sup>3</sup> Herman Bavinck writes, “Morality, in other words, cannot be custom, but must be an idea, something that does not just exist but *must be*; something that needs to be concretized in real life. This is the idea of the Good, the ethical ideal, the idea of the truly human or humane. Morality is thus considered more deeply than what is customarily human; it is normed by the *essence of the human*.” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 19.

morality and the formation of personal conscience.<sup>4</sup> Second, the conscience incites guilt or approval within people's hearts in light of their relationship to God and his laws.<sup>5</sup> Third, through the working of the Holy Spirit, the conscience raises self-conscious awareness of the pervasiveness and extent of sin, along with the need for forgiveness and acceptance with God, which is only possible through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross and union with him by faith. Fourth, the conscience of the follower of Christ, when maintained vis-à-vis the work of Jesus Christ and a new identity "in Christ", will produce a proper view and integration of self, love for God, and love for others in the human heart, all of which will lead to true human flourishing.

The conscience is a fundamental element of the nature of a person that God designed for the purpose of self-assessing moral acceptance more than merely judging individual actions. Modern evangelical ethics typically focus on act-centered approaches to ethical studies instead of virtue-based or agent-based approaches. Virtue-based approaches give focus to moral identity and personal formation.<sup>6</sup> A careful study of the biblical teaching on the conscience leads to an emphasis on virtue-based or agent-based approaches to ethics that focus on moral identity. The conscience serves to integrate a person around the good, shaping human identity, increasing human compassion, and, thereby, encouraging human flourishing. Therefore, counseling should involve exploration of the individual's conscience as it shapes human and moral identity. This task involves helping counselees understand the operation of the conscience in the formation of their identity. The counselee must learn to correctly respond to their

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<sup>4</sup> See pp. 13-17 of this dissertation.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to think of the law of God considering Jesus's teaching on the extent of the law. In Matt 6, Jesus directs the crowds around him to consider the centrality of the heart in obedience to God's law. See also the "Westminster Confession of Faith," chaps. 14-15, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications PCA Bookstore, 1990), 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> See Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul's Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 23-26.

conscience as it testifies to their moral position before God. Moreover, the only correct response to the conscience that leads to true human flourishing, or stated another way, to a properly working or “good” conscience, is through a divine formation of a new identity “in Christ.” This formation occurs through the gracious work of God by means of the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

## Significance

### **The Secular Shift Leading to Greater Confusion in Identity, Morality and the Conscience**

Despite the central importance of understanding personal identity, one of the greatest areas of growing confusion in the West is in this domain of ideas—the understanding of self, human identity, and identity formation. The disorientation in matters of the self has led to vastly increasing levels of psychological struggles, such as anxiety, depression, and various personality disorders that dominate the current context of Western culture.<sup>7</sup> A number of factors persist in the West that lead to the growing confusion in this area; however, each of these factors emerges from a foundational shift

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Sources of The Self*, 19. See Greg Easterbrook, *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse* (New York: Random House, 2003).

Also, theologian Michael Horton refers to the work of Robert Jay Lifton, “a psychiatrist and pioneer in brain research who observes that the source of many neuroses in society today is a nagging sense of guilt without knowing its source.” See Robert J. Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 101; Michael Horton, *Justification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 2:22.

Bruce Ashford comments on Sigmund Freud’s observation of this connection. Ashford writes, “Freud recognized that as belief in God faded, psychological neuroses multiplied. Instead of correcting this by pointing persons back to God, however, Freud sought to heal by teaching his patients to *accept* this loss of authority as a positive development.” Bruce Ashford, “The Jewish Intellectual who Predicted America’s Social Collapse,” *Gospel Coalition*, April 25, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-jewish-intellectual-who-predicted-americas-social-collapse>.

See also Charles Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 1-12.

in the “social construction of reality,”<sup>8</sup> the “social imaginary,”<sup>9</sup> or, more specifically, the novel “moral ecology”<sup>10</sup> found in contemporary Western culture.

The “secular age” has shifted Western culture from being “a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”<sup>11</sup> The casting off of God does not happen in a vacuum. The rejection of God has led to the rejection of a standard or framework of morality that is an essential aspect of life and reality. Moreover, this profound turn away from God and morality leads to an unmooring of the only anchor that provides stability in life and a holistic sense of identity.

Returning to Charles Taylor’s emphasis, proper identity formation will only proceed from a right understanding of one’s relation to morality, or “the good.” A proper view of morality and one’s moral agency are indispensable to an accurate understanding of identity. The difficulty for people in this secular age is that the new “moral ecology” has redefined and nearly extinguished any consistent understanding of “the good.” This redefinition of the good has an overwhelming impact on the view of self. As Wilfred McClay insightfully observes, there is a “strange persistence of guilt” in not meeting the standards of the good “even as the rich language formerly used to define it has withered and faded from discourse.”<sup>12</sup> Psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton describes this nagging sense of guilt as an anxiety that is “a vague but persistent kind of self-condemnation related to the

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23; Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3. The term, “social imaginary” will be adopted throughout this dissertation to refer to the average person’s understanding of metaphysical reality.

<sup>10</sup> David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 243-60; Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019), 3-13.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” *Hedgehog Review* 19 (Spring 2017): 1.

symbolic disharmonies I have described, a sense of having no outlet for loyalties and no symbolic structure for achievements. . . . Rather than being a feeling of evil or sinfulness, it takes the form of a nagging sense of unworthiness all the more troublesome for its lack of clear origin.”<sup>13</sup> This moral confusion has led to an existential confusion and internal fragmentation that worms itself into the depths of an individual’s self-conception.<sup>14</sup>

Social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt, directs us to the foundations of the moral confusion in his book *The Righteous Mind*. Haidt describes how the new morality embraces the disappearance of a moral framework. Radical individualism has succeeded in leading a “cultural shift away from general principles to individualistic moral reasoning.”<sup>15</sup> Haidt demonstrates this shift by identifying six basic psychological systems

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<sup>13</sup> Lifton, *The Protean Self*, 133. Horton interprets Lifton’s arguments theologically, suggesting that Lifton is pointing to the lack of an “external law to measure oneself by or external gospel through which one becomes re-scripted ‘in Christ.’” Horton, *Justification*, 2:22.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor points to the existential confusion of identity theory when he writes, In the light of our understanding of identity, the portrait of an agent free from all frameworks rather spells for us a person in the grip of an appalling identity crisis. Such a person wouldn’t know where he stood on issues of fundamental importance, would have no orientation in these issues whatever, wouldn’t be able to answer for himself on them. If one wants to add to the portrait by saying that the person doesn’t suffer this absence of frameworks as a lack, isn’t in other words in a crisis at all, then one rather has a picture of frightening dissociation. In practice, we should see such a person as deeply disturbed. He has gone way beyond the fringes of what we think as shallowness: people we judge as shallow do have a sense of what is incomparably important, only we think their commitments trivial, or merely conventional, or not deeply thought out or chosen. But a person without a framework altogether would be outside our space of interlocution; he wouldn’t have a stand in the space where the rest of us are. We would see this as pathological. (Taylor, *Sources of The Self*, 40-41)

See also Philip Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks: Illustrations of the Aesthetics of Authority* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2006). Rieff insightfully displays the impact of the erasure of sacred order on identity when he writes,

No one understands himself or anyone else. What can be understood is where one is in the vertical in authority and where others are, themselves always on the move. This understanding of where we are makes every psychology radically moral, as well as sociological. We only know where we are in relation to others and to those inviolate commands (however arbitrary we may now think them) that warrant our sense of self and of others. Wherever we find ourselves is what we are. Our own motions in sacred order are locatable once each of us has restored to himself the notion of sacred order. The basic restorative is to understand the purity and inviolate nature of the vertical in authority. Those arbitrary meanings warranted not by any man, but by the one God, are necessary if we are to find some safety in any world. That we do not now find safety in any of our worlds reflects our loss of the radically contemporaneous memory of sacred order and our present time and place in it. This book maintains that nothing about us is to be understood without the sense of where we are, only so can we know what we are. (13)

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 357.

or foundations to all moral reasoning.<sup>16</sup> Each system evaluates a moral question from a different vantage point. The following diagram (figure 1) illustrates the different systems at play in moral reasoning:

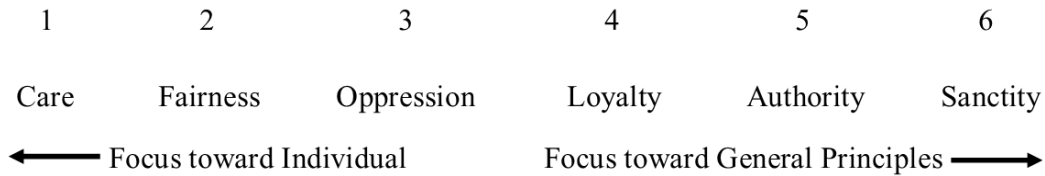


Figure 1. Haidt’s foundations for moral reasoning

The answer to a moral question or issue will be different depending on the category emphasized by an individual in a moral dilemma. For example, the response to the moral question “Is it right to have sex on the first date?” will differ according to which category someone emphasizes. Each category above addresses this question from a different vantage point, and each category will lead to a different answer to the moral question. The far-left category of “care” will consider the moral question from the standpoint of whether the individuals involved are being cared for or harmed in this situation. So, in this question, a person who focuses on the “care” category would most likely conclude that it is acceptable to have sex on a first date if both parties agree because that person believes no one is really being “harmed.” As a person works to the right of the diagram, he or she will address the moral question from different vantage points. The “fairness” category asks if the parties involved receive equal or similar benefit in the situation. The “oppression” category considers whether someone is being mistreated or oppressed in the situation. The first three categories on the left focus on the

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<sup>16</sup> Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 357. See also Glynn Harrison, *A Better Story: God, Sex and Human Flourishing* (London: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 29-39.



individuals in the moral situation—addressing questions such as “Is everyone safe?” or “Is everyone being treated fairly?”

The right side of the diagram considers the moral question (i.e., “Is it right to have sex on the first date?”) from the standpoint of a moral framework or moral space. The “loyalty” category considers the impact of the couple’s decision on the community and on each person’s future relationships. The “authority” category contemplates the moral question from a consideration of moral principles derived from innate laws in society (i.e., derived from God, religion, family or culture). The “sanctity” category considers the impact of this moral issue on the sacred principles that God designed for this world.

Psychiatrist Glynn Harrison summarizes Haidt’s observations on the Western moral situation when he writes,

Westerners with liberal social attitudes tend to give prominence to the individualistic perspectives that care about harm, favour the individual’s freedom to choose, and insist on fairness. . . . The rise of radical individualism has shifted the balance of Haidt’s six moral intuitions decisively to the left . . . . This cultural shift away from “general principles” to individualistic moral reasoning has been one of the greatest achievements of radical individualism over the past half-century.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, this shift has led to a subjective understanding of morality that has destabilized many aspects of life—including one’s understanding of self.

Alasdair MacIntyre designates this conventional ethic of the modern West as “emotivism.” In his classic work *After Virtue*, he writes that “emotivism rules the day . . . . [E]motivism is the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character.” In the emotivist view of morality, a universal “good” disappears. The statement “It is good not to steal your neighbor’s possessions” is the same as “It is good not to eat pistachio ice cream.” All

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<sup>17</sup> Harrison, *A Better Story*, 33-37.

ethical decisions become a matter of taste and preference. Moreover, as MacIntyre argues, we still have some of the verbiage of morality, but

what we possess are . . . the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance is derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality; we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. . . . [G]ood has become an indefinable property.<sup>18</sup>

Increasingly, over the last decade, this “indefinable” aspect of morality has diminished. Culture is progressively moving from a soft relativism to a strict moralism. The issue, however, is that the strict moralism of secularism is absent a solid framework. The foundation of the new moralism is the radical freedom of the individual. The new moralism stands in stark contrast to the biblical framework of morality—indeed, the new morality based on secular ideals is inharmonious with any type of morality based on a sacred creed.

If, as Charles Taylor suggests, “to know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand to the good,”<sup>19</sup> this ethical shift has led to the disappearance of the true “good” and has had a massive impact on the shaping of modern identity. In developing his argument, MacIntyre demonstrates an affinity to Taylor’s hypothesis. MacIntyre determines that in emotivism, the self becomes “criterionless, because the kind of *telos* in terms of which it once judged and acted is no longer thought to be credible.”<sup>20</sup> If there are no sacred moral criteria, the result is that there is no “self.”

Sociologist Philip Rieff argues toward this same conclusion in *Life among the Deathworks*. In this summation of his philosophical works, Rieff decries the collapse of the connection between “sacred order” and “social order” in secularity or

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<sup>18</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 33.

Postmodernism.<sup>21</sup> He contends that this profound disconnection will necessarily lead to unprecedented moral decline and a personal loss of identity.<sup>22</sup> In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, his prophetic warnings are being realized with precision. Increasingly, morality is becoming a shapeless ideal that molds to the prevailing desires of the dominant culture, and identity has become increasingly incoherent, disjointed, fragile, and meaningless.

Kenneth Gergen more specifically describes the consequence of the collapse of “sacred order” on the category of the self when he writes that “with postmodern consciousness the last few decades begins the erasure of the category of self.” He continues,

We realize increasingly that who and what we are is not [so] much the result of our “personal essence” . . . , but how we are constructed in various social groups. The initial stages of this consciousness result in a sense of the self as a social con artist manipulating images to achieve ends. As a category of “real self” continues to recede from view, however, one acquires a pastiche-like personality.<sup>23</sup>

Paul Vitz elucidates Gergen’s three-fold characterization of the “contemporary self”; the current state of the self is “polyvocal, plastic, and transient.” First, by “polyvocal,” Gergen is directing his readers to consider the increasing number of voices that address the self. “The voice of conscience . . . is drowned out by the many other voices that we have . . . . [T]his polyvocality comes from the variety of people we are dealing with, from

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<sup>21</sup> I am following Paul C. Vitz’s definition of postmodernism:

Although the term “postmodern” is hard to define, and although it contains different strands of thought, I will use it in a relatively straightforward and familiar way. By “postmodern” I mean a form of late modern or hypermodern thought and mentality. This postmodern mentality is characterized by a rejection of universal truth and objectivity and by a rejection of systematic, binding morality. In other words, for the postmodern, both truth and morality are true or good only for the individual. . . . [I]t rejects all the grand narratives, all the big stories that are supposed to describe how we live, or should live. (Paul C. Vitz and Susan M. Felch, eds., *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006], xii)

<sup>22</sup> Rieff, *My Life among the Deathworks*, 9-12. See also Bruce Ashford, “Jordan Peterson: High Priest for a Secular Age,” *Gospel Coalition*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/jordan-peterson-high-priest-secular-age/>.

<sup>23</sup> Vitz and Felch, *The Self*, xiii.

the media we are bombarded by, from the cacophony created by the channels of information.”<sup>24</sup> With authority diminished and denied, the self is limited to a formation by a conflation of various voices.

Second, the current self is “plastic.” Gergen points to the moldable nature of the self as people find themselves in different situations: “We live in a world of new groups that require not only that we accept their points of view and set up internal polyvocality, but also that we become a plastic person, with a kind of chameleon self. It is as though we are all morphing into politicians: as we try to look good to many different groups of people, we lose integrity.”<sup>25</sup>

Third, the self is “transient.” The self lacks coherence because one’s identity is tied to occupation, accomplishments, or other social ties. The self is socially constructed, and a socially constructed self is very fragile, unstable, and ever-changing. When the circumstances of someone’s life change, one’s identity or understanding of self can disintegrate. When someone denies the sacred moral framework, he or she reduces identity to a mere social construction. The only result will be an empty and ever-shifting self.

The logical outcome of the secular viewpoint is clear: there is no God; therefore, there is no morality. There is no morality; therefore, there is no “me.”<sup>26</sup> Few

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<sup>24</sup> Vitz and Felch, *The Self*, xiii.

<sup>25</sup> Vitz and Felch, *The Self*, xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca McLaughlin precisely describes the “illusion” of the category of self: “A consistent and honest secular viewpoint will recognize that the secular conclusions lead to no grounding for morality or identity. Few people will be willing to accept this view in their ‘everyday lives.’” Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 70.

MIT professor Alan Lightman states, “Our consciousness and our self-awareness create an illusion that we are made out of some special substance, that we have some kind of special ego-power, some ‘I-ness,’ some unique existence. But in fact, we are nothing but bones, tissues, gelatinous membranes, neurons, electrical impulses and chemicals. This is the nature of man in secular anthropology. There can be no other conclusion.” Alan Lightman, “Alan Lightman Shares His Worldview,” Veritas Forum (video), September 16, 2011, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=6Ny30CgaRmU>. This may seem refreshingly honest. But if science is all we have, our sense of self is just an illusion, and we have no moral agency; morality is no more than preference.

people would find the conclusion “there is no me” acceptable, yet they tolerate and even embrace the secular premises that necessarily lead to this conclusion. Many are willing to live with the inconsistency of maintaining a sense of identity alongside secular ideals. However, this inconsistent thinking will prove to be significantly inadequate in the long run, leading to great pain and a confusion in the personal sense of self.

### **Secular Shift Leading to “the Triumph of the Therapeutic”**

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor, argues that the move to a socially constructed self in the secular age emanates from a distinct shift from the premodern view that understood the self as “porous” to the modern secular view that understands the self as “buffered.” The “porous self” is open and vulnerable to outside influence in an “enchanted (Divine) cosmos.”<sup>27</sup> The “buffered self” is “insulated” and “closed” to any interaction with outside influence. The “buffered self” turns inward and lives in what Taylor refers to as an “immanent frame” that denies transcendent elements and influences.<sup>28</sup> As theologian Michael Horton states, “Transcendence has moved indoors. No longer inhabiting the highest places in the cosmos, the enchanted world came to occupy the deepest places of the self.”<sup>29</sup>

This “move indoors,” as Horton describes it, profoundly and detrimentally affects counseling and soul-care practices. Taylor writes that “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it ‘within’ human life.”<sup>30</sup> In all spheres of psychological care, this transition

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<sup>27</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> Horton, *Justification*, 2:20.

<sup>30</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

has been evidenced by the dramatic shift to a therapeutic, individualistic, internalized, and self-focused philosophy and practice, or what Philip Rieff has described as “the Triumph of the Therapeutic.”<sup>31</sup>

Many of the soul-pathologies and psychiatric disorders of the present generation either originate from, or are exacerbated by, the untethering of the person’s identity to the moral and spiritual framework designed by God. Yet, in the therapeutic ethos of the secular counseling model, the emphasis encourages a greater freedom from all moral frameworks in a move deeper into the self. Moral culpability has disappeared, so every problem becomes a disorder, and every lawbreaker is considered a victim. The main goal of the therapeutic approach is to lead all people to find an internal “positive self-regard” regardless of the outward reality of actions and life. This shift has resulted in profound loss for individuals and the community.<sup>32</sup>

It has become increasingly clear that people cannot establish a stable identity or experience human “fullness” or flourishing by only looking “within.” The inherent problems of the therapeutic approach are becoming more and more evident in the current Western context. Although many in the fields of psychology and counseling have denied the possibility of sin and guilt, McClay’s insightful cultural observation remains; there is a “strange persistence of guilt” that plagues individuals and Western society as a whole.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, as McClay writes, “The therapeutic view of guilt seems to offer the guilt-

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<sup>31</sup> Rieff, *The Triumphs of the Therapeutic*, 199.

<sup>32</sup> See Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn’s introduction to Philip Rieff’s *Triumph of the Therapeutic*: Rieff presents a set of troubling paradoxes: contemporary life holds to a therapeutic ethos more than any previous age while simultaneously removing all traditional sources of therapy; modern history brought a revolutionary expansion of individual freedom at an unfathomable cost, precisely, to the individual; newfound religiosity, as much as science, slammed shut the door on genuine faith. Reformers who sought “to liberate . . . the inner meaning of the good, the beautiful, and the true” ended up severing the historical bond between us and these goods, threatening to render us “damned for all time.” Without gravity or anchor, we speed aimlessly through the icy darkness of space. A Stygian fate. (Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, introduction to *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, by Philip Rieff, 40th anniversary ed. [Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006], xxiv)

<sup>33</sup> McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” 1.

ridden an avenue of escape from its powers by redefining guilt as the result of psychic forces that do not relate to anything morally consequential. But that has not turned out to be an entirely workable solution, since it is not so easy to banish guilt by denying its reality.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, people must pursue a “workable solution.” McClay leads in the right direction when he writes,

What is to be done? One conclusion seems unavoidable. Those who have viewed the obliteration of religion, and particularly of Judeo-Christian metaphysics, as the modern age’s signal act of human liberation need to reconsider their dogmatic assurance on that point. Indeed, the persistent problem of guilt may open up an entirely different basis for reconsidering the enduring claims of religion. Perhaps human progress cannot be sustained without religion, or something like it, and specifically without something very like the moral economy of sin and absolution that has hitherto been secured by the religious traditions of the West.<sup>35</sup>

### **Summary of Research: Charting the Moral Terrain**

If the response to the “strange persistence of guilt” is, as McClay argues, a reconsideration of the “Judeo-Christian metaphysic,”<sup>36</sup> clarity on the framework of this metaphysic is essential. One may be tempted to respond to the confusion of secularism and postmodernism by “turning back the clock” and returning to the “moral ecology” of a traditional culture, such as the United States in the 1940s. Sadly, the Christian perspective is portrayed by many Christians as merely a return to the glory days of a morally structured society and worldview. However, the Christian task is precisely different, and it provides a unique response to the secular and therapeutic challenges which currently dominate the Western mindset.

In order to understand biblical morality, there must be a careful avoidance of oversimplifying the major moral frameworks. David Brooks, in *Road to Character*, describes two major moral frameworks that have dominated Western culture: moral

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<sup>34</sup> McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” 1.

<sup>35</sup> McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” 5.

<sup>36</sup> McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” 5.

realism and moral romanticism.<sup>37</sup> Moral romanticism is another term for Alistair MacIntyre's "emotivism" (described above). Brooks states that moral romanticism is the view that dominates the current social imaginary. By a rejection of moral sources and standards, moral romanticism necessarily leads to the therapeutic focus on self that we see in modern soul-care. I have outlined the influence of this dominant approach to morality in the preceding pages, and I will give further analysis in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

Moral realism, on the other hand, upholds an objective moral standard for all people. Moreover, moral realists predominantly hold that this standard is such that all people have fallen short of this standard. Brooks calls this view the "crooked timber school of humanity."<sup>38</sup> Moral realism places a tremendous emphasis on righteousness, sin, and human weakness. The clear connection to the biblical teaching on morality is evident. However, although Brooks does not take this step in *The Road to Character*, it is important to further differentiate two categories within moral realism. These two categories are distinguished by the way individuals address and amend moral deficiency within themselves. In this dissertation, I designate these two categories as a "ritual-moral ecology" and a "grace-moral ecology" (see figure 2).<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 244.

<sup>38</sup> Brooks, *The Road to Character*, 244.

<sup>39</sup> See Bavinck's distinction between "philosophical and theological ethics" in *Reformed Ethics*, 1:161, 169. See also Dirk van Keulen and John Bolt's introduction to Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Ethics*:

At the end of the section on classical Greek philosophy, for instance, Bavinck observes that many Scholastic theologians adopted Aristotelian thought in their ethics. According to Bavinck, "in itself there is no great objection to this." "We can profit," continues Bavinck, "from Aristotelian thought, and without doubt, in its essentials, Aristotle's *Ethics* is the best philosophical ethics available" because of its "agreement with Christian ethics that human morality involves developing all the gifts and powers given to us in harmonious agreement with our moral nature." Aristotle's "only error was to think that human beings could achieve this ideal in their own strength." (Dirk van Keulen and John Bolt, introduction to *Reformed Ethics*, 1:xxxviii)



Ritual-moral ecology<sup>40</sup>, contrary to the moral spirit of the age, correctly understands the importance of objective moral standards. However, the approach to correcting moral deficiency focuses only on the individual and his or her activity (often ritual behavior and obedience). In this moral ecology, the gravity of the moral deficiency is not fully realized, so the response focuses on virtues like personal religious devotion, altruism, and ethical living. As I will argue later in this dissertation, these responses will prove to be ineffective because the moral bankruptcy and self-focus of individuals does not disappear once it is recognized. There must be a powerful and transforming work of God that frees people from their self-focus and enables them to live out the primary biblical ethic of loving God and fellow humanity. This transformation only happens through a drastic change in identity.

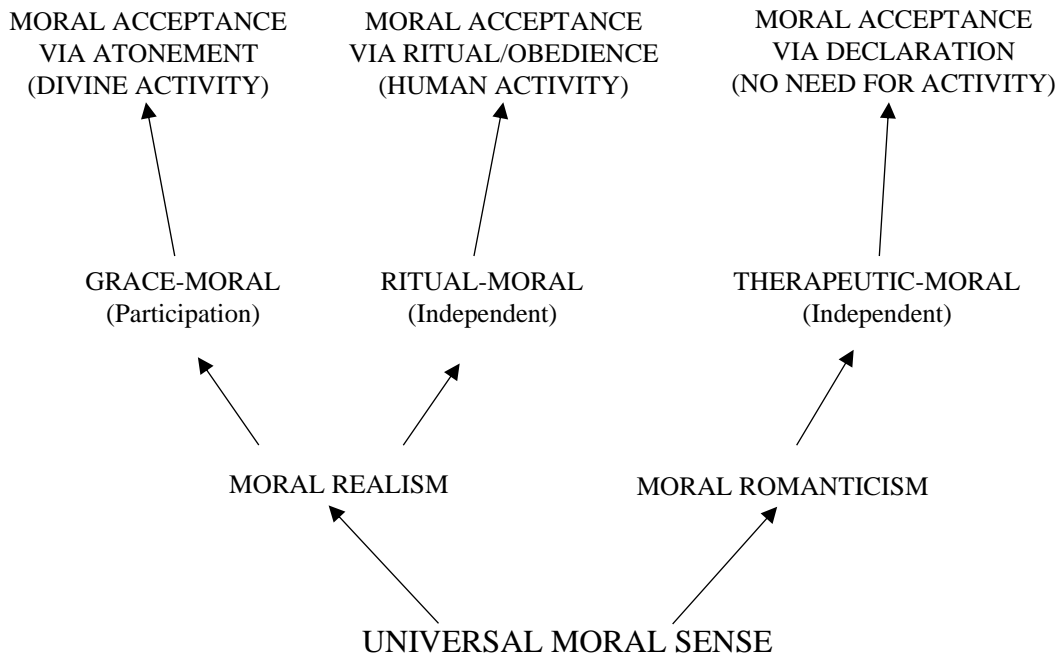


Figure 2. Terrain of moral ecologies

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<sup>40</sup> Although I am using the term “ritual,” it is not an inherently negative term. The emphasis here is that ritual is weak and ineffective when it is divorced from grace. Rituals like the sacraments and other religious practices are wonderful gifts from God when combined with faith in Jesus Christ.

As the apostle Paul writes, “I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).<sup>41</sup> The Christian’s identity is formed through a “relational encounter with another.”<sup>42</sup> In responding to secularism, Christians can link arms with individuals who hold to a ritual-moral ecology approach in order to argue for an objective moral framework; however, there must be a recognition that the gospel of Jesus Christ and an individual’s union with Christ are the only answers to the moral dilemma in the present Western context.<sup>43</sup>

The Bible teaches what I have termed a “grace-moral ecology.” Like “ritual-moral ecology,” this ecology contends that there is a universal moral framework that undergirds reality. However, a key distinction is that humanity is so morally bankrupt that the only response that effectively addresses the moral situation is a work of God on behalf of humanity. Therefore, this moral ecology centers on the objective atoning work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross. Jesus lived a perfect life of moral righteousness, and he died the death of a moral failure. Jesus carried out this mission in order to objectively and actually impute his righteousness via his obedience and substitutionary punishment to those who put their faith in him.<sup>44</sup> The biblical approach to the moral

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<sup>41</sup> Further, Macaskill writes,

The core claim of this book is that all talk of the Christian moral life must begin and end with Paul’s statement “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20), and must understand the work of the Holy Spirit rightly in relation to Christ’s presence. This assertion is the *sine qua non* of the Christian moral life, which is rendered void in its absence. This means that we can never talk about the moral activity of a Christian without always, in the same breath, talking about Jesus, because the gospel of our salvation is not that we become morally better versions of ourselves but that we come to inhabit and to manifest *his* moral identity. (Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 1)

<sup>42</sup> Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer writes, “The ability rightly to distinguish between law and gospel is, says Luther, ‘the highest art in Christendom.’” Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 44; quotation from Martin Luther, “The Distinction between the Law and the Gospel: A Sermon Preached on January 1, 1532,” trans. Willard L. Burce, *Concordia Journal* 18, no. 2 (1992): 153.

<sup>44</sup> Lesslie Newbigin points to the uniqueness of the Biblical message when he writes, Even when, as in many forms of Indian religion, there is a strong sense of a personal God to whom loving devotion is due, there is not the sharply etched and unforgettably real character that we recognize in the God of the Bible. No one who has been deeply immersed in the biblical narrative could ever again entirely escape from the presence of that One, God, so tender and yet so terrible, so

quandary of contemporary times will focus on the obedience and cross-work of Jesus Christ as the only remedy for morally bankrupt humanity and as the only way that one can find a solid affirmation and acceptance before God and others. Moreover, moral change in behavior and in relationships will flow and increase in an individual who has received the benefits of, focuses on, and finds their identity in, Jesus Christ and his atoning work.<sup>45</sup>

In *Making Sense of God*, Timothy Keller uses Langdon Gilkey's biographical account of his time in an internment compound in Shandong Province, China, to demonstrate the divergent paths of these two moral ecologies. Langdon Gilkey entered the compound as a convinced secularist who viewed human beings as having an inherent "rationality and goodness" and that religion was "merely a matter of personal taste, of temperament, essential only if someone wants it' and useless in achieving the broad concerns of the human race."<sup>46</sup> However, Gilkey discovered something very different during his time in the Shandong prison camp. His experience of suffering in community with the other prisoners exposed human beings as "self-interested and selfish," but, Keller writes, Gilkey observed that most prisoners "found the most ingenious ways to cloak those motives in moral or rational language."<sup>47</sup> Gilkey called this behavior "the

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passionate in his wrathful love and his loving wrath, forever calling on those who turn their backs on him, forever humbling himself in tender appeal, forever challenging his children to heights of utter purity, and finally accepting the shameful death of a condemned sinner in order to open for us the gate of glory. There is absolutely nothing in all the world's sacred scriptures that can be compared for a moment with this. (Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 54)

<sup>45</sup> Timothy Keller distinguishes the difference in moral ecologies:

If our gospel message even slightly resembles "you must believe and live right to be saved" or "God loves and accepts everyone just as they are," we will find our communication is not doing the identity-changing, heart-shaping transformative work. . . . The gospel is the good news that God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into a right relationship with him and eventually to destroy all the results of sin in the world. (Timothy Keller, *Center Church* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012], 31)

<sup>46</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Shantung Compound: The Story of Men and Women under Pressure* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 75, quoted in Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 251.

<sup>47</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 251.

essential intractability of the human animal,” and he said that it evidenced itself in all types of people in the compound, “the lower and less educated classes” as well as “the missionaries and priests in their midst.”<sup>48</sup> This excessive selfishness shook Gilkey to the core of his being and forced him to reconsider his understanding of humanity.

Keller continues,

Gilkey saw an intractable inclination to selfishness and cruelty in the human heart that simple appeals to moral ideals could neither dislodge nor even enable people to see in themselves. People need a “new heart.” . . .

In his account, Gilkey distinguishes one prisoner from all the others. This was Eric Liddel, the former Olympic star whose story is told in *Chariots of Fire*. . .

Gilkey wisely points out that “religion” all by itself does not necessarily produce the changed heart capable of moral selflessness. Often religion can make our self-centeredness worse, especially if it leads us to pride in our moral accomplishments. In Liddell we had a picture of what a human being could be if he was both humbled yet profoundly affirmed and filled with the knowledge of God’s unconditional love through undeserving grace.<sup>49</sup>

As is seen in Gilkey’s contact with the life of Eric Liddel, the only answer to the “intractable” selfishness and moral lack in the human heart is the new heart and new identity that God gives by faith in Jesus Christ. The conscience is a vital aspect of God’s gift of a new heart and new identity in that through it and the work of the Holy Spirit, the depth of human selfishness, sin, and brokenness is exposed. From this exposure, the conscience directs individuals to the only sufficient answer to the human dilemma—Jesus Christ, his work, his personal presence through the Spirit, and a new identity found “in Christ.”

### **Methodology**

Therefore, the answer to the subjectivism and radical individualism that plagues evangelicalism and secularism today is to return to the only reliable source of

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<sup>48</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 249.

<sup>49</sup> Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 251.

moral order in the world—the gospel story of the Word of the Creator God (grace-moral ecology). As Michael Williams argues in his review of Richard Lint’s monumental theological work, *The Fabric of Theology*, “The biblical bias is that the truth of the Word of God, and the fundamental truth about us, is to be found within the flow of the history found in the gospel story.”<sup>50</sup> Humanity lives in “moral space,” and being made in the “image of God,” we only know ourselves in light of our moral and relational standing with him.<sup>51</sup>

Any appeal to consider the moral framework of God and the essential morality of understanding one’s identity must ensure that the biblical understanding of morality is emphasized and not the “moralism” or “ritual-moral ecology” that has been overwhelmingly presented and modeled by many professing Christians as the Christian way. The prolonged influence of evangelical political groups such as the “religious right” and the “moral majority,” along with the practices of many Christians, have skewed and misrepresented the focus and goal of Christian living and ethics. A biblical call to return to a moral framework will emphasize the context of the “gospel story” of Scripture.

As theologian Kevin Vanhoozer argues, “Hearing and doing the gospel story, the law of life is altogether different from hearing and doing a moral law.”<sup>52</sup> As we approach the Bible, “what we need are reading practices that correspond to what the

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Williams, “Fabric of Theology (Book Review),” *Pro Rege* 23, no. 1 (September 1994): 34.

<sup>51</sup> As Vanhoozer writes, The biblical narratives depict human persons as in terms of their being towards God’s covenant. What matters is not merely outward behavior nor, on the other hand, merely the dispositions of one’s heart, but rather one’s whole-person response to the Word of God and the total pattern of one’s historical existence. The particular form that a person’s communication takes is the “spirit” of the individual. The human spirit is not some self-same unchanging substratum of the body so much as the underlying pattern of response that emerges in communicative action. (Kevin Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019], 179)

<sup>52</sup> Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 49.

Bible really is, and that means eating it organically—in its natural (literary) forms—rather than as the processed McNuggets of individual verses (and moral commands).”<sup>53</sup>

The whole story of Scripture focuses on the person and work of Jesus Christ on behalf of sinners, and it leads to a clear “grace-moral ecology” as the foundation of one’s life and new identity. A proper understanding of Scripture provides a beautiful and well-formed answer to the dilemmas of identity that dominate our present situation. As Harrison observes when talking about the truth of the Bible, “Its teaching is life for the world and the only true foundation of human flourishing.”<sup>54</sup>

### **Human Flourishing in the Moral Context**

The proper goal of soul-care and counseling practices is “human flourishing” in the real context of the presence and work of God for the glory of God.<sup>55</sup> To point to “human flourishing” is to consider what it looks like to have a life of wholeness, internal integration, vibrancy, and well-being under the gaze of God.<sup>56</sup> The Old Testament Scriptures promise and prophesy of “shalom,” and the New Testament Matthean description of Jesus Christ’s Sermon on the Mount concerning the “blessed” life expressly points to the prospect of individual and communal human flourishing only in God’s presence.

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<sup>53</sup> Vanhoozer emphasizes the importance of understanding the difference between morality and Christianity. He writes,

The church’s core is more than moral, and discipleship is about more than morality. The things that disciples say and do are right and Christlike not simply because they adhere to the law of God (Jesus often asks his disciples to do the *more* than moral) but because they fit with the drama of redemption. Disciples must do more than follow moral prescriptions; they must live out their citizenship of the gospel, embodying and enacting the mind of Christ. (Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers*, 156)

<sup>54</sup> Glynn Harrison, *Ego Trip: Rediscovering Grace in a Culture of Self-Esteem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), xvii.

<sup>55</sup> Jonathan Pennington argues that “the Bible is about human flourishing.” Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 290.

<sup>56</sup> Bavinck states that “Plato . . . called virtue the harmony or health of the soul.” Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:3.

To consider this existential question of human flourishing, one must presuppose an ordered ontology and moral framework for humanity. Similar to the arguments for the necessity of a moral framework for an understanding of self, people cannot know and experience true human flourishing unless they understand their relationship to the objective moral standard as it is internally communicated by the work of the conscience. Philosopher Oliver O'Donovan observed and emphasized this important connection in his significant work in the field of ethics. He writes, "One cannot speak of the flourishing of any kind without implicitly indicating a wider order (framework) which will determine what flourishing and frustration within that kind consist of."<sup>57</sup> Because human beings are psycho-somatic unities, people will only "flourish or frustrate" to the extent that they comply with the physical, moral, and spiritual frameworks that God has designed for humanity.

Few deny the existence and importance of the physical framework for the flourishing of the human body. The field of medicine and the focus on diet and exercise assume an essential framework for physical human flourishing. It is God's design of the moral and spiritual framework that is under attack by the dominant secular mindset of the age. And yet, as Taylor argues in *Sources of the Self*, secularism views a fundamental moral and spiritual framework as "nonsense from a bygone age."<sup>58</sup> However, it is "inescapable" to live without some kind of framework.<sup>59</sup> Human flourishing becomes unattainable, and life becomes meaningless and futile, without a sacred moral framework. It is only through an awareness of the state of one's conscience and a return to the objective "grace-moral ecology" of the Bible that individuals will flourish.

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<sup>57</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 35.

<sup>58</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 3.

### **Argument: Morality, Identity, and the Conscience**

The first step in counseling toward human flourishing is to establish both the obvious moral framework inherent in this world (“the good”) along with a person’s moral agency and relation to the good (work of the individual conscience). Moreover, in effective identity formation, following the articulation of the “real” or “true” moral framework, the second—and necessary—step will be to establish the unique “grace-moral ecology” given in the story of Scripture. The establishment of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture will provide an accurate understanding of the proper way one is to relate to the moral framework. This line of reasoning entails the central importance of the conscience in all of life and, specifically, in the important area of identity formation. Every individual possesses a conscience that testifies to both the moral framework of this world along with the way an individual relates to the moral framework.

Considering the dearth of attention given to the conscience and the blatant antagonism to a moral framework in much of modern soul-care, effective counseling will acknowledge and correct the therapeutic ethos that dominates people’s thinking and living. Pointing to the presence of the conscience, the counselor will emphasize the reality of morality, moral agency, and the only path to acceptance, forgiveness, integration, and wholeness. Proper identity formation, morality, and human flourishing will thrive or deteriorate according to the success or failure of a correct understanding of the personal conscience.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I will locate and define the conscience in the human heart and in natural human experience. Moreover, because influential psychological schools of thought have overshadowed and patently mis-defined the conscience, I will define the conscience and place it in the proper context of human experience. The clear teaching of Scripture is that the conscience is an essential element of the human person, an internal testimony of God and his law, a means of understanding one’s identity, and a primary source of internal integration leading to sincere love. A



healthy conscience plays a primary role in producing an outward focus and love in the human heart that leads to true human flourishing. I will support and explain each of these aspects of the conscience by the teaching of Scripture. Chapter 2 will also look at the limitations of the conscience (whether it is misinformed or misdirected) and at the different states of conscience as described in the Bible (good, bad, weak, seared, and hardened). The chapter will conclude with a summarizing definition of a healthy conscience.

The third chapter will consider the therapeutic overshadowing of the conscience in modern soul-care. The therapeutic ethos focuses on the priority of self, emphasizes authenticity, fixates on disorder instead of moral agency, and promotes “positive self-regard” at all costs. It is important to note how this therapeutic ethos has even permeated Christian soul-care practices. This chapter attempts to show the weaknesses and ineffectiveness of the therapeutic approaches to soul-care and counseling that dominate current practice.

The fourth chapter will outline the practice of addressing the conscience in soul-care and counseling. This outline will include the following foci: (1) counseling individuals toward both an awareness of the working of their conscience, and an attentiveness to the voice of the conscience, (2) counseling individuals toward a correct informing and training of their conscience, (3) counseling individuals toward a proper appeasement of the guilt of their conscience.

In this chapter, focus will be given to four common, yet faulty, attempts at appeasing the voice of conscience, and one legitimate and effective means to appeasing the voice of conscience. The common faulty attempts are mere admission of fault, altruism, ritual, victimhood, and distraction. I will describe and evaluate these methods of appeasement according to scriptural teaching and effectiveness in counseling. Then, I will consider the only legitimate and effective method at appeasing the guilt of conscience, which is through the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross and union

with him by faith. The connection a person has with the cross of Jesus Christ only comes through the way of the gospel as described in the Bible. This way of the gospel begins with, and continues in, repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Chapter 4 will consider these vital aspects of possessing and maintaining a healthy conscience.

The dissertation will conclude with a summary of the role of the conscience in identity formation and soul-care, and it will give guidance for focusing on the conscience and identity formation in counseling.

## CHAPTER 2

### LOCATING AND DEFINING THE CONSCIENCE

Clarification is in order. In many considerations of human personhood and experience, the conscience is given a peripheral mention at best. Even when the term “conscience” is mentioned, there is a wide range of meanings and understandings that lead to a “vague and chaotic” understanding of what is meant by its usage.<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis wrote that in attempts at understanding the conscience, we are “left with a maze—or, better, a simmering pot—of meanings.”<sup>2</sup> Still, however, even after years of secularization, once the work of the conscience is accurately described, “every man feels and knows what conscience means.”<sup>3</sup> The workings of conscience—guilt, conviction, affirmation, and approval—are realities that every person has experienced. This project argues that the conscience is an essential element of the human person that must be accurately informed and operational for a person to experience a proper sense of self and full human flourishing. Therefore, it is vital that a person locates and understands the conscience in his or her life and inner experience.

In this chapter, I will first examine the teaching of the Bible on the conscience. Then, proceeding from the study of the biblical focus on the conscience, I will consider

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Thielicke writes, “There is some ground for the complaint of Richard Rothe that linguistic usage in respect of the term ‘conscience’ is so vague and chaotic that we must declare the term to be scientifically useless and advise scholars to avoid it altogether; since its meaning cannot be fixed with precision, the term in fact does not say anything.” However, the beauty of Scriptural authority is that an important term like the conscience can be “fixed with precision.” Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Foundations*, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1966), 298.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Sibbes, *A Commentary upon the First Chapter of the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, vol. 3 of *Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 208.

five features of a “healthy conscience.” Only the teaching of the Bible clarifies and fully explains the natural human experience of the internal dynamic of the personal conscience.

### **The Bible and the Conscience**

Scripture assumes that every person possesses a conscience. Although the exact term is not used in the Old Testament, the idea and activity of the conscience is present. As will be explained later in this chapter, the Old Testament often refers to the conscience by using the more comprehensive term “heart.” The conscience is a perspective, or an aspect, of the broader workings of the heart. Moreover, because of the thick moral space of human experience, the conscience is a fundamental and central perspective of the heart.

An example of the term “heart” referring to the “conscience” in the Old Testament is when David cut off a corner of King Saul’s robe. David’s “heart struck him” (1 Sam 24:5). Or, stated another way, David experienced guilt in his conscience. Also, Job responds to his friends’ accusations of his guilt by saying, “I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days” (Job 27:6).<sup>4</sup> Job is referring to his clear conscience before God. Throughout the Old Testament, the conscience is described as an aspect of the heart that has an essential place in human inner experience.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture citations come from the English Standard Version.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Bavinck helpfully explains,

In the Old Testament, we find clear testimony concerning conscience: Joseph’s brothers acknowledge their guilt with respect to their brother (Gen. 42:21); after cutting off a corner of Saul’s robe, “David’s heart struck him” (1 Samuel 24:5). Abigail pleads with David to forgive her husband Nabal’s foolish actions so that David would “have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause” (1 Sam. 25:31); and, after he sinned in taking a census of the people, “David’s heart struck him” (2 Samuel 24:10). In 1 Kings 2:44 Solomon tells Shimei, “You know in your own heart [i.e., you are conscious of] all the harm that you did to David my father.” In his prayer dedicating the temple, Solomon asks God to attend to the pleas made by anyone or all the people, “each knowing the affliction of his own heart,” and forgive them (1 Kings 8:38). Similarly, the book of Job portrays the wicked as writhing in pain and filled with distress and anguish (Job 15:20-25); by contrast, Job clings to his integrity: “My lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter deceit. Far be it from me to say that you are right; till I die I will not put away my

The Greek term for “conscience” (*syneidesis*) is used thirty times in the New Testament. Twenty-two of these occurrences are in the writings of Paul. Along with Paul’s usage of the term, conscience is used five times in the book of Hebrews and three times by Peter.<sup>6</sup> New Testament usage points to the conscience as a God-given part of the human person that resides in the heart or soul of man. In Scripture, the conscience is understood as a testimony to the existence of God and his law. Furthermore, the conscience provides moral and religious self-awareness to an individual in light of these certain realities of God, his law, and the Redemptive story of Scripture. A properly working, or “healthy,” conscience will lead to psychic and affective integration and, therefore, sincere love for God and others.

Before considering the specific New Testament’s usage of conscience, it is important to understand the recent history of research in this area, especially in Pauline studies. Anthony Thiselton points to important emphases and reactions of twentieth-century scholars in this consideration of Paul’s usage of the term “conscience” (*syneidesis*). In 1911, H. J. Holtzmann “argued that Paul borrowed the term from Hellenism, where its use was broader than that of *conscience* in medieval and modern moral discourse.”<sup>7</sup> According to Holtzmann and other authors, such as Ceslas Spicq and Rudolph Bultmann, the term “had no precise equivalent in the Hebrew OT and had little

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integrity from me. I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days’ (Job 27:46). This is a locus classicus. We also take note of those psalms in which the poet declares his innocence (Pss. 17:3; 18:32) and those in which he is profoundly aware of his guilt (6:2-7; 32:4; 51). It is the heart that accuses: “Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others” (Eccles. 7:22); “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars” (Jer. 17:1). . . . Whether hearts are bold or timid is ascribed to guilty and unburdened consciences, respectively: “The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion” (Proverbs 28:1). Luther even translated “heart” as “conscience” in Joshua 14:7 (“I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh-barnea to spy out the land, and I brought him word again as it was in my heart”) and in Job 27:6 (“I hold fast my righteousness and will not let it go; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days”). (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, vol. 1, *Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019], 171-72)

<sup>6</sup> *Syneidesis* is also found in John 8:9 in some of the text traditions.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 641.

or no role in Judaism.”<sup>8</sup> Bultmann, a very influential theologian, defined the conscience as “man’s knowledge (‘consciousness’) of his conduct as his own” that “scrutinizes precisely this intent of one’s own mind. Conscience judges, i.e., it is a knowledge about one’s own conduct in respect to requirement.”<sup>9</sup> From the 1910s to the 1940s, authors like Holtzmann, Spicq, and Bultmann viewed Paul as “borrowing the term from Hellenism,”<sup>10</sup> and they focused on the similarities between Paul’s usage of the term and “Graeco-Roman and Stoic literature.”

In the 1950s and 1960s, a second phase of research developed through the writings of C. A. Pierce, J. N. Sevenster, and D. E. H. Whiteley. Pierce contended that the “Stoic origin of the Pauline *syneidesis* rests on quite insufficient evidence, and is inherently improbable.”<sup>11</sup> Sevenster and others thought that Pierce put forward good insights but overstated some of his argument. Sevenster contrasts Paul’s usage of conscience with Seneca and sees some overlap between the way Paul and Seneca use *syneidesis*. However, an important contrast between Paul and Seneca is that whereas Seneca considers the conscience as “God . . . is with you, is within you,”<sup>12</sup> Paul understood the conscience as being “fallible, provisional, subject to correction, and relative to a person’s moral stance.” This recognition of the fallibility of conscience is central in biblical teaching on the conscience, and it is an important aspect of understanding the internal dynamic of one’s personal conscience.

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<sup>8</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 641.

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 216, quoted in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 641.

<sup>10</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 641.

<sup>11</sup> C. E. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 13-20, quoted in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 641.

<sup>12</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 642.

Thiselton writes that Margaret Thrall transitioned the focus of research on Paul's use of conscience yet again when she gave "increasing attention to the variety of meanings of *syneidesis* found in different contexts of Paul." This transition led to an interpretation of *syneidesis* as primarily "consciousness" or "self-awareness." German scholar H. G. Eckstein argued that Paul's use of conscience in "1 Corinthians and Romans . . . includes awareness of, reflection on, and evaluation concerning, thought, will, decision, and resultant action."<sup>13</sup> Eckstein understood the "weak conscience" of 1 Corinthians 8 as a "lack of knowledge of oneself in relation to others." In examining the New Testament usage of the term "conscience," it is important to take into consideration this recent history of research as it is developed by these twentieth-century authors while searching the Scriptures for clarity on this important subject.

In the New Testament, there are six different settings in which the term conscience is used. Understanding the usage of conscience in these different New Testament settings will aid in forming a definition of the conscience. These different settings will be considered in the following order: Paul's testimony in the book of Acts, Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul's letters to the Corinthians, Paul's pastoral letters, the book of Hebrews, and Peter's letters. From an explanation and understanding of these passages, five main aspects of a conscience will emerge to form the biblical definition of the "healthy conscience."

### **Paul's Testimonies in the Book of Acts**

Both references to the conscience in the book of Acts occur when Paul is standing before a tribunal. In Acts 23, Paul is under the critical gaze of the chief priests and the Jewish council. He defends himself by appealing to his "good conscience" "before God." His speech is recorded in Acts 23:1. Paul says, "Brothers, I have lived my

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<sup>13</sup> H. G. Eckstein, *Der Begriff Syneidesis bei Paulus* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1983), 241, quoted in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 643.

life before God in all good conscience up to this day.” As David G. Peterson writes, “[Paul] means that his conscience was clear of any blame with regard to the conduct of his life . . . . He was not aware of any fault in responding to God’s direction for his ministry.”<sup>14</sup> In referencing his “good conscience,” Paul is arguing that as he looks at his personal identity, mission, and manner of living, he sees nothing worthy of blame. The testimony of conscience in his self-awareness approves of him and his actions.

In a similar situation, in Acts 24:16, Paul is standing on trial before Felix, the Roman governor. During his testimony, Paul says, “I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man.” The Greek word for “I always take pains” is *askw*. This can also be translated as “I exercise myself.”<sup>15</sup> Paul is testifying to giving focus in his life to having a self-awareness that is free of accusation and blame. Paul is not claiming sinlessness as he stands before Felix. In many other places in his writings, Paul is clear about the continual presence of sin in his and every believer’s heart. For example, in Romans 7, Paul writes, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:15-18). So, how does Paul, a sinner, “take pains to have a clear conscience”? The focus of his “taking pains” is not on his pursuit of obedience to God and righteous living, even though obedience and righteous living are lawful and essential pursuits of the follower of Christ. The primary way Paul pursues a clear conscience is by continually looking to the Son who was “sent in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin” (Rom 8:3). This Son, Jesus Christ, “condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law

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<sup>14</sup> David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 613.

<sup>15</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 444.



might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). Because Paul knows that sin always “dwells close at hand” (Rom 7:21), he must continually look to God and his means of atonement for strength, forgiveness, peace, and clarity of conscience. From this gospel awareness, Paul pursues obedience and a holy manner of living in his new identity as “In Christ.” Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:20 undergirds his pursuit of a clean conscience. He fundamentally understands himself as being connected to Jesus Christ. Martin Luther properly understood Paul’s emphasis when he argued, “But here Christ and my conscience must become one body so that nothing remains in my sight but Christ, crucified and risen.”<sup>16</sup> Further, in another place, Luther wrote, “On the basis of this happy exchange, however, the *theologia crucis* [i.e., theology of the cross] directs those who feel their sins not to good works but to Christ.”<sup>17</sup> The essential focus of one’s foundational identity is the new identity of being “in Christ” that flows from the work of Christ. The focus cannot be an individual’s activity or good works.

Paul’s “clear conscience” is not as a result of perfect and perpetual obedience. He possesses a “clear conscience” because by faith, the Spirit of Jesus Christ connects him to Jesus and his work. Therefore, now, “there is no condemnation” (Rom 8:1), and no one can bring any “charge” (Rom 8:33) against him. He strives, by the power of the Spirit, to live as he should, according to his calling. However, as all sinful human beings do, Paul fails often. So, by faith, he looks to the One who “redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13-14). Paul’s “clear

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<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, vol. 26 (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1963), 166, quoted in Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehman, vol. 31, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 233, quoted in Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 57.

conscience” before God and men can only proceed from the objective work of Jesus Christ on the cross. From the foundation of Paul’s new identity “in Christ” which emerges from Christ’s work, a new obedience will follow. This new obedience will be a comfort and support to the cleansed conscience, but not its ultimate basis. The Bible’s focus on the cross in the teaching on the conscience will be evident in the other settings considered in this dissertation.

Paul’s use of the term “conscience” in his two speeches in Acts emphasizes the importance of the conscience and its health for human flourishing. He takes “great pains” to keep it “clear,” or healthy. The fact that Paul “takes great pains to keep his conscience clear” implies the possibility of a conscience that is not clear but weighed down with accusation and blame. In his speeches in Acts, Paul assumes that the conscience is an essential and internal element of the human person that must be “kept” by the central work of Jesus Christ that unites individuals to him—forming a new identity. This new identity leads to a healthy view of self and an increased life of obedience and love.

### **Paul’s Letter to the Romans**

In his letter to the Romans, Paul connects the conscience to the internal moral framework present in each individual. Paul is writing to Jews who were boasting of their possession of God’s law. Paul argues that it is not the possession of the law of God that makes people righteous or right with God but a proper relation to God’s law. As Paul states his case to his Jewish readers, he clearly articulates the universal possession of God’s law as it is “written on the hearts” (Rom 2:15) of all of humankind. Paul sees an important connection between God’s law and the internal workings of the conscience. In Romans 2:14-16, Paul writes,

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 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 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

As Thomas Schreiner writes, “the conscience in Gentiles proves that they are keenly aware of moral norms that accord with the Mosaic law.”<sup>18</sup> The natural law of God interacts and communicates to each person’s conscience.

Sixteenth-century pastor Richard Sibbes taught that in these verses, Paul is describing the conscience as “God’s court within” each person; as “God’s court,” the conscience has in it “all that are in a court.” Romans 2 emphasizes the legal aspect of the work of conscience. Sibbes explained this legal aspect of the conscience as containing a register, witnesses, an accuser, a judge, and an executioner. The conscience as register “keeps diaries . . . . It sets down everything . . . . It is not forgotten, though we think it is . . . . There is a register that writes it down.” The conscience as witness provides a testimony of “this have I done, this I have not done.” The conscience as accuser either “accuseth or excuseth” a person’s thoughts or actions. The conscience as judge determines what is good, bad, “well done,” or “ill done.” Lastly, the conscience as executioner brings punishment. “The first punishment is within man always before he comes to hell. . . . There is a flash of hell presently after an ill act. . . . If the understanding apprehend dolorous things, then the heart smites, as David’s ‘heart smote him.’ (2 Sam 24:5). . . . The heart smites with grief for the present, and fear for the time to come.” Sibbes stated that God is the one who “set and planted in man this court of conscience, and it is God’s hall, as it were, where he keeps his first judgment . . . his assizes. And conscience doth all the parts. It registereth, it witnesseth, it accuseth, it judgeth, it executes, it doth all.”<sup>19</sup>

There must be a knowledge of a moral standard and an awareness of the individual’s relation to that standard for the conscience to act and react in the inner

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 123.

<sup>19</sup> Sibbes, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 210.

dynamics of an individual's heart. In Romans 2, the apostle Paul is pointing to the gift of moral awareness that God has placed in each heart. Although this understanding is contrary to modern considerations of human personhood and experience, a recognition of this moral awareness is necessary to clarify and explain normal human experience. As N. T. Wright explains,

Go to any school or playgroup where the children are old enough to talk to each other. Listen to what they are saying. Pretty soon one child will say to another, or perhaps to a teacher: "That's not *fair!*" You don't have to teach children about fairness and unfairness. A sense of justice comes with the kit of being human. We know about it, as we say, in our bones.<sup>20</sup>

Or, as R. C. Sproul taught,

People demonstrate by their actions, by what the philosophers call the *ius gentium* (the law of nations), that even if they have never seen the Ten Commandments, God has written his law on their hearts. Their behavior reveals that they know in their hearts the difference between right and wrong. Both Jew and Greek have consistently defied God, and they will be judged according to the light they have been given.<sup>21</sup>

A study of Romans 2 leads to an awareness of the conscience in the context of the universal moral framework of God's world. The purpose of the conscience is to lead the individual into a right relation to the objective law of God. Paul teaches that a vital part of natural human experience is the possession of an immediate sense of deity and of this deity's moral framework for individual's lives and the world as a whole.<sup>22</sup> This understanding of the content of one's conscience being formulated by the law of God is

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<sup>20</sup> N. T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2006), 4.

<sup>21</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 63.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Horton writes, "There is an intuitive, inward, and direct revelation in the human conscience, but it is an awareness of God's original relation to humanity in creation (the covenant of works), not a revelation of his free decision to have mercy on sinners (the covenant of grace)." Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 142.

directly opposed to the “modern moral conscience”<sup>23</sup> presented and “subjectified” in secular culture. In a traditional view of the conscience,

an appeal to a person’s conscience was simultaneously an appeal to the ethical resources of a wider institution within which this person was embedded, with its own rich history and developed moral attitudes that underpinned their conscientious judgment. Conscience, so understood, is a matter of shared ethical horizons rather than individually divergent ones.<sup>24</sup>

According to Scripture, this “shared ethical horizon” is the sacred moral framework of the living God. However, the new entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* presents a very individualized view of the conscience, stating that the conscience “is like an empty box that can be filled with any type of moral content.”<sup>25</sup> Tom O’Shea further explains that this secular idea of the conscience “takes its proper content to be solely determined by each person for themselves. The individual’s conscience can still be influenced by the social and historical context within which it is formed, but they themselves are the ultimate authority on what its binding verdicts are.”<sup>26</sup> This subjective and individualized view of the conscience is opposed to the clear teaching of Scripture on the design of the conscience as a testimony to one’s relation to the objective law of God.

In light of the sinfulness that pervades each person, the only way that this “court of conscience” will accurately give approval to an individual’s heart is through their union with Jesus Christ. Later in Romans, Paul speaks of the “no condemnation” (Rom 8:1) found in Jesus Christ. This concept is a constant theme of Paul’s ministry. It is evident in Paul’s speeches in Acts, and it is evident here as well. Echoing the apostle Paul’s emphasis, one of Richard Sibbes’s biographers records that for Sibbes, “the goal

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<sup>23</sup> Tom O’Shea, “Modern Moral Conscience,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 26, no. 4 (July 2018): 586.

<sup>24</sup> O’Shea, “Modern Moral Conscience,” 587.

<sup>25</sup> Alberto Guibilini, “Conscience,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Zalta (Winter 2012), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/davidson/>.

<sup>26</sup> Tom O’Shea, “Modern Moral Conscience,” 585.

of keeping a good conscience came not from perfect obedience, but from a sincere heart laboring to obey the gospel and keep the covenant with God.” Sibbes’s commentary on 2 Corinthians 5:11 clarifies what he meant by describing “keeping a conscience in this way.” Sibbes explains,

We must not look for perfection. For that makes the papists to teach that there may be doubting, because they look to false ground; but we must look to the ground in the covenant of grace, to grace itself, and not to the measure. Where there is truth and sincerity, there is the condition of the covenant of grace, and there is a ground for man to build his estate in grace on.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to see that the apostle Paul’s concern for those under his care to keep a good conscience was based on his single-minded focus on their union with Jesus Christ. Individuals are united to Christ and experience the grace of God through the cross-work of Jesus Christ. There is a way for an individual to stand in right relation to the perfect law of God; it is by the grace given through their new identity in Jesus Christ. Therefore, a Christian’s conscience should be “easily troubled for sin by the Spirit, easily pacified by the promises of grace, and easily restored to a gracious desire to please God in all things.”<sup>28</sup>

Later in Romans, Paul points to the “witness bearing” aspect of the conscience. He writes in Romans 9:1, “I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit.” The conscience testifies in the heart of man. In human experience, this event feels like an outside voice giving witness to one’s actions. J. I. Packer writes that “conscience, as distinct from our other powers of mind, is unique; it feels like a person detached from us, often speaking when we would rather not hear. We can decide whether to heed conscience, but we cannot decide whether or not it

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Dever, *Richard Sibbes: Early Puritanism in Late Elizabethan and Early Stuart England* (Atlanta: Mercer University Press, 2000), 197.

<sup>28</sup> Dever, *Richard Sibbes*, 199.

will speak; our experience is that it decides that for itself.”<sup>29</sup> The conscience witnesses to an individual’s identity and conduct before God and his law.

Lastly, in considering Paul’s use of the term “conscience” in Romans, Paul cites the conscience as a reason for obedience and submission to proper authority in Romans 13:5. Along with avoiding God’s wrath, one should submit to proper authority “for the sake of conscience.” Paul is pointing to the internal angst that follows a convicted conscience. This angst of conscience should serve as a motivation for proper focus and behavior in every aspect of an individual’s life.

From Paul’s use of “conscience” in his letter to the Romans, it is clear that the work of the conscience connects the objective law of God to the internal reality of an individual’s heart. The conscience serves as a witness to the soul; it must be maintained if it is to operate effectively.

### **Paul’s Corinthian Letters**

In Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, there are two extended sections (1 Cor 8:7-12; 10:25-29) where Paul is counseling the Corinthian believers on issues of conscience. The Corinthians disagreed about how to interact with the pagan community around them (see Rom 14:1-15:7).<sup>30</sup> Some people’s consciences would not allow them to eat meat offered to idols, while others saw no issue with the practice. A vital part of Paul’s counsel to them is his teaching on the different states of conscience that influence different choices and practices in the church. Those who considered it wrong to eat meat offered to idols possessed “weak consciences” (1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12). For Paul, this notion

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<sup>29</sup> J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2001), 96.

<sup>30</sup> Although the term “conscience” is not used in this passage, there are many themes that are consistent with Paul’s arguments in 1 Corinthians. For very practical instruction on relating to fellow Christians in matters of conscience, see Andrew David Naselli and J. D. Crowley, *Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 84-117.

means that a conscience can err because it is operating with an improper understanding of God's moral standards. As Herman Bavinck writes,

A weak conscience has been improved by faith, but, nonetheless, still depends on someone other than God and something other than his Word (Rom. 14:15). Consequently, it still considers some things unclean (1 Cor. 8:7; Rom. 14:14), is quickly saddened (Rom. 14:15), is easily offended (Rom. 14:15, 21; 1 Cor. 8:9, 12), and condemns others (1 Cor. 10:29; Rom. 14:3, 15).<sup>31</sup>

It seems that some in the Corinthian church continued “to associate food offered to idols with their former experience as idolaters, ‘and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled (1 Cor. 8:7).’”<sup>32</sup> While, on the other hand, “a strong conscience” is “established in the truth.” This kind of conscience is one that is established on the truth of the gospel—a proper view of law and grace dominate self-awareness.

Paul's interaction and counsel to the Corinthians brings further formation to the biblical definition of conscience. Although the conscience is a gift from God, it can be an “unreliable guide.”<sup>33</sup> A necessary part of a Christian's spiritual formation is the ongoing training and maintaining of the conscience toward “real truth” in God's “grace-moral ecology.”<sup>34</sup> This “grace-moral ecology” must be the paradigm for Christian self-awareness, character, and conduct.

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<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:211.

<sup>32</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 368.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher Ash, *Discovering the Joy of a Clear Conscience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2012), 30.

<sup>34</sup> See pp. 19-24 of this dissertation.



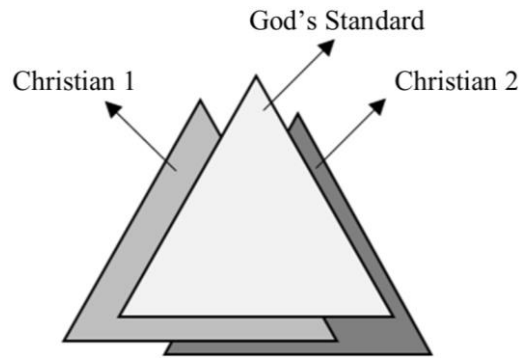


Figure 3. Human conscience and God's standards<sup>35</sup>

In figure 3 above, Andrew Naselli and J. D. Crowley helpfully illustrate how differences may develop between Christians in matters of conscience. This is a very important aspect of conscience to understand because it induces people toward the fundamental and necessary importance of adjusting, or “calibrating,” the conscience more and more toward the “grace-moral” principles of God. This “calibrating” takes place through proper intake of God’s gospel truth.

A central element of calibrating the conscience that is undervalued in many considerations of the conscience is that the conscience is not only calibrated according to the laws of God, but in the context of the redemption narrative of God. As is evident in considerations of Paul’s other writings, there must also be a calibration of the conscience in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ—primarily, the objective benefits of the cross of Jesus Christ and an individual’s new identity “in Christ.” An accurately working conscience—that is, one which is calibrated according to the Law of God—will always be in “accusing” mode if a consideration of the individual’s new identity and connection to Jesus is not evident. A focus on Jesus and what he “accomplished and applied”<sup>36</sup> must be central and prominent in a person’s self-awareness.

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<sup>35</sup> Naselli and Crowley, *Conscience*, 105.

<sup>36</sup> This phrase is taken from the title of John Murray’s excellent book; see John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955).

Another aspect of the conscience that comes to light in Paul's letters to the Corinthians is Paul's appeal to the Corinthians' consciences in 2 Corinthians 4:2 and 5:11. In 2 Corinthians 4:2, Paul writes that "we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." And, in 2 Corinthians 5:11, he writes, "Knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience."

There are a few important themes regarding the conscience found in these passages in 2 Corinthians. First, Paul gives the example of speaking or appealing to another person's conscience. This is an important aspect of any Word-based ministry. Second, as an argument, or case, for Paul's clear conscience, the apostle points to a minor function of the conscience as "assessing the actions of others."<sup>37</sup> This particular function is not a focus of the New Testament teaching on the conscience, but it is important to note. In the thick relational context of human experience, this secondary function of the conscience in "assessing the actions of others"<sup>38</sup> is also an aid in self-interpretation and understanding. Therefore, this function of the conscience serves in both assessing other people and their actions as well as a further aide in the primary role of the conscience as self-assessment.

### **Paul's Pastoral Letters**

Paul's pastoral letters contain some of the most important passages on the centrality of the conscience in self-awareness, relationships, and ministry. In 1 Timothy

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<sup>37</sup> V. P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (New York: AB, 1984), 219, quoted in Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 215.

<sup>38</sup> Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 215.

1, Paul summarizes his comprehensive philosophy of ministry. He “charges,” or commissions, Timothy to follow his example in ministry in giving primary focus to the increase of sincere love in the hearts of those under his care. This “love,” Paul writes, “issues,” or “flows,” “from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5). Paul continues later in the chapter by articulating the primary charge “entrusted” to Timothy and every other minister of the gospel—to “wage the good warfare, holding faith and a good conscience” because some have “rejected this” charge and “made shipwreck of their faith” (1 Tim 1:18-19).

In these passages, it is evident that the conscience is a vital aspect of Paul’s focus in maintaining his own soul as well as those under his care (1 Tim 4:16). For Paul, a “good conscience” is one of a triad of graces that increase love in a person’s heart and life. These three internal factors of human experience (“a pure heart and a good conscience, and a sincere faith”) are—to a certain degree—pleonastic phrases for Paul; they all emphasize the integration of heart that is necessary for sincere and accurate love for self, others, and God. An accurate understanding of a “good conscience” in this text will see the overlap between the three internal dynamics mentioned here by Paul.

The first of these graces is “purity of heart.” As Søren Kierkegaard explains, to have a “pure heart” is “to will one thing.”<sup>39</sup> Kierkegaard’s understanding of a “pure heart” as being single-minded is consistent with the focus of Scripture. Psalm 24:3-4 points to the one who has a pure heart as one who “does not lift up his soul to what is false, and does not swear deceitfully.” Deceitfulness is duplicitousness of heart. Further, James encourages the “double-minded” to “purify their hearts” (Jas 4:2).<sup>40</sup> The first of

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<sup>39</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart: Is to Will One Thing* (Philadelphia: Feather Trail Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>40</sup> Dan McCartney writes,

James may have had in mind people who were toying with acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah, or those who had done so but were clinging to their non-Christian habits. They were attracted to Jesus the Christ but were vacillating. This may explain James’s use in 1:8 of “double-minded,” referring to someone of a divided mind. A person of double mind is ultimately trying to serve two masters. In some ways, such “double-mindedness” is the essence of sin and unfaithfulness (compare the

Paul’s three central graces refers to a heart integrated in faith around God and his glory—the ultimate good.

Similarly, the third internal grace Paul points to is “sincere faith.” “Sincere faith” is an unhypocritical (Gk: *anhypokritos*) faith. As Philip Towner explains, “Within this context, ‘faith’ . . . describes Christian existence as a posture or state that consists of active believing in God and the apostolic gospel.”<sup>41</sup> An “unhypocritical” faith emphasizes the “integrity and authenticity” of an individual’s faith and heart trust. For a person to possess a “pure heart” and a “sincere faith,” that a person has moved from the fragmented and divided soul to a place of healthy internal integration “in Christ.”

Paul includes a “good conscience” in this important list because a “good conscience” is one in which the internal voice of accusation has been answered, and there is a peace and acceptance that rules in one’s self-awareness. The heart of man is not divided against itself in accusation and condemnation, but peace resides through the accepting and approving voice of the “good conscience.” A “good conscience,” or “integrated heart,” is not turned in against itself and is, thus, able to be a conduit of God’s love to others. These three graces form an integrated heart, and they have a natural flow in them that leads to increased love in one’s soul.

Paul emphasizes this dynamic of an integrated heart again in his letter to another one of his mentees, Titus. Paul writes that “to the pure, all things are pure, but to the defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure; but both their minds and their consciences are defiled. They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work” (Titus 1:15-16). Again, the duplicity of the fragmented heart is evident. People with such a heart may say they know the God of

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“double-hearted” of 1 chronicles 12:33; Psalm 12:2). One cannot live a life of integrity and faith if one is waffling on such a basic issue, and thus “doubters” are unstable. (Dan McCartney, *James*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], 91-92)

<sup>41</sup> Philip Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 116.

love, but their lives do not display sincere love. “They deny him by their works” (v. 16). Paul writes that “their consciences are defiled” (v. 15). The word “defiled” is contrasted with “purity” and is associated with “unbelief.” The “double-mindedness” of unbelief marks their thinking and living. As Andreas Köstenberger writes, “If a person’s heart is corrupted by sin and unbelief, their actions will predictably follow suit.”<sup>42</sup> The “defiled conscience” is a conscience corrupted by unrepentant sin and unbelief. This “defilement” will, as Köstenberger states, “predictably” lead to certain actions—namely, selfishness and lack of love.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the fundamental importance of a good conscience for one’s relationship to God and to others is evident in Paul’s counsel to younger pastors as they lead their churches.

The last key theme of the conscience in Paul’s letters is found near the end of Paul’s first letter to Timothy. Paul writes that there will be those who give in to the “deceitful spirits, teaching of demons, and insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” (1 Tim 4:1-2). This “searing” of conscience points to the possibility of a conscience becoming deadened and ineffective. When individuals continually mistreat and ignore their conscience, it can slowly stop working, become hardened, and become ineffective in God’s purposes of leading people to life and wholeness. This undesirable state of being does not have to be overt rebellion, as it seems to be with the “insincere liars” of Timothy’s context. Instead, it can happen slowly over time; “merely routinized, unthinking, habituated action” can slowly deaden the nerves of a soul’s moral compass.<sup>44</sup> Sadly, this deadening leads to what Paul calls the “shipwreck of the faith” (1 Tim 1:19). The term “searing” is a vivid illustration for the deadening of the proper sensitivity of

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<sup>42</sup> Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Commentary on 1-2 Timothy and Titus*, Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2017), 325.

<sup>43</sup> Köstenberger, *1-2 Timothy and Titus*, 325.

<sup>44</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 643.

conscience. In the searing of one's conscience, the individual becomes self-deceived "within their own moral evaluator."<sup>45</sup>

Medical doctor turned pastor-theologian D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wonderfully explains Paul's vivid illustration of the "seared conscience" when he writes of the antiquated medical practice of searing:

This no longer happens now that we have asepsis and various disinfectants, but in times past when an operation was performed on an animal or, indeed, on a person, the surgeon or vet would often avoid infection by heating an iron on fire, and then using the hot iron to seal up open blood vessels, arteries and veins – in this way, the wound was "seared". But, of course, at the same time, this hot iron also killed the nerves and rendered that part of the body insensitive, and it is this idea in particular that the Apostle has in mind here. Imagine a sensitive surface with nerves and nerve endings responsive to the slightest touch and feeling a sensation of pain. Then you bring this hot iron and seal off these nerve roots so that the area becomes hard and calloused, and you can even pinch it and feel nothing; stick a pin into it and you feel nothing.<sup>46</sup>

The apostle Paul is warning that some have "seared" or "calloused" their moral conscience in this way. The pain of guilt following disobedience or law-breaking has disappeared. They have persisted in sin and rebellion so long that their conscience has stopped communicating and warning them of the danger of immorality.

From the Pauline usage of "conscience" in his pastoral epistles, a few key themes on the conscience emerge. First, keeping a "good conscience" is central to Paul's philosophy of ministry and life of love. A good conscience is a necessary aspect of the integrated heart. Second, an individual's conscience exists in different states. One can have a good conscience, a defiled conscience, or a seared conscience. If the rest of the New Testament emphasis of the conscience is included in this consideration, one can also possess a weak or strong conscience, a bad conscience, or a tender conscience. There is some overlap in these ideas, but the important point is that a person's conscience exists in

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<sup>45</sup> George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 189.

<sup>46</sup> David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 14:1-17: Liberty of Conscience* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 180.

one of these states. Moreover, a person's conscience can change for the better or worse. It can become more sensitive or less sensitive. It can be trained or neglected to a person's benefit or detriment. There are disastrous effects to neglecting or rejecting the voice of conscience—even, sadly, as Paul writes, they may make a “shipwreck of their faith” (1 Tim 1:19).

### **The Book of Hebrews**

The author of Hebrews assumes the centrality of the conscience when he includes the definitive cleansing of conscience in his description of the benefits of the final sacrificial work of Jesus Christ. In the old arrangement of Old Testament worship, “gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (Heb 9:9). However, now that Christ has suffered and died, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14).

The Old Testament worshiper was surrounded by sacrifice. Throughout their lives, they were called to continue offering sacrifices. The writer of Hebrews argues that the perpetual sacrifices pointed to the inability of animal sacrifices to assuage the guilt of sin. A major purpose of these sacrifices was to point ahead to the one sacrifice that could “perfect the conscience” by establishing internal peace. The central sacrifice of Christ has, as Paul Ellingworth states, had “deeper effects, fitting the worshiper for freer and fuller access to God.”<sup>47</sup>

John Owen helpfully explains that these Old Testament sacrifices “were a part of the ‘mystical instruction’ which God granted the church in those days, directing them

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 458.

unto the one sacrifice and offering of Christ, typically representing it, and through faith applying the virtue and efficacy of it unto their consciences every day.”<sup>48</sup>

Owen continues,

There is a state of perfect peace with God to be attained under imperfect obedience. For it is charged as a weakness in the legal administrations, that they could not give such a peace where any sin remained; it is therefore to be found in the sacrifice of Christ, as is proved at large in the next chapter. “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God.”<sup>49</sup>

Normal Christian experience, after the final atonement of Christ’s sacrifice, furnishes people who trust in Christ with all they need to have a “perfect peace with God” even though they live with “imperfect obedience.” This “perfect peace” is the definitive and final purifying of conscience that the writer of Hebrews explains in these texts.

The author of Hebrews continues this focus on the peace of conscience that emanates from Christ’s atonement in Hebrews 10:1, 11-25. In this context, it is clear that the author of Hebrews uses “conscience” as an individual’s personal “divine orientation” and that the conscience testifies to the “whole person in relation to God (9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:18).”<sup>50</sup> The conscience is a gift from God that is intended to provide holistic self-assessment and an accurate understanding of the foundation of one’s identity.

From a broader reading of Scripture, an aspect of the design of the conscience is to render reliable judgment upon a person’s actions as right or wrong. However, the greater emphasis on the role of the conscience as it is taught and exemplified in the Bible is on its role in individuals’ holistic understanding of themselves. Through the obedience and suffering of Jesus Christ, people can possess a “perfected” conscience even though

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<sup>48</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 6, *Hebrews 8:1-10:39* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 250.

<sup>49</sup> Owen, *Hebrews 8:1-10:39*, 251.

<sup>50</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 325.



they live with “imperfect obedience”<sup>51</sup> because they live in union with Jesus Christ by faith. Individuals can live with an awareness of complete approval and acceptance before God because of Jesus’ work on their behalf or in their stead.

The remaining sin and failures of a follower of Jesus Christ must not define or shape an individual’s sense of self or identity. The Christ-follower is one who has experienced a change in position with God—her whole self is in proper relation to God and his law. As she continues to live in this broken world, with remaining sin in her heart, her position does not change. She is found “in Christ.” Moreover, her practice and lifestyle continue to grow in righteousness and holiness as she is molded by her new identity “in Christ” and by the truths of the good news of Jesus Christ at work in her inner experience.

This drastic change of one’s awareness of God’s “grace-moral ecology” leads to personal change as an individual lives out their new identity “in Christ.” The biblical approach to life leads to a life of continual repentance and faith before God. Repentance is a recognition of one’s sinfulness and moral deficiency. Faith is a recognition of the objective work of Jesus’s atonement, which has provided a person with perfect acceptance and approval before God. As Martin Luther wrote, “Its [i.e., the conscience’s] proper work is to accuse or to excuse, to cause one to stand accused or absolved, terrified or secure. Its purpose is not to do, but to speak about what has been done and what should be done, and this judgment makes us stand accused or saved before God. . . . The conscience does not stop at works, but moves on to judge the whole person on the basis of works.”<sup>52</sup> Through an individual’s union with Christ, an imperfect person can stand “absolved” and “secure” before the holy God. The important emphasis of Hebrews is that

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<sup>51</sup> Owen, *Hebrews 8:1-10:39*, 251.

<sup>52</sup> Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 21.

through the work of Jesus Christ, the cleansed conscience is the source of holistic self-assessment and a stable identity.

### **Peter and the Conscience**

Peter references the conscience two times in a short section in his first letter.

First, Peter writes,

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. (1 Pet 3:13-17)

Peter's challenge to his readers could be translated as follows: "Make a defense . . . with gentleness and reverence and so maintain a good conscience."<sup>53</sup> Here, Peter emphasizes a specific manner of living with non-Christians. He encourages a life of "gentleness and reverence." This manner of living will help an individual maintain a "good conscience." In slight contrast to the writer of Hebrews's emphasis on the holistic self-assessment of conscience, here, Peter emphasizes the effect of a person's manner of living on maintaining a good conscience. However, in the continuation of Peter's argument, the apostle quickly brings in the necessary context of the cross of Jesus when he points to their "good behavior *in Christ*." As Edmund Clowney writes, "Peter uses the phrase *in Christ* that is a keystone of Paul's teaching. Like Paul, Peter glories in the fact that Christ represented us in his death and resurrection."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, through Christ, there is "power for holy living" and an ongoing "clear conscience" that is maintained in light of the cross-work of Jesus. In Paul's first letter to Timothy, it is evident that a "good

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<sup>53</sup> Greg W. Forbes, *1 Peter*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Nashville: B & H, 2014), 117.

<sup>54</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Message of 1 Peter*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 153.

conscience” and “unhypocritical faith” lead to love as they are mutually formed in an individual’s heart. So, here according to Peter, mission and evangelism happens as a person eschews hypocrisy and lives with a good conscience before God and humanity.

Peter continues his argument in verse 18, and his emphasis on the cross is clear. He writes,

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit . . . . Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him. (1 Pet 3:18, 21-22)

Peter is describing baptism as a picture of the true cleansing that comes through the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. The baptismal waters do not just remove dirt from the body; they remove the “wrongdoing of the soul”—they lead to a clear and good conscience before God. As Wayne Grudem writes, “When God gives a sinner a clear conscience, that person has the assurance that every sin has been forgiven and that he or she stands in a right relationship with God.”<sup>55</sup> The cross of Jesus Christ provides a holistic identity shift that affects self-awareness, character, and action.

### **Biblical Definition of the Conscience**

From this study of the biblical teaching on the conscience, it is evident that the Bible provides clear direction and substantial material for the formation of a definition of the healthy conscience. According to the teaching of the Bible, the conscience is an aspect of the heart’s perception that testifies to an individual’s relationship to God and his law. Considering the story of redemption and the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible, the healthy conscience is an internal witness that directs a person outward to an objective

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<sup>55</sup> Wayne Grudem, *1 Peter*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 163.

position and standing before God through union with Jesus Christ. Therefore, even though the conscience addresses specific moral situations, the focus of the conscience is on the formation of holistic identity and self-awareness in an individual. Personal holiness and righteous living are concerns of the Bible; they are connected to the work of the conscience. However, the Bible teaches that authentic holiness and righteousness do not create the cleansed conscience. The cleansed conscience is founded on the individual's union with Jesus Christ by faith. Because the conscience can be healthy or unhealthy, good or bad, it is not an infallible witness or testimony to one's relationship to God and his law. It must be trained, maintained, and protected by the "grace-moral ecology" of God. Furthermore, a healthy conscience is an aspect of the integrated heart that will naturally lead to a life of love for God and others.

In the rest of this chapter, I will clarify and elucidate five aspects of the definition of the conscience gathered from the biblical material considered above. The conscience is (1) an essential element of the human person; (2) an aspect of human perception that testifies to one's relationship to God's law in light of God's gospel; (3) the primary instrument for the formation of holistic identity and self-awareness; (4) an aspect of the heart that must be trained, maintained, and protected; and (5) the source of the integrated heart that leads to sincere love.

### **The Conscience: An Essential Element of the Human Person**

The plausibility structure of Scripture directs readers toward an understanding of humankind as thoughtfully designed by God in his own image (Gen 1:26-31). This is unique to human existence. God did not create anything else in his image and likeness. What does it mean to be "created in the image and likeness of God"? "Created" points toward God's "design and plan." Every aspect of personhood (physical, psychological, and spiritual) can be traced back to the good design of God for humanity. Therefore, each aspect has a specific purpose and function. For example, God designed human beings

with a mouth. God designed the mouth to be an intake of food and drink as well as a source of communication. His design points to a purpose and leads to a function. The proper functioning of one's mouth is eating, drinking, and communicating. The end of the proper functioning of one's mouth leads to nourishment, enjoyment, and relationships. With the foundation of God's creative work, one can elaborate on the design, purpose, and function of every aspect of the human person.<sup>56</sup> Once I locate the conscience in the human person, I will consider its design, purpose, and function in human experience.

First, however, it is important to briefly consider what it means that man is created "in the image of God" because the conscience is a key aspect of man being in God's image. Man being made "in the image of God" points toward the truth that humans share specific characteristics and attributes with God. Because God is spirit (John 4:24), human imaging of God must be much deeper than just physical characteristics and attributes.<sup>57</sup> "Each human being in this world consists of a material body animated by an immaterial personal self."<sup>58</sup> The "image of God" leads toward a consideration of metaphysical and ontological realities that shape human purpose, activity, and experience.

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<sup>56</sup> According to Leslie Newbigin, there is a dichotomy between the impersonal and personal view of the universe. The argument for design and purpose in the conscience only makes sense in a personal universe. Newbigin writes,

I have spoken of the radical character of the switch from the classical worldview to that which was based on the biblical story. . . . There is a fundamental difference between a worldview which sees ultimate reality as in some sense personal, therefore to be known only in the way that we can have knowledge of another person, and the worldview which sees ultimate reality as impersonal—as (for example) does the Indian tradition. There is no principle more fundamental than either of these views and by which one could, therefore, adjudicate between them. . . . ultimate reality is personal, God's address to us is a word conveying his purpose and promise, a word which may be heard or ignored, obeyed or disobeyed. (Leslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 14)

<sup>57</sup> Also, J. Gresham Machen writes, "The 'image of God' cannot well refer to man's body, because God is spirit; it must therefore refer to man's soul. It is man's soul which is made in the image or likeness of God." J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 145.

<sup>58</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 74. See also Michael R. Emler, "Understanding the Influences on the Human Heart," *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 20, no. 2 (Winter 2002): 47-52.

This view of humankind is profoundly different from the secular and materialistic viewpoints that dominate the social imaginary of the West and lead to the therapeutic focus in soul-care. In his teaching on psychiatric disorders, David Powlison describes the limited and detrimental views of approaches to human personhood that miss the whole person:

The bio-medical approach understands the interplay between the body and social surroundings, but misses the person. . . . In Psychiatry [a second approach] there will be assertions of general psychological factors, expectancies and patterns of desire, but it will be non-specific. In contrast, biblical Christian faith has a profound engagement with the person and understands that life is mediated though the brain, through the heart, and through who you are as a person. . . . The Christian gaze is able to develop a picture that recognizes and considers the whole person. We live in a personal and interpersonal universe, and human beings are God-relational beings.<sup>59</sup>

Powlison illustrates these different approaches to understanding human personhood through what he calls “Nested Circles” (see figure 4 below).

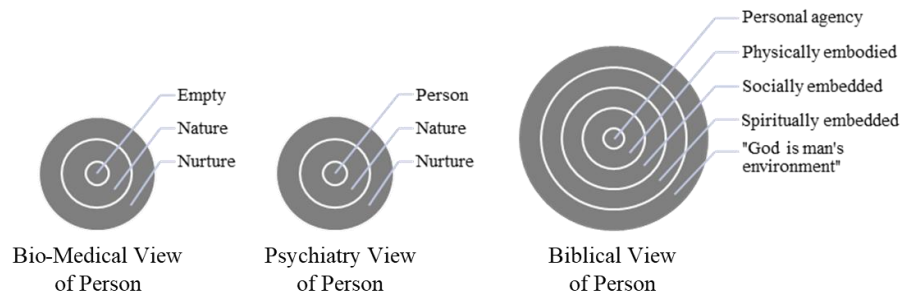


Figure 4. Powlison’s “Nested Circles” of personhood<sup>60</sup>

In order to properly locate and understand the conscience, the “Christian gaze” must be the foundation of the understanding of human personhood. The primary interaction of the personal conscience is between an individual’s “personal agency” and

<sup>59</sup> David Powlison, *Psychiatric Disorders: A Biblical Approach to Understanding Complex Problems* (Glenside, PA: Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation, 2015), 6-7.

<sup>60</sup> Powlison, *Psychiatric Disorders*, 6-7.

“God is man’s environment,” as seen in the diagram above. Man being created “in the image of God” and living in “God is man’s environment” is the impetus and foundation for metaphysical considerations of human personhood.

God is personal. Therefore, man is personal. God is Trinity. He is fundamentally relational. Therefore, man is relational. God is the primary reasoning being. Therefore, man possesses reason. God is moral. God’s law is binding on the universe. Therefore, man is a moral being and accountable to God’s law.<sup>61</sup> Each of these attributes are aspects of man’s “imageness.”<sup>62</sup> It is primarily the categories of relationality and morality where the conscience operates in the human person.

The conscience is placed in the human person and designed by God to testify to one’s relation to God’s fundamental morality. Being in the image of God, each person is given a conscience that witnesses to one’s moral agency before God, to God’s moral standards, and to one’s compliance (or lack of compliance) to God’s standards. The metaphysical realities of the conscience work in the realm of the “immaterial personal self.” The Bible refers to this realm of the person in different ways (e.g., mind, soul, spirit); but, one of the most common ways that the Bible refers to this aspect of man is by the term “heart.”<sup>63</sup> As John Frame writes, “In general, the heart is the ‘center’ of man’s

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<sup>61</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:38-39.

<sup>62</sup> As philosopher J. P. Moreland writes, “As image bearers, human beings have all those endowments necessary to re-present and be representative of God . . . and exhibit the relationality in which they were meant to live, such as endowments of reason, self-determination, moral action, personality and relational formation. In this sense, the image of God is straightforwardly ontological.” J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 4, quoted in Edgar Andrews, *What is Man? Adam, Alien or Ape?* (Nashville: Elm Hill, 2018), 254.

<sup>63</sup> See, e.g., Eccl 11:10; Matt 9:4; 15:8 Luke 12:34. Also, Jeremy Pierre writes, Different psychological theories, especially those considered intrapsychic, continue to represent people as having various, often opposing, forces operating within them. . . . Such statements properly recognize that human experience is complex and multifaceted, but they betray a dismissal of people’s simplicity. Humans are unified in their personhood because God is unified in his personhood. . . . Spirituality, thus is not a separate function, but expresses itself in the full breadth of psychological function. Scripture uses different anthropological terms—heart, soul, spirit, mind, and more—to describe a simple, singular human experience. The authors of Scripture use these different terms to describe human functioning in largely the same way, which implies that they refer to the same internal reality. (Jeremy Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life* [Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2016], 15)

being. It is what we are most fundamentally, as God sees us.”<sup>64</sup> The conscience resides in the “heart” of man and leads to a key emphasis on understanding the individual person “in relational terms” with the moral God.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Conscience in the Context of the Human Heart**

The previous section located the conscience in the “heart of man.” This section will consider the relationship between the dynamic functions of the heart (cognition, affection, and volition) and the operation of the conscience in the heart. Referring to man’s creation in the image of God, Jeremy Pierre writes,

God designed people theomorphically—meaning, the functions of the human heart are reflective of divine internal functions. Every human being on the green earth is made to image the same God, and therefore they share the same framework for inner experience. They operate according to the same design in different contexts and with different influencing factors. . . . No one should treat people as merely rational beings in need of instruction, nor as merely emotional beings in need of healing, nor as merely decision-makers who need the right motivation. The truth is broader than each of these . . . . [H]uman experience is three-dimensional.<sup>66</sup>

The dynamic interplay of the “cognitive, affective, and volitional” functions of the heart is key to understanding the human person. Pierre’s understanding of the dynamic heart is illustrated in figure 5 below.

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<sup>64</sup> John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 362.

<sup>65</sup> Susan Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), 14.

<sup>66</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 12.



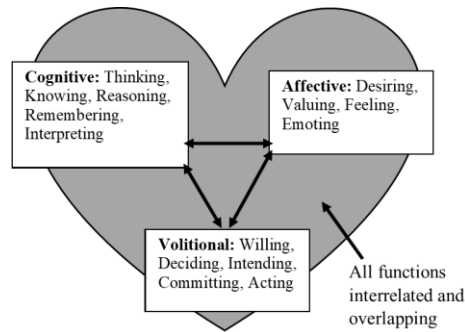


Figure 5. Pierre’s “Dynamic Heart” model<sup>67</sup>

As Pierre points out in this diagram, these three heart functions are “interrelated and overlapping.”<sup>68</sup> Pierre’s primary concern in counseling is that the counselor does not neglect one of these functions by inordinately emphasizing another.<sup>69</sup> Individuals are helped as they move toward a more unified heart, and a unified heart will be marked by correct thinking, right feeling, and appropriate choosing. Moreover, the primary means of this unification happens through faith.<sup>70</sup> A healthy heart is a heart unified by faith and focused on worship of the living God. The thoughts, desires, and choices of an individual are central in the act and life of worship. Worship is aligning these internal heart dynamics with God’s desires and plan for the individual’s life. This alignment occurs as one lives out their union with Jesus Christ. As Pierre writes,

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<sup>67</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 17.

<sup>68</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 17.

<sup>69</sup> Pierre writes,

In counseling and in other forms of personal ministry, the trajectory of care must delve deep into the dynamic heart instead of skim along the surface of the presenting issue. Counselors, pastors, and lay leaders can say more than the obvious thing. They can seek to understand others’ experience so that they may help them understand it for themselves. A theology of human experience allows counselors to do this because God designed the heart to respond like he does in thought, desire, and intention. Counseling should be directed to the breadth of the heart’s function—thinking, feeling, choosing. Emphasizing one aspect without due attention to the others will lead to a lopsided view of people and a lopsided methodology in handling them. A goal of the counselor should be to work toward the unification of these functions so that change is whole-hearted and not compartmentalized. (Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 27)

<sup>70</sup> Again, Pierre writes, “The unification of the heart is the unification of faith; the heart’s functions work in step with one another as faith in Christ has greater influence over their mutual operation.” Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 28.

“Cognitively, when people believe the testimony of God’s Word, they worship him. Affectively, when people value what God values, they worship him. Volitionally, when people submit their choices to God’s will, they worship him.”<sup>71</sup> This cognitive, affective, and volitional movement issues from the work of the Spirit of the Son as he “very specifically realizes the moral presence of Jesus in our lives.”<sup>72</sup> Union with Jesus Christ leads to moral change, integration of heart, and a “good conscience.”

The conscience is a key and primary perspective of the dynamic heart; therefore, Pierre’s insights on the dynamic heart are very helpful in understanding the role of the conscience. The conscience is designed by God to be a built-in evaluator of, and an aide toward, a unified heart. The conscience is the God-given capacity for dynamic self-perception—in other words, a person’s ability to know and evaluate his own thoughts, desires, and intentions. As with all human capacities, the conscience is native to him, yet given from outside him. This helps explain the experience of the conscience’s operations as both an internal and external voice. A vital aspect of the heart’s dynamic perception, therefore, is its moral evaluation of itself. Thoughts, desires, and intentions are being constantly self-evaluated in a healthy conscience. This is a vital aspect of perceiving the world rightly and acting rightly in it. A correct understanding of the role of the conscience in the heart is an immense aid to personal change and to ministering and counseling others toward positive change. Human experience is complex. As Pierre writes,

God designed the human heart to be both varied and varying, and he delights in his craftsmanship. By varied, I mean that human hearts function with a complex spectrum of thoughts, feelings, and choices that flow seamlessly together. By

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<sup>71</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 22.

<sup>72</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 41.

varying, I mean that this spectrum bends, adapts, expands, contracts, vacillates, turns—always dynamically responding to everything around it.<sup>73</sup>

The “varied and varying” thoughts, feelings, and choices of the heart confirm the complexity of inner human experience. One dominant aspect of this complex inner experience of the heart is the uniquely human ability of moral self-awareness and self-assessment in the inescapable context of a relationship with God and his law. This aspect of the dynamic heart is the work of the conscience.

Like the heart as whole, the conscience operates dynamically in cognitive, affective, and volitional ways. The cognition is active in the conscience in that God’s law is written and known in the heart of each person. The conscience testifies to a person’s relation and status with God and his law (Rom 2:14-16). The cognitive evaluation of the conscience immediately influences the affections as feelings of guilt or approval, and unworthiness or worthiness<sup>74</sup> result from the conscience’s evaluation of the person. And the conscience affects the will as it encourages or discourages actions and decisions based on its understanding of moral standards of good and bad, or right and wrong. Guilt or commendation are strong motivational factors in a person’s will and decision-making processes. These conscience dynamics are a subset of the dynamic workings of the heart and the influence of the Holy Spirit of Jesus. As John Frame describes, the conscience is a “perspective” of the heart. He writes, “There is no metaphysical difference between the heart and the conscience. The two are perspectives on one another. The heart is the center of human personality. The conscience is the heart in its function as a moral guide. As we make moral decisions as whole persons, we gain moral knowledge as whole persons.”<sup>75</sup>

Illustrating Frame’s point using Pierre’s dynamic heart model, the conscience could be understood as a cross-section, or transverse cut, of the dynamic heart because all

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<sup>73</sup> Pierre, *The Dynamic Heart in Daily Life*, 5.

<sup>74</sup> The psalmist writes, “My bones wasted away” (Ps 32:3).

<sup>75</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 364.

of the heart dynamics are active in the conscience (see figure 6 below). Moreover, because of the thick moral space of reality and human experience, the conscience is a major part of the workings of the dynamic heart. People live in a personal, relational, and moral environment; therefore, the heart as “moral guide,” or as conscience, is a dominant aspect of a person’s experience.

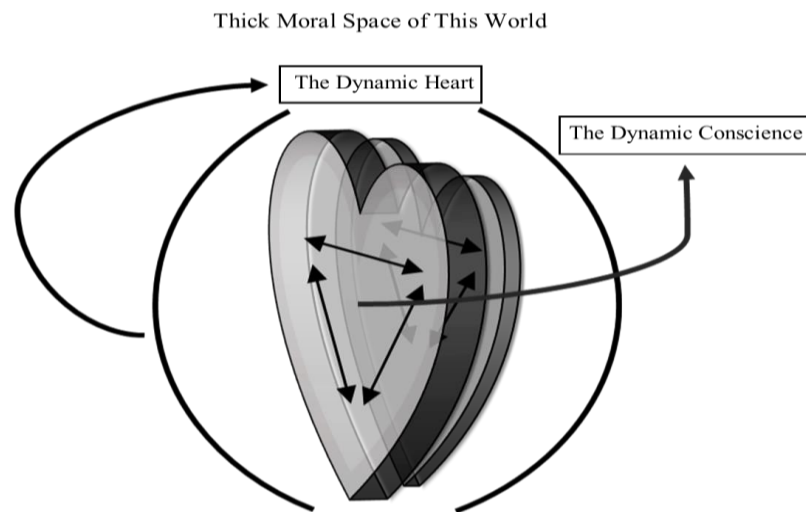


Figure 6. The dynamic conscience

Of course, this illustration simplifies a unified and complex dynamic within human experience that cannot always be neatly distinguished and divided. However, it is helpful to consider and give focus to the dynamic conscience because of the impact one’s relation to the moral God and to morality have on identity, self-awareness, and relationships (with God and fellow human beings). In the drastically changing moral landscape of the contemporary West, the conscience testifies to a different moral framework that will lead to true human flourishing.

The conscience, then, is like a “radio receiver” of the dynamic heart, “picking up transmissions from the seat of justice.”<sup>76</sup> The conscience is an internal voice that is intended to communicate objective realities of moral relation to the subjective inner dynamic of an individual’s heart. It is important to recognize that this view of the human person stands in direct contrast to the popular thinking of the present-day West which views man as autonomous and self-determined. Although chapter 3 of this dissertation will address this concern by looking at the therapeutic overshadowing of the conscience in modern soul-care practices, it is helpful, here, to briefly consider the current understanding of the conscience in order to place the conscience in the proper context of the dynamic inner-workings of the heart.

Much of current psychological philosophy attempts to focus completely on either the subjective or the objective realm of the human person to the exclusion of the other. On the one hand, there are those who focus on the objective concerns, emphasizing the centrality of physical disorders (e.g., faulty synapses, chemical imbalances). These objective issues need to be corrected in order to help the counselee move past psychological struggles. On the other hand, secularism leads some areas of psychology to focus on the subjective side, as if this sphere was completely divorced from objective reality. This approach limits the conscience to solely a subjective role in human experience. The guilt of conscience is addressed by “correcting” the socially constructed norms of the individual without any consideration of an objective standard of morality that has been transgressed.

The interaction between subjective and objective realities in an individual’s inner experience is crucial in understanding the work of the conscience; yet, since Descartes, Western culture has promoted the dualism of the “objective” and “subjective”

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<sup>76</sup> Timothy Keller, *Encounters with Jesus: Unexpected Answers to Life’s Biggest Questions* (New York: Dutton, 2013), 135.

elements of reality and experience that has led to many detrimental effects. One of these detrimental effects is a profound misunderstanding of the conscience. Lesslie Newbigin insightfully exposes the problem of this dualism when he writes,

These words, “objective and subjective,” and the dichotomy that they describe have become so integral to our ways of speaking that it is very hard to think in a way that is not controlled by them. A little reflection, of course, will show that all human knowing involves both a knowing human subject and something that is the object of the subject’s inquiry. These two poles, subject and object, constitute any knowing that takes place. But the method of Descartes has created a wide gulf between them, so that we have become accustomed to the idea that truth claims can be divided into those which communicate objective knowledge and those which express subjective experience.<sup>77</sup>

The Cartesian dualism of objective and subjective experience massively impacts counseling and soul-care practices today. The conscience, properly understood, corrects this dualism and its detrimental effects on the human soul. The conscience, and its work in the human heart, unites the objective standards and laws of God with the agency of the human being. The biblical teaching concerning the conscience leads to a permeation of objective truth in personal subjective experience. The objective position of the person in the moral world leads to a “unity of heart” and to peace in a person’s subjective experience.

Philosopher Oliver O’Donovan writes of the necessity of moral theory and ethics “triangulating” between the self, the world, and time.<sup>78</sup> Ethics without a consideration of the self and subjective human experience becomes “mere problem solving . . . without any sense of what it would mean for us, or for any possible ‘us,’ to act in that way. . . . This form of moral degeneration . . . is responsible for the various brands of ‘professional ethic,’ which envisage the agent simply as functionary, not as a

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<sup>77</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 37.

<sup>78</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 18. See also John Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2017).

human being with a conscience to guard and a life to live.”<sup>79</sup> When the self is ignored, the “person” is overshadowed by biology and politics. Ethics without a consideration of the world and the moral environment of human experience leads to relativism and ignores the reality that, as Newbigin writes, “there is a real world to be explored and coped with, and one can be right or wrong about it. Survival depends on being right. . . . We cannot retreat into total subjectivity . . . . [T]his collapse into relativism and subjectivism must in the end disable us for survival.”<sup>80</sup> Ethics without a reference to time fails “to concentrate upon what is fit to be done in this time and place” and leads to “idealism, which cannot bring reflection on actuality and possibility down from abstractions to the point where we actually find ourselves needing to act.”<sup>81</sup>

Each of these categories must be considered in order to have a working morality and identity in individual experience. However, O’Donovan states that the problem is that “moral disease” festers and harms individuals and society due to “two-legged,” or even “grotesque one-legged,” systems of morality—neglecting the other categories.

God has designed the conscience as an internal element of the person, working in the dynamic heart, to hold these three aspects of morality together. The objective moral framework of this world, the subjective human experience, and moral action in time all integrate in the workings of the human conscience. The conscience testifies to the thick moral space of human experience. Human beings were made to be in relation with the moral God of the universe. The conscience works in the subjective experience of the person by being an internal voice which is informed by authoritative instruction and action from the outside. Through union with Jesus Christ, the human agent inherits a

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<sup>79</sup> O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Newbigin, *Proper Confidence*, 35.

<sup>81</sup> O’Donovan, *Self, World, and Time*, 18.

moral identity that impacts thinking, behavior, and the self-understanding of the conscience.<sup>82</sup>

As Geerhardus Vos taught, “Man is disposed for communion with God . . . . [A]ll the capacities of his soul can act in a way that corresponds to their destiny only if they rest in God. This is the *nature* of man . . . . Man has to be in relation with God in everything he is and does.”<sup>83</sup> It is a person’s union with Jesus Christ that leads to a sincere worship of God and a united heart evident in a healthy conscience. This healthy conscience is an essential element of the human person that unites the objective and subjective elements of the human experience in relation to God, the greatest good.

### **The Conscience: A Testimony to One’s Relationship to God’s Law in Light of God’s Gospel**

Even though secularism has attempted to erase any knowledge of God and his law from the social imaginary, a persistent witness remains written on every human heart. This “writing of the law on the heart” is what Paul is arguing for in Romans 2. A major aspect of the work of a healthy conscience is its interaction with the law of god. This law is the “content by which the conscience evaluates our deeds.”<sup>84</sup> On this point, it is vitally important to see the balance of Scripture on the teaching of the conscience. Scripture teaches that the conscience is both informed and instructed by the moral law of God as well as conditioned by the social and relational context of human experience. As Paul Helm writes, “the conscience [is] a part of the *sensus divinitatis*, though affectable by upbringing and culture. So the conscience has an indelible aspect of the self as well as an aspect that is socially conditioned. It was not the source of nothing but privileged, pure

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<sup>82</sup> Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ*, 1-11.

<sup>83</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Anthropology*, trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Grand Rapids: Lexham Press, 2014), 13-14.

<sup>84</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:196.



moral intuitions, nor was it simply the purely sociological construct that it has tended to be later.”<sup>85</sup> Under this point of the definition of the conscience, the first aspect of this dichotomy will be considered. Later, under the fourth point of the definition, the social conditioning of conscience will be explored.

In the history of ethical thought, the *synteresis* is the law, and the *syndeisis* is the conscience.<sup>86</sup> Bavinck helpfully distinguishes between the *synteresis* and the *syndeisis* as follows:

If we are to speak correctly, then, this *synteresis* does not belong to the conscience, but precedes it, is its necessary presupposition, without which the conscience cannot judge. To say that it is not itself part of the conscience is to say that the law by which the conscience judges does not lie in the conscience itself but, as Romans 2:15 teaches, in the heart, in practical reason. Strictly speaking, the conscience has no content; the lawbook by which it judges resides in the heart. Furthermore, the heart itself did not produce the law, is not itself the law, but is only the tablet for that law and is passive.<sup>87</sup>

There is some disagreement concerning the connection and relationship between *synteresis* and *syndeisis*. Some scholars place the *synteresis* within the workings of the *syndeisis*. However, the diverse views lead to minimal differences in practice and teaching on the conscience. The conscience is both a testimony of God and his universal moral framework as well as an internal witness to an individual’s relation to God and his law.

Sociologist Christian Smith contends that the “most adequate” conception of human beings is within moral order. Smith writes, “Human culture is always moral order. Human cultures are everywhere moral orders. Human persons are nearly inescapably moral agents. Human actions are necessarily morally constituted and propelled practices.

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<sup>85</sup> Paul Helm, *Human Nature from Calvin to Edwards* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), xx.

<sup>86</sup> C. S. Lewis quotes Horace as writing “that which is called *synteresis*, or the general repository of moral principles.” Lewis, *Studies in Words*, 195.

<sup>87</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:196.

And human institutions are inevitably morally infused configurations of rules and resources. . . . There is nowhere a human can go to escape moral order.” Smith continues by defining moral as “an orientation toward understandings about what is right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy, just and unjust, that are not established by our own actual desires, decisions, or preferences but instead believed to exist apart from them, providing standards by which our desires, decisions, and preferences can themselves be judged.<sup>88</sup> A key foundation for Smith’s argument that “there is nowhere a human can go to escape moral order” is the human conscience placed in each human soul.<sup>89</sup>

A person’s conscience, when healthy, will testify to a one’s lack of conformity to the perfect standards of God’s law. As was pointed out earlier, this understanding of conscience complies with the “moral realism” approach to morality referred to by David Brooks.<sup>90</sup> However, because of the extent of the moral failure and deficiency in all of

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<sup>88</sup> Christian Smith, *Moral Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8. Also, John Frame writes, “But even unbelievers cannot escape the revelation of God in their own persons, any more than they can escape God’s revelation in the facts of creation external to them. God’s reality is stamped on every fact; it is found wherever we look, outward or inward.” John Frame, *Perspective on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 30.

<sup>89</sup> Also, Christopher Ash writes, “There is a moral order placed in the creation by the Creator, however imperfectly we perceive it and however much we need the grace of redemption to open our eyes to it in its fullness. The moral structure of the world and the core anthropology of the human person, although flawed and spoiled, yet bear this order of creation, to which we must attend if we are wise.” Christopher Ash, *Marriage for God: Making Your Marriage the Best It Can Be* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 64.

Oliver O’Donovan writes,

The order of things that God has made is there. It is objective, and mankind has a place within it. Christian ethics, therefore, has an objective reference because it is concerned with man’s life in accordance with this order. The summons to live in it is addressed to all mankind, because the good news that we may live in it is addressed to all mankind. Thus, Christian moral judgments in principle address every man. They are not something which the Christian has opted into and which he might as well, quite sensibly, have opted out of. They are founded on reality as God has given it. (Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 17)

Further, Christian Smith writes, “Moral animals are inescapably interested in and guided by normative cultural orders that specify what is good, right, true, beautiful, worthy, noble, and just in life, and what is not. To be a human person requires locating one’s life within a larger moral order by which to know who one is and how one ought to live.” Smith, *Moral Believing Animals*, 153.

<sup>90</sup> Brooks, *Road to Character*, 11. See also pp. 19-20 of this dissertation.

humanity, the healthy conscience only operates correctly in the “grace-moral ecology” found in the Bible, not the “ritual-moral ecology” that is the natural bent of every person and is clearly typified by most religiously minded people.

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians 3:24 that “the Law has become our tutor *to lead us* to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith” (NASB; emphasis added). The proper use of the law leads to a consideration of Christ’s obedience and death. The law directs non-Christians to their need for someone to provide objective obedience and satisfaction. The law directs Christians to a recognition that their ongoing right standing before God is through their union with Christ. John Stott’s commentary on this verse is helpful on this point. Stott writes, “No man has ever appreciated the gospel until the law has first revealed him to himself. It is only against the inky blackness of the night sky that the stars begin to appear, and it is only against the dark background of sin and judgment that the gospel shines forth.”<sup>91</sup>

Considering this aspect of the law’s purpose (i.e., driving individuals to see their need for Christ), the conscience is a vital aspect of God’s gift to humanity. The Holy Spirit uses the conviction of conscience to lead individuals to see their need for a new heart. The healthy conscience bears internal testimony of the depth of people’s selfishness and their breaking of God’s law. Through this work of exposure, the conscience, influenced by the Holy Spirit and the gospel of truth, leads individuals to the only answer to the human dilemma—the cross-work of Jesus Christ. The healthy conscience leads inward—to the subjective state of the individual—in order to lead outward—to the objective work of Jesus Christ. However, this process completes itself in “the obedience of faith” that is evident in Scripture’s view. A new heart and identity “in Christ” will produce new obedience and love. The next aspects of the biblical definition of conscience will address this important dynamic of faith and obedience and the

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<sup>91</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 92-93.

conscience. The conscience drives to Christ, and the conscience encourages a delight and obedience to the good law of God.

### **The Conscience: The Primary Instrument for the Formation of Holistic Identity and Self-Awareness**

The primary purpose of the conscience in human experience is to testify to the “whole person’s standing before God,”<sup>92</sup> not merely to the rightness or wrongness of particular actions. Scripture’s emphasis on the conscience as the primary instrument for the formation of identity is noticeably present in many of the New Testament passages that were considered above. When this biblical emphasis on the conscience is absent in Christian ethical teaching, a subtle form of moralism or legalism can creep into Christian living and practice. In support of the biblical teaching that the conscience is an essential element in identity formation, Stephen Chester quotes a sermon by Reformed theologian Heinrich Bullinger:

As Bullinger expresses it in preaching, “God’s commandments require the whole man, and a very heavenly (*plane divinam*) kind of perfectness; which whosoever performeth not, he is accursed and condemned by the law. Now no man doth fulfill that righteousness; therefore we are all accursed by the law. But this curse is taken away, and most absolute righteousness if freely bestowed on us, through Christ Jesus.” Not surprisingly it makes little sense in such a view to treat conscience simply as an ethical organ or ethical part of a person within a wider anthropological structure. The conscience is not that part of a person that renders reliable judgment upon whether a person’s actions are right or wrong. Rather the validity or invalidity of the judgments made by the conscience is indicative of the whole person’s standing before God.<sup>93</sup>

The conscience is the divinely given essential element of the human person that is designed to aide a person in identity formation, self-awareness, and self-assessment. The alternate focus on the conscience as the ethical organ that merely judges

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<sup>92</sup> Stephen J. Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers: Reconciling Old and New Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 127.

<sup>93</sup> Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers*, 127; quotation from Heinrich Bullinger, *Bullinger’s Decades: The Third Decade*, edited by Thomas Harding, Parker Society 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1851), 253.

individual actions rips the conscience from the necessary contexts of justification by faith alone and union with Jesus Christ that form the basis of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture.

As was explained earlier,<sup>94</sup> the important distinction to be made here is between the “ritual-moral ecology” and the “grace-moral ecology” found in the Bible. “Ecology” is a very fitting and helpful word in this consideration of the role of conscience in Christian living. “Ecology” points to an “environment and the interactions within that environment.”<sup>95</sup> It speaks to a whole realm or state of being—the position or place of a person. The apostle Paul, in Romans 5, points to an “ecology of grace” in which Christians live. He writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom 5:1-2). Because the conscience is intimately connected to the law of God, Christian teaching on the conscience often slips into a legal “ecology”—a legalistic mindset and approach to Christian living. Even when the foundation of grace and justification is established, it is easy for teaching on the conscience to wander into this unbiblical “ritual-moral ecology.”

Sinclair Ferguson’s lectures and book on the eighteenth-century Scottish Marrow Controversy, *The Whole Christ*, exposes the legalistic tendency that often infiltrates and affects Christian ethical teaching and practice. He warns, “Legalism is a much more subtle reality than we tend to assume.”<sup>96</sup> This legalistic tendency is very evident in the details of the specific controversy that Ferguson discusses in his book. Ferguson argues that “what troubled the Marrow Brethren, however, was their sense that

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<sup>94</sup> See p. 15 of this dissertation (see figure 2).

<sup>95</sup> “Ecology,” Dictionary.com, accessed December 15, 2019. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ecology?s=t>.

<sup>96</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 75.

a web of legalism had been woven into the hearts and minds of many of their fellow ministers.” Even though, “No minister in the Church of Scotland in the eighteenth century would have openly denied that salvation is by grace.” This subtle legalistic shift has a history and presence in every human heart, beginning with our first parents and their fall into sin.

Sadly, Christian teaching on the conscience often drifts into this legalistic realm because it primarily emphasizes the role of the conscience in individual and isolated actions and decisions. It operates with a profound misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of the law of God.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, the conscience is used merely as a tool to maintain correct and upright lifestyle choices. As Ferguson writes, “Legalism begins to manifest itself when we view God’s law as a contract with conditions to be fulfilled and not as the implications of a covenant graciously given to us.”<sup>98</sup>

The healthy conscience, as it is described in Scripture, is “erected on grace”<sup>99</sup> and centered on the cross-work of Jesus Christ and an individual’s true union with him. Justification in the Christian life is an “act [in time] of God’s free grace unto sinners”<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> The Westminster divines wrote,

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of god, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promise of it, in like manner, show them God’s approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man’s doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace. (“Westminster Confession of Faith,” chap. 19, in *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. [Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications PCA Bookstore, 1990], 88-91)

<sup>98</sup> Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 115.

<sup>99</sup> Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 190.

<sup>100</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 207.

that is emphatically and fully present at the beginning of the Christian life. As the writer of Hebrews states, the “blood of Christ” purifies an individual’s “conscience to serve the living God” (Heb 9:14). This purifying work of Christ’s blood frees the Christian to live and serve without the constant pestering and accusing voice of conscience. The Christian who possesses a clear conscience is a person whose whole life and identity is marked by the cross of Jesus Christ. As was pointed out in the teaching of the conscience in the book of Hebrews, John Owen viewed this aspect of the conscience as central to Christian living. By God’s amazing grace, “there is a state of perfect peace with God to be attained under imperfect obedience.”<sup>101</sup> The “divine orientation” of the conscience in an individual is one permeated with peace and acceptance before God because of the objective work of Jesus Christ.

Smith writes that “to be a human person, to possess an identity, to act with agency requires locating one’s life within the larger moral order by which, to know who one is and how one ought to live.”<sup>102</sup> Smith’s argument is very similar to the emphasis of Charles Taylor mentioned in chapter 1 of this dissertation.<sup>103</sup> Taylor writes, “To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand to the good.”<sup>104</sup> This understanding of identity is the focus of the biblical teaching on the conscience. The healthy conscience testifies to the individual’s position and standing before God “in Christ.” This status and identity of the individual is not affected by the ebb and flow of the individual’s obedience, religious devotion, or affections. The only “healthy conscience” is the conscience that is cleansed and purified by the blood of Jesus Christ. This “healthy

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<sup>101</sup> Owen, *Hebrews 8:1-10:39*, 251.

<sup>102</sup> Smith, *Moral Believing Animals*, 118.

<sup>103</sup> See pp. 8-14 of this dissertation.

<sup>104</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

conscience” leads to a stable identity because it finds its basis in an accomplished reality and not in the shifting experience and desires found within the human heart.

This view of identity formation stands in stark contrast to the subjective approach to identity formation that flows from a secular worldview. As was explained in chapter 1,<sup>105</sup> a secular worldview leads to the disappearance of the self and to the complete confusion of identity. A properly working conscience leads to a “sense of self that is durable”<sup>106</sup> because the healthy conscience is formed by the objective and accomplished work of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, a properly working conscience leads to a healthy “sense of worth” that is essential to identity because of the value of Christ’s supreme sacrifice applied to the individual. The biblical teaching on the healthy conscience is the only way to a durable identity partnered with true self-worth.

Herman Bavinck insightfully points to the way the “grace-moral ecology” taught in Scripture affects an understanding of one’s status and identity:

The moral and the good is not an ideal hovering far off in the distance from humanity and which we need to reach. The good is not the end goal of life, a destination for humans, but the foundation on which we stand and the environment within which we stand. . . . Holiness is a gift; otherwise we shall never have it. But we receive it now, at once, through justifying faith in Christ. For this reason, moral virtue (holiness, the image of God) is *one*, a seamless garment, which cannot be reached and obtained in piecemeal fashion. Whoever has moral virtue has it wholly; whoever lacks it in part lacks it completely. . . . The moral good, therefore, is not a purpose or ideal to be obtained through striving and exertion; it is a gift, a condition of being, a state.<sup>107</sup>

The healthy conscience testifies to a person being in this new “state” of moral good through Jesus Christ’s work of deliverance. As Paul writes, “He [Jesus] has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in

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<sup>105</sup> See pp. 9-19 of this dissertation.

<sup>106</sup> Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 118.

<sup>107</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics*, 1:39.



whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13-14). This is a drastic transfer of status and position that fundamentally affects an individual’s identity.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore, “only those who are in Christ have the beginnings of a healthy conscience.”<sup>109</sup> The conscience is not intended to move one inward into subjectivity, but it is to move one outward and upward to the redemption “accomplished and applied”<sup>110</sup> by the triune God. Chester’s insightful comments on Martin Luther’s theology of law and gospel are very helpful on this point: “Luther insists with Melancthon that ‘those who teach and understand the law correctly are the ones who lead the people to a realization of their sins and alarm them with the Law, and then comfort and cheer the dejected and terrified with the Gospel.’”<sup>111</sup>

In light of the secular denial of a sacred moral framework and an objective personal identity, the scriptural teaching on the conscience as the primary source of identity formation and self-awareness is crucial for human flourishing. The Cartesian shift that dominates the social imaginary of the Western world has led to an increased subjectivism that affects all realms of society, including the church. The modern emphasis has moved from the biblical “path inward” as “a step on the way upward” to a “reflexive turn” that dead ends in the self. The secular approach focuses on the inward path in isolation. Now, instead of, and “in contrast” to, the biblical approach, “the whole point of the reflexive turn is to achieve a quite self-sufficient certainty” apart from anything outside of one’s person.<sup>112</sup> “We find ourselves,” Taylor writes, “living at a time

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<sup>108</sup> The Westminster Shorter Catechism uses the term “estate.” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 367-74.

<sup>109</sup> Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers*, 128.

<sup>110</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Chester, *Reading Paul with the Reformers*, 125. Further, in his consideration of Luther’s view of the conscience, Chester writes, “There is an earthly, active righteousness of the law that produces good works but is not righteousness in the sight of God and does not justify, and there is a heavenly, passive righteousness that is not performed but is received by faith and creates a new person” (132).

<sup>112</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 156-57.

when the traditional categories for thinking of the self have made us strangers to ourselves and to the world around us.”<sup>113</sup> Taylor argues that without an external and objective element, identity and an understanding of self disappear. The conscience precisely responds to both the subjective and objective elements of an individual’s identity formation.

The biblical teaching on the conscience leads from subjective experience to objective realities. The New Testament directs individuals to their identity as being “in Christ.” The primary emphasis of Scripture is not that individuals need to have Christ in them, even though this is taught, but that individuals need to be found “in Christ.” As Sinclair Ferguson writes, “While there is proper duality to be maintained [we are “in Christ,” and, by the Spirit, Christ dwells “in us”], the fundamental dynamic is centrifugal rather than centripetal.”<sup>114</sup>

Scripture clearly speaks of the “fundamental dynamic” of Christian living as “centrifugal rather than centripetal.” This is exactly how the healthy conscience operates in the Christian life. The conscience is the element of the human person that proceeds inward in order to take this fundamental and “centrifugal” step outward—into Christ. The healthy conscience’s testimony of an individual’s acceptance before God through one’s union with Jesus Christ provides the path toward a stable identity and healthy self-awareness. As Richard Lints writes, “The irony of identity is that by looking away from ourselves we are more likely to discover our identity.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

<sup>114</sup> Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 49.

<sup>115</sup> Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and Its Inversion*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 11.

## **The Conscience: An Aspect of the Heart That Must Be Trained, Maintained, and Protected**

Another aspect of the conscience that becomes very clear in considering the teaching of Scripture is that an individual's conscience can fail in several ways and, therefore, must be trained, maintained, and protected. A person's conscience can be "bad," "evil," "dirty," "seared," or "misguided." The apostle Paul carefully and routinely considered the state of his conscience. In his speech in Acts, Paul testified to his "taking pains" to have a clear conscience (Acts 24:16). He focused on maintaining a self-awareness that is free of accusation, and he founded and ordered his training, maintenance, and protection of conscience on the clear "grace-moral ecology" of Scripture.

The foundation to the health of Paul's conscience was his union with Christ. From this foundation, Paul pursued a life of genuine repentance, faith, and new obedience. Often, Christian teaching on training, maintaining, and protecting one's conscience focuses on mere discipline and obedience in the Christian life. The teaching of Scripture, however, leads in a very different direction. Of course, discipline, obedience, and an awareness of God's law are beneficial goals and pursuits in Christian living; yet, they are not the primary ways of training, maintaining, and protecting one's conscience. As previously discussed, Martin Luther saw the importance of "Christ and my conscience" becoming "one body so that nothing remains in my sight but Christ, crucified and risen."<sup>116</sup> Those "who feel their sins" are not to look "to good works but to Christ."<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 56.

<sup>117</sup> Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 57. Also, Bo Giertz masterfully illustrated this biblical emphasis in his novel, *The Hammer of God*. He tells the story of one Swedish church's history in three different time periods. One of the main characters of Giertz's novel, a pastor, preaches a sermon on the nature of true Christianity. This pastor compares reform in the human heart to a new homeowner who begins to clear his ground for a garden. As he plows his field, he finds stones and removes them one by one. At first, he is able to toss them aside quite easily. However, the deeper he plows, the bigger the stones get and the harder they are to get out of his garden. This new homeowner is a thorough person, so he continues to plow and remove stones.

When a person's conscience is properly working, it will possess both an awareness of God's laws along with a conviction that one is completely unable to keep God's law due to the sinfulness of one's heart. The natural response to this conviction of conscience will be to re-double one's efforts and attempt to live in accordance with God's standards. However, this response will lead into one of two pitfalls. Either, a person will lessen the extent and internality of God's law, adopting a "ritual-moral ecology," and

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The preacher compares the little stones to the outward sins in one's life. It is easier to remove and change in these small ways. It is like throwing small stones over a fence. Sins like pride, a critical spirit, and self-focus are the larger stones that a person cannot just pick up and throw to the side. They are much more difficult to remove. The preacher continues his sermon by saying,

*Then one day, when a man is battling sin and is trying to clear the stones from the heart's field, sweating at the task yet hoping finally to get rid of the last ones so that he may really see the garden grow, his spade strikes solid rock. He digs and scrapes on every side; he tries again and again to budge the rock. Then the terrible realization dawns: It is stony ground through and through. When he has hauled away load after load of stone and dumped them outside the fence, he still has not succeeded in making a garden that can begin to bear fruit. . . . He has laid bare a ledge of granite, which never can support a living, fruit-bearing tree.*

*This is the rock foundation we know as the sinful corruption of our human nature, the sinful depravity that remains even after a man has separated himself from all his conscious sins. It is the stony ground that explains why a man is just as great a sinner before God after he has offered God the best he is able to give of obedience and commitment.*

The preacher then explains that there are three possible responses to this realization of sinful corruption. The first option is to just leave God in unbelief and dismiss the idea of sinfulness altogether. The second option is to

*make a show of clearing away the stones, as the Pharisees did. The stones that are visible to men may be put away. One becomes temperate, honest, industrious. One may take a bit of this soil of self-righteousness and plant therein such flowers as will be a sweet fragrance to one's own nostrils, such as kindness, helpfulness, support of missions, zealous activity for kingdom causes, witnessing and preaching, or perhaps extreme abstinence in respect to food and drink. And then one walks among these flowers and considers that the work is completed. But in the sight of God, the rock foundation remains, and on Judgment day the flowers have long since withered.*

The third option is to acknowledge the truth of God's Word and recognize the deep need of one's soul.

*Only such a one understands that he needs not only repentance, but salvation. But when he understands that, if he is to be saved at all, he must be saved by grace, that is a work of God. It was to that place God wanted to lead the soul, when he laid bare the rock foundation.*

The preacher concludes by directing his hearers to the only place of healing—the cross:  
*Outside of Jerusalem, there is a hill of yellow, naked stone, ugly and hard as a dead man's skull. Long ago men bored a socket in this rocky hill and planted a cross there, and on that cross they hanged the only one of our race who was righteous and had perfectly fulfilled the law.*

*The stone soil of our heart, the rock foundation of our corrupt nature, need not, therefore, be the basis for judgment upon us. It can be sprinkled with the blood of Jesus . . . . God marks the evil heart with the sign of the cross and makes a man righteous in Christ. . . . Man, as he is in himself, remains a sinner. But the guilt is atoned for, the curse is lifted, and he can come confidently as a child into the presence of God and, thankful for the wonder of redemption, begin to live to the Savior's glory. Then the fruits of faith begin to appear. A fertile soil now covers the rocky base. (Bo Giertz, *The Hammer of God* [Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 1960], 256-66)*

become proud in one's ability to live as one "should." Or, a person will be caught in a cycle of despair, with failed attempt after failed attempt at living according to God's standards.

Sadly, this response has impacted both Christians and non-Christians alike. It makes sense that non-Christians would think and live with this focus on their efforts since they do not understand or trust in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Yet, sadly, many Christians think and live in very similar ways. They may have initially come to see the beauty of Jesus and his cross-work for them, but they live as if the rest of their Christian life is dependent on them. The conscience does not primarily direct Christians back to God's law; it directs them to the law, their sinfulness, and the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ died for sinners, a "new and living way" (Heb 10:20) is opened for all of his followers by which they can be united to him. The way forward, the way to a clean conscience and a healthy self-awareness, is through repentance unto life, faith in the objective work of Jesus Christ, and the fruit of repentance and faith—a new obedience and love.

Therefore, the two key elements in training, maintaining, and protecting one's conscience will be repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ. As Rankin Wilbourne and Brian Gregor write, "The cross is more than an *ethic*, a way of doing things; it sets up a whole new way of being, fueled by a whole new way of seeing."<sup>118</sup> This whole new way is the glorious Christian path of repentance and faith as individuals live in union with Jesus Christ.

**Repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ: the foundation of a healthy conscience.** The Westminster divines were intent on emphasizing the positive nature of

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<sup>118</sup> Rankin Wilbourne and Brian Gregor, *The Cross before Me: Reimagining the Way to the Good Life* (Colorado Springs: David Cook, 2019), 20.

repentance when they described it as “repentance unto life.”<sup>119</sup> Followers of Christ can freely repent of their sins because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. This positive view of repentance led theologian and pastor C. John Miller to counsel people toward joy in the realization of the extent of their sinfulness. He often taught and wrote, “Cheer up, you’re far worse than you could ever imagine.”<sup>120</sup> At first, this statement seems misguided and unhelpful. Why would people experience joy in realizing that they are much worse than they ever realized? However, this way of thinking is the path to joy because it leads to the second part of his profound counsel: “And, cheer up, Jesus is a much greater Savior than you could ever imagine.”<sup>121</sup> Bo Giertz was right—our hearts are “solid granite all the way down.”<sup>122</sup> Only the blood of Jesus can soften the ground and make our hearts fruitful. Because of the “new and living way” of the cross of Jesus Christ, the only way forward to a clean conscience and healthy self-awareness is by repentance and faith.

In response to the “ritual-moral ecology” that infiltrated the Roman Catholic Church, Martin Luther emphasized that “the entire life of the Christian is one of repentance.”<sup>123</sup> Repentance not only marks the beginning of the Christian life, one’s conversion to Christ; it also marks every single phase of Christian living. Moreover, the conscience is a vital aspect of the Christian walk of repentance in that the healthy conscience testifies to a one’s awareness of the presence of sin and moral lack in one’s being. The conscience is a gift of God because this subjective awareness of the objective

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<sup>119</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 214.

<sup>120</sup> World Harvest Mission, *Gospel Identity: Discovering Who You Really Are* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>121</sup> World Harvest Mission, *Gospel Identity*, 1-2.

<sup>122</sup> Giertz, *The Hammer of God*, 267.

<sup>123</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Harold J. Grimm and Helmut T. Lehman, vol. 31, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 25, quoted in Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith*, 57.

reality of moral culpability is to lead to the objective and accomplished work of Jesus Christ.

The Westminster divines described repentance as

a saving grace, wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit and the Word of God, whereby, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, he so grieves for and hates his sins, as that he turns from them all to God, purposing and endeavoring constantly to walk with him in all ways of new obedience.<sup>124</sup>

This description is in line with the “grace-moral ecology” found in Scripture. God graciously works in people’s consciences to give them an accurate “sight and sense” of their sinfulness so that when they comprehend—or “apprehend”—God’s mercy as it is proclaimed in God’s Word, they cling to their only hope—the objective work of Jesus Christ. Moreover, from this foundation of the mercy of God in Christ, individuals then turn from their sins and endeavor after new obedience “in Christ.”

Therefore, the healthy Christian desires a conscience that continues to convict of sin and encourage repentance because such conviction does not lead to despair but to great hope in light of the objective work of Jesus Christ. This gospel process of the conscience, as taught in Scripture, leads to a greater awareness of one’s sinfulness and a focus on the cross of Jesus Christ. This is “repentance unto life!” Repentance and faith in Jesus Christ are necessarily connected in Christian living and in training, maintaining, and protecting one’s conscience. As John Murray wrote, “Christ’s blood is the laver of initial cleansing, but it is also the fountain to which the believer must continuously repair. It is at the cross of Christ that repentance has its beginning; it is at the cross of Christ that it must continue to pour out its heart in the tears of confession and contrition.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 214.

<sup>125</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 143.

Individuals train, maintain, and protect their conscience by immersing themselves in the grand story of redemption and the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible. The accusing voice of conscience must be addressed by the truth of Jesus Christ’s objective work in the stead of sinners. As David Powlison writes,

By nature and nurture, you and those you counsel have lie-darkened and lie-calloused hearts. . . . These lies are always untruths about God, ourselves, and others. . . . You, and those you counsel can stand in the truth. You and those you counsel can gird yourself with truth and turn from the lies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Putting on the belt of truth means depending every day on Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life.<sup>126</sup>

This central element of Christian living—repentance and faith—has been profoundly impacted by the therapeutic self-focus of Western culture. In order to maintain, train, and protect one’s conscience, a person must understand the proper path of repentance and faith.

**The fruit of new obedience: an encouragement to the healthy conscience.**

Moreover, it is from our “identity in the risen Christ”<sup>127</sup> that we will see the fruit of new obedience, which is an encouragement to a peaceful conscience. If repentance and faith is genuine, new obedience will follow. As Klyne Snodgrass writes, “The church needs to start emphasizing what the Reformers knew, that faith is participation with Christ, not thought about him, and no one can participate without acting.”<sup>128</sup> Here, an important distinction must be maintained. Obedience and growth in holiness do not increase a Christian’s standing with God; they confirm the reality of a Christian’s standing. Puritan John Colquhoun clarifies this very important distinction when he writes,

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<sup>126</sup> David Powlison, *Safe and Sound: Standing Firm in Spiritual Battles* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2019), 27-28.

<sup>127</sup> Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburg: Crown & Covenant, 2015), 71.

<sup>128</sup> Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are: A Christian Understanding of Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 165.



When a man is driven to acts of obedience by the dread of God's wrath revealed in the law, and not drawn to them, by the belief in His love revealed in the gospel; when he fears God because of His power and justice, and not because of His goodness; when he regards God more as an avenging Judge, than as a compassionate Friend and Father; and when he contemplates God rather as terrible in majesty than as infinite in grace and mercy, he shows that he is under the dominion, or at least under the prevalence of a legal spirit. . . . He shows that he is under the influence of this hateful temper . . . when his hope of divine mercy is raised by the liveliness of his frame in duties, and not by discoveries of the freeness and riches of redeeming grace, offered to him in the gospel; or when he expects eternal life not as the gift of God through Jesus Christ, but as a recompense from God for his own obedience and suffering, he plainly shows, that he is under the power of a legal spirit.<sup>129</sup>

Lloyd-Jones speaks of the conscience as being “the greatest safeguard possible against theoretical opinions about truth, and a mere intellectual interest in truth.”<sup>130</sup> The conscience cleansed and “perfected” (Heb 10:14) by the atoning death of Jesus Christ still continues to work in the heart of the Christian. The conscience serves as a valuable aid to growth in righteous conduct. Lloyd-Jones writes, “You are a Christian—what are you doing with your life in this world? Your conscience will upbraid you. In this way, it is of inestimable value. It will keep you right on the doctrines of justification and sanctification, and it will see to it that your whole self is always engaged—not only the mind but also the heart and the will.”<sup>131</sup>

Lloyd-Jones encouraged Christians to allow the conscience to work. The conscience will be a valuable asset toward understanding the new way of life that flows from one's new identity “in Christ.” As was considered in the section of the conscience as a testimony to the law of God,<sup>132</sup> the law of God is good; it is not a covenant of works. However, it has not been thrown away. The law is the design of God and the path of life. Union with Christ must be central to the psyche of the Christian, but a proper

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<sup>129</sup> John Colquhoun, *Treatise on the Law and Gospel*, ed. D. Kistler (1859; repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1999), 143-44, quoted in Ferguson, *The Whole Christ*, 128.

<sup>130</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 181.

<sup>131</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, 181-82.

<sup>132</sup> See pp. 66-70 of this dissertation.

understanding of union with Christ will lead to a pursuit of holiness and a new obedience in accordance with God's law.

Therefore, genuine Christians desire to have a tender conscience with which they interact daily. They have a healthy conscience because they know they are fully accepted through the work of Jesus Christ. Union with Jesus Christ is the basis for their stable identity before God and others. However, the conscience continues to shape their thinking and behavior according to the beautiful design of God as seen in his law. Christians' healthy consciences will continue to convict them of sinful thoughts, words, or deeds. How are Christians to respond to such conviction of conscience? First, they must not dismiss or excuse the conviction of sin. They must seek to understand and respond in faith. If the conviction of conscience is consistent with the teaching of God's Word, then the path forward is repentance and faith. Thus, Christians must confess their sin and look for the covering of Jesus's blood. Moreover, from this foundation of forgiveness and acceptance in Christ, believers pursue change and new obedience.

Just as it would be very unwise for people to desire that their physical sense of pain would disappear, so also would it be very foolish for individuals to cover the painful voice of conscience in unnatural and ineffective ways. This pain, although very uncomfortable at times, is a sign of a problem, a need, that can only be addressed by the one who came to "give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28 // Mark 10:45). Chapter 4 of this dissertation will explore the different attempts people pursue in order to quiet the voice of conscience. This consideration will clarify the unique effectiveness of faith in the cross of Jesus Christ to give rest to an individual's conscience.

People maintain, train, and protect their consciences by living in the gospel foundations of repentance unto life and faith in Jesus Christ. From this foundation, there will be real fruit of a new obedience and a growth in love that will comfort individuals' consciences.

### **The Conscience: Designed to Be an Aspect of the Integrated Heart That Produces Sincere Love**

“One task in life is synthesis,” David Brooks writes, “It is to collect all the fragmented pieces of a self and bring them to a state of unity, so that you move coherently toward a single vision. Some people never get themselves together; they live scattered lives.”<sup>133</sup> The argument of Scripture is that a “good conscience” is a fundamental aspect of moving from a “scattered,” fragmented heart to a healthy, integrated heart. In a healthy conscience, the accusing internal voice of conscience is fully and finally answered by the work of Jesus Christ. Here, this key emphasis of scriptural teaching on the conscience, that a healthy conscience leads to integration of heart, addresses one of the main therapeutic concerns of Western culture—self-acceptance, love, and worth.

The healthy conscience leads to true and accurate self-acceptance and self-worth as well as provides one with the resources to love and serve fellow humanity. Through the healthy conscience, an individual’s focus turns outward in sincere love for others. This focus on love was so important to the apostle Paul that he held it up as his core philosophy of ministry (1 Tim 1:5). A person with an inner life integrated by the gospel of Jesus Christ that centers on a person’s union with Christ will move more and more into obedience to the two great commandments—love for God and others (Matt 22:38-39).

Eleonore Stump demonstrates the important connection between the integrated heart and love in her description of Thomas Aquinas’s view on the nature of love: “Love requires two interconnected desires: (1) the desire for the good of the beloved, and (2) the

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<sup>133</sup> David Brooks, *The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life* (New York: Random House, 2019) 82.

desire for union with the beloved.”<sup>134</sup> For Aquinas, “the ultimate good for any human person is union with God. . . . [T]o desire the good of the beloved, on the standard of goodness Aquinas accepts, is to desire for the beloved those things that in fact contribute to the beloved’s flourishing, and these will also increase the beloved’s closeness to God.”<sup>135</sup>

Stump continues,

It is important to see that, for Aquinas, the two desires of love are not independent of each other but rather interrelated. And when the two desires of love appear to conflict, Aquinas’s claim that the ultimate good for human beings is union with God gives a method for harmonizing them. Union with God is shareable, and persons united with God are also united with each other. *Ultimately*, then, the same thing—namely, union with God—constitutes both the final good for each of the persons in a loving relationship and also their deepest union with each other. But God’s nature is equivalent to goodness; and so it is also true, on Aquinas’s views, that persons can be ultimately and deeply united with each other only if they are united in goodness.<sup>136</sup>

This “united in goodness” is similar to the “pure heart, good conscience, and sincere faith” of Paul’s philosophy of ministry (1 Tim 1:5). One can be “united in goodness” with another person only if they are “united in goodness” within oneself. An accusing conscience testifies to the reality of a person being “divided against” oneself. Stump argues that “moral wrongdoing has the effect of fragmenting the wrongdoer’s psyche, and those who are internally divided against themselves in moral evil are also isolated from others.”<sup>137</sup> If the moral wrongdoing present in an individual’s heart is not

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<sup>134</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 91.

<sup>135</sup> Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 94. Also, Herman Bavinck writes, “God, and God alone, is man’s highest good. In a general sense we can say that God is the highest good of all His creatures. For God is the Creator and sustainer of all things, the source of all being and of all life, and the abundant fountain of all goods. All creatures owe their existence from moment to moment solely to Him who is the one, eternal, and omnipresent Being.” Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God* (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 1.

<sup>136</sup> Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 95.

<sup>137</sup> Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 139. Stump illustrates this by describing the “social isolation and loneliness of the upper-echelon Nazis.” She writes,

It is notable how often high-ranking Nazis were thought by others to be both divided within themselves and isolated from others. Even Himmler saw his closest subordinate Heydrich in this

addressed and covered (i.e., atoned for) in a full and accurate way, the heart remains fragmented. The healthy conscience, erected on grace and on an individual's real union with Jesus Christ, integrates the heart around the good and enables sincere love.

Moreover, Stump very helpfully explains that because of the common grace of natural law in each person's heart, true integration can only happen around what is truly good: "No one can be whole-hearted in evil. . . . Internal integration is possible only for a person single-mindedly understanding and whole-heartedly desiring the good."<sup>138</sup> Further, Scripture is clear that the only way for a person to have a "whole-hearted desire for the good" and a sincere love for others is through the divine regeneration of one's soul. A key aspect of this divine regeneration is a cleansing of the guilty, accusing conscience. Therefore, the conscience is a source of sincere love for God and others because the conscience is an aspect of the integrated heart focused on the good.

### **Conclusion: Definition of the Conscience**

In this chapter, the teaching of Scripture has provided a clear definition of the conscience in human experience. The conscience is (1) an essential element of the human person; (2) a testimony to one's relationship to God's law in light of God's gospel; (3) the primary instrument for the formation of holistic identity and self-awareness; (4) an aspect of the heart that must be trained, maintained, and protected; (5) and the source of the integrated heart that leads to sincere love. The next chapter will consider the therapeutic

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way. Heydrich was notoriously inaccessible to others, and Himmler explained him by saying that Heydrich was "an unhappy man, completely divided against himself." In describing the state of his own psyche during the Nazi years, Adolf Eichmann said: "It would be better to call it a split state, a form of splitting, where one fled from one side to the other side and vice versa." The social isolation and loneliness of the upper-echelon Nazis is in fact a feature regularly remarked on by their biographers. For example, one of Ribbentrop's biographers comments that by the mid-1930s Ribbentrop was characterized by "an insensitive remoteness" that left him "extremely difficult to like." There were, of course eminent Nazis who were regarded by some of their peers as cultured family men; but that appearance now seems to historians to have been only a thin covering for inward isolation. Even when it comes to the most gregarious and social of the Nazi elite, Goering, one of his biographers, says: "Few got close to him. Indeed for all his excessive sociability he remained an outsider, keeping people at a distance . . . , his sociability was a mask."

<sup>138</sup> Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 126.

overshadowing of the biblical emphasis of the central role of the conscience in human flourishing.

### CHAPTER 3

#### THERAPEUTIC OVERSHADOWING OF THE CONSCIENCE

The therapeutic approach to life and soul-care that dominates the current “social imaginary”<sup>1</sup> of Western culture stands in stark contrast to the biblical teaching and focus on the conscience. This is not to argue that one should be skeptical of all forms of therapy. It is important to distinguish between therapy and the therapeutic approach that is inherently secular in nature and overshadows much, but not all, of the therapeutic realm. As Eric L. Johnson writes, “Christianity, from its beginning, has been a therapeutic religion. A significant theme of the Christian Scriptures—highlighted by the Gospels—is the portrayal of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as the world’s supreme soul physician, who came to earth from heaven to heal humankind of its worst maladies, spiritual and ethical in nature.”<sup>2</sup>

Therapy is a fundamental ministry of Jesus Christ and his church. A necessary element of the Christian’s calling is to deliver the therapeutic resources of the Christian faith to others, and a vital part of those therapeutic resources is the teaching on the conscience explained in this dissertation. Again, Johnson helpfully distinguishes therapy from the secular therapeutic approach when he writes, “Christian salvation involves a process of spiritual and psychological healing and transformation, analogous to physical healing (Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 1:18; 15:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 2:4-10; 1 Tim 4:10). The root meaning of *psychotherapy* is soul healing (*psyche* = soul; *therapeuo* = to heal), which is a

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>2</sup> Eric L. Johnson, *God and Soul Care: The Therapeutic Resources of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 1.

pretty good descriptor for the Christian life.”<sup>3</sup> The concern of this chapter is not therapy in general but the therapeutic approach informed by the predominant secularism found in Western culture which focuses on the self. Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel designate the predominant secular therapeutic approach as “therapism.”<sup>4</sup> This term will be appropriated for the rest of this dissertation to describe the secular therapeutic approach that stands in contrast to the biblical teaching on the conscience.

After decades of the influence of Oprah Winfrey,<sup>5</sup> self-esteem training, and ever-increasing subjectivism, therapism has inundated and permeated most approaches to psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being. In observing this, one must not assume that therapism has been ineffective in producing behavior change and in leading to greater emotional stability in some situations. There are aspects of this therapeutic shift that have benefitted and helped many people with deep emotional wounds and needs.<sup>6</sup> To be fair, it is primarily the influence of therapism that has led to the increased acceptance of therapy in Western culture. More people have pursued and found help for psychological, emotional, and spiritual struggles because of the reduced stigma of mental illness.

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<sup>3</sup> Johnson, *God and Soul Care*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Christina Hoff Sommers and Sally Satel, *One Nation under Therapy: How the Helping Culture Is Eroding Self-Reliance* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>5</sup> See Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Lofton explains the amazing inundation of Oprah’s influence on a global scale.

<sup>6</sup> I agree with Johnson when he writes,

Research on secular therapy has convincingly demonstrated that it can improve human functioning. But Christians might argue it does so, to some extent, by its cultivation of an increasingly sophisticated and adaptive aut centrism, “civilizing” it, if you will, by training autonomous selves how to get along better with others and inhibit *excessively* self-serving behavior, while simultaneously normalizing it, encouraging “self-reliance” and “self-determination” and, in the process, unwittingly undermining social bonds. The cost of modern therapy to the contemporary family has been enormous. At the same time, Christians should not overreact to this state of affairs by abandoning the contemporary field of mental health. On the contrary, Christianity supports many of the cultural goods it promotes, including the care for the mentally ill, the alleviation of suffering, research on therapy effectiveness, and others too numerous to mention. (Johnson, *God and Soul Care*, 29)



According to Barna research from early 2018, the younger generations—Millennials and Gen X’ers—are much more open to counseling than the older generations—Boomers and Elders. The Barna Group reports that “one-fifth of Millennials (21%) and 16 percent of Gen X are currently engaged in therapy. By comparison, only 8 percent of Boomers and 1 percent of Elders are presently working with a counselor or therapist.”<sup>7</sup> The stigma of pursuing therapy or counseling for mental illness definitely has lessened in younger generations. Again, the Barna Group reports that

Millennials are the generation most likely to begin counseling as treatment for mental illness, with more than one-third (34%) reporting this as the impetus for therapy. By comparison, 23 percent of Gen X and 21 percent of Boomers cite this reason. These statistics point to decreasing stigma around mental illness among younger generations, who have grown up with more open and public conversations about mental health.

Certainly, a decreasing stigma around mental illness and its resultant care is a beneficial and important point of progress in society. However, some important questions remain: What kind of care, therapy, or counseling are people receiving in therapism? Is this care helping? Is the common therapeutic approach to soul-care serving individuals in long-term ways? In therapism, are people being led to places of true human flourishing? Does therapism lead people to be further entrenched in themselves and thus further from the true enjoyment of God? An examination of therapism will show that there are very clear dangers to the forms of therapy present in therapism. It may be perceived as ignorant and backward to warn against seeing certain therapists, but the dangers of therapism must be accounted for and recognized or more people will be led further from the place of true human flourishing.

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<sup>7</sup> Barna Group, “American Feel Good about Counseling,” February 27, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/americans-feel-good-counseling/>.

## The Unrecognized Permeation of Therapism

Eva Moskowitz argues that there is a cultish commitment to therapism and the therapeutic approach to life in Western society. She writes that this age is “consumed by the worship of the psyche” and devoted to the “therapeutic gospel.”<sup>8</sup> For her, this “therapeutic gospel” focuses on “psychological happiness” and the “belief that feelings are sacred and salvation lies in self-esteem, that happiness is the ultimate goal and psychological healing the means.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, “this philosophy is not . . . merely a perspective, a means of understanding the world, but a faith, a program for individual and social development” that is forced upon everyone living in its context.<sup>10</sup>

This “therapeutic gospel” of therapism has completely infiltrated and dominated the social imaginary of Western culture over the last sixty years. As Ross Douthat writes,

It’s the religious message with the most currency in American popular culture—the truth that Kevin Costner discovered when he went dancing with wolves, the metaphysic woven through Disney cartoons and Discovery Channel specials, and the dogma of George Lucas’s Jedi, whose mystical Force, like Gilbert’s God, “surrounds us, penetrates us, and binds the galaxy together.”<sup>11</sup>

Douthat is referring to best-selling author Elizabeth Gilbert and her award-winning book *Eat, Pray, Love*, wherein Gilbert’s search for God, meaning, and the major answers to life’s biggest questions ends when she hears her own voice.<sup>12</sup> The way to fix the “heartbreaking inability to sustain contentment is to recognize that somewhere within us all, there does exist a supreme self who is eternally at peace. That supreme Self is our

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<sup>8</sup> Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust: America’s Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 215.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything across Italy, India, and Indonesia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007).

true identity, universal and divine.”<sup>13</sup> Douthat comments, “This is the highest religious dogma, and our highest religious obligation is like unto it: To ‘honor the divinity that resides within me,’ and to worship at the feet of the God within.”<sup>14</sup> Gilbert’s book remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 187 weeks<sup>15</sup> and was made into a major motion picture starring Julia Roberts. The modern Western mindset is the therapeutic mindset, and the therapeutic shapes and forms the aware and unaware alike—because the therapeutic mindset (therapism) is so prevalent and assumed, most are unaware of how much the Western world is shaped by it.

In his book *Status Anxiety*, philosopher Alain de Botton describes the nature of unrecognized ideologies when he writes,

Ideology is released into society like a colourless, odourless gas. It pervades newspapers, advertisements, television programmes and textbooks, always making light of its partial, perhaps illogical or unjust take on the world and meekly implying that it is only presenting age-old truths with which none but a fool or a maniac would disagree.<sup>16</sup>

The modern Western “social imaginary” has been surreptitiously infiltrated with the ideology of therapism. An individual raised in the Western context of the last fifty years has been immersed in therapism like a fish is to water.<sup>17</sup> David Foster Wallace’s anecdote

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<sup>13</sup> Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 215; quoting Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*, 122.

<sup>15</sup> Douthat, *Bad Religion*, 215.

<sup>16</sup> Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (New York: Random House, 2004), 205.

<sup>17</sup> David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water” (audio transcript of commencement speech, Westmont College, Santa Barbara, CA, 2005), Farnam Street (blog), accessed January 13, 2020, <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>. Also, Jean Twenge writes,

I also include ample references to popular culture, including television, movies, music, and magazines, without which a book on young people today would not be complete. This is where the culture lives and breathes, especially for a generation that has always enjoyed cable TV with one hundred channels. American pop culture refers constantly to the self and individuality. I was astounded at how often I heard the word *self* from so many different sources. I had never noticed it before, as most of us haven’t: like fish swimming in the ocean, we don’t notice the water because it is all around us and has always been there. (Jean Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006], 13)

during his commencement address at Westmont College in 2005 is very fitting on this point. Wallace began his address by saying, “There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, boys. How’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What . . . is water?’” In order to lead people to a biblical understanding of their conscience and its role in shaping identity, it is essential to expose and address the formative influence of the social imaginary of therapeutics that stands in direct contrast to biblical teaching in this area.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith leads readers through the “liturgical elements” of the local mall in order to uncover the unseen but strong formational elements that permeate people in the West. The mall serves as his example of the formational influence that often goes unrecognized. Smith’s purpose is to awaken the oblivious to the strong shaping influences that permeate every aspect of society and culture. Smith writes, “Here is a religious proclamation that does not traffic in abstracted ideals or rules or doctrines, but rather offers to the imagination pictures and statues and moving images. . . which speaks to our deepest desires . . . with a winsome invitation to share in this envisioned good life.”<sup>18</sup>

One of Smith’s arguments is that there are secular and therapeutic liturgies and evangelists (personal and impersonal) lurking behind many, maybe every, corner—in the mall, at the movies, in best-selling self-help books, and even in the church. The tenets of the “therapeutic gospel” have become commonplace in our culture. No one is surprised by the counsel “believe in yourself,” “consider yourself special,” “you need to take time to discover who you are,” “just be yourself,” and “learn to like yourself.” Sadly, this kind

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<sup>18</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, vol. 1 of *Cultural Liturgies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 21.

of counsel has even infiltrated the church, where the primary, and sometimes sole, emphasis is often a therapeutic gospel of “you’re unique and special to God.”

The Christian faith, when properly understood and applied to the individual, will lead to a greater positive self-regard. However, this positive self-regard will be accomplished by means of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture and not the well-worn path of therapism.<sup>19</sup> Christianity holds positive self-image as a good. The issue of concern is the foundation for the positive self-image. Jesus Christ, his substitutionary death, and his victorious resurrection provide the only stable and lasting foundation for true positive self-image and identity. The conscience, when operating according to its design, leads individuals to see their lack of moral worth in order to direct them to the only stable identity-forming foundation found in union with Jesus Christ.

Therapism, or the therapeutic “faith,”<sup>20</sup> as Moskowitz identifies it, overshadows and transforms the prevalent understanding of the conscience in the Western world. Therapism commandeers the conscience for its subjectivist ends. By changing the definition and parameters of the conscience, therapism appropriates the conscience and uses it to support the individualistic and relativistic purposes of its agenda. This transformation of the conscience is antithetical to the biblical teaching and emphasis on the conscience. Through this subversion of the conscience, key elements of the conscience’s purpose, as well as the individual’s identity, are lost and confused in the “moral void” of therapism. Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, in her introduction to Philip Rieff’s influential book *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, writes that “the shift to the purely therapeutic culture (Rieff sometimes called it an ‘anti-culture’) leads to nothing short of a moral void.”<sup>21</sup> The therapeutic approach may produce some temporary results; however,

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<sup>19</sup> See pp. 19-25 of this dissertation.

<sup>20</sup> Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, introduction to *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, by Philip Rieff, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), xviii.

the “moral void” of this approach will—in the end—prevent true human flourishing and lead to greater confusion and emotional struggles.

In this chapter, I will examine four major characteristics of therapism and then contrast them with the biblical teaching on the role of the conscience. First, therapism emphasizes the self—apart from God—as the sole resource for happiness and purpose in life. Second, therapism identifies authenticity as the basis and foundation for “morality.”<sup>22</sup> Third, therapism accentuates disorder and nurture as the central and sole source of pathologies and thereby extinguishes moral responsibility. Fourth, therapism promotes progress and change through a hollow self-regard. This chapter will conclude with a consideration of how the Western Christian social imaginary has been impacted by the therapeutic agenda of therapism in the West.

## **The Major Characteristics of Therapism**

### **The Self as the Ultimate Resource**

In her 2006 book *Generation Me*, Jean Twenge wrote that “this generation is unapologetically focused on the individual, a true Generation Me. . . . Today’s young people speak the language of the self as their native tongue. The individual has always come first, and feeling good about yourself has always been a primary virtue.”<sup>23</sup> The focus of this generation’s education and upbringing has been on taking care of and looking to one’s “self first.” Twenge writes, “Since GenMe’ers were born, they’ve been taught to put themselves first.”<sup>24</sup> In therapism, this self-focus has become the ideal and highest attribute that healthy children and adults are to pursue in order to find true human flourishing.

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<sup>22</sup> See pp. 9-17 of this dissertation. “Morality” is in quotation marks because secular “morality” is very different from the traditional view of morality. As has been argued in this dissertation, the secular approach denies sacred moral horizons to life.

<sup>23</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 2, 3.

<sup>24</sup> Twenge, *Generation Me*, 7.

The therapeutic transition of focus has been to look for identity, purpose, and meaning in oneself instead of in a relationship with and connection to a deity or religion. As I noted in the first chapter of this dissertation, “transcendence has moved indoors.”<sup>25</sup> Transcendence is no longer sought in “the highest places in the cosmos; the enchanted world came to occupy the deepest places of the self.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Charles Taylor writes that “we have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it ‘within’ human life.”<sup>27</sup> The teaching of Scripture on the conscience challenges this therapeutic turn inward and focus on the self and argues, instead, that “fullness” can never be found in what Philip Cushman has now famously termed “the empty self.”<sup>28</sup>

Cushman’s influential article from 1990, “Why the Self is Empty?”<sup>29</sup> still resonates with insights on the role of the self in the current social imaginary. Recognizing some of the benefits of moving away from traditional honor-based cultures where individual identity was completely absent, Cushman discerns the dangers of the therapeutic move to the “bounded, masterful self” of individualism that necessarily creates the “empty self.”<sup>30</sup> By using the term, “empty self,” Cushman argues that the current self is shaped by “a significant absence of community, tradition, and shared

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<sup>25</sup> Michael Horton, *Justification*, New Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 2:22.

<sup>26</sup> Horton, *Justification*, 2:20.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 15. Taylor also writes, “To see what is new in his, we have to see the analogy to earlier moral views, where being in touch with some source—God, say, or the Idea of the Good—was considered essential to full being. Only now the source we have to connect with is deep in us. This is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.” Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 26.

<sup>28</sup> Philip Cushman, *Travels with the Self: Interpreting Psychology as Cultural History* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 6-32.

<sup>29</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 6.

meaning.” He continues, the self “experiences these social absences and their consequences “interiorly” as a lack of personal conviction and worth, and it embodies the absences as a chronic, undifferentiated emotional hunger. The post-World War II self thus yearns to acquire and consume as an unconscious way of compensating for what has been lost: it is empty.”<sup>31</sup>

Cushman continues in his article by explaining the unlikely partnership and relationship that advertising and psychotherapy have formed in the West. These enterprises—advertising and psychotherapy—have developed and exploded to care for this increasingly “empty self” phenomenon found in American culture. However, both advertising and psychotherapy are only able to “momentarily fill them [the empty selves] up.”<sup>32</sup> Advertising promotes consumption as an answer to the emptiness that many people struggle with in life. The self is encouraged to “seek the experience of being continually filled up by consuming goods, calories, experiences, politicians, romantic partners, and empathic therapists in an attempt to combat the growing alienation and fragmentation of its era.”<sup>33</sup>

Psychotherapy attempts to fill the emptiness through therapeutic counseling and practices. Yet, as Cushman argues,

Unfortunately, many psychotherapy theories attempt to treat the modern self by reinforcing the very qualities of self that have initially caused the problem: its autonomous, bounded, masterful nature. The patient is diagnosed as empty and fragmented, usually without addressing the sociohistorical predicament that caused the emptiness and fragmentation. Thus, through the activity of helping, psychology’s discourse and practices perpetuate the causes of the very problems it is trying to treat.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 12.



According to Cushman, this perpetuation of the empty self in both advertising and psychotherapy is at least partially intentional due to the massive revenue created by the growing need for the continual filling of the “empty self” through consumption or therapy. Cushman articulates what is a damning insight to many in the therapeutic professions: “While psychologists have been treating the empty self, they have of necessity, also been constructing it, profiting from it, and not challenging the social arrangements that created it.”<sup>35</sup>

The challenge to the “empty self” must penetrate deeper than the shallow excavations of the therapeutic focus on the self. Cushman’s conclusion is that “the most effective healing response” is to address the “sorely lacking community and tradition” of contemporary Western culture. This is an astute insight; however, a clear definition of community and tradition is necessary. Contrary to Cushman’s conclusions, the only “community” that will be thoroughly effective in bringing fullness to the “empty self” will be a community that includes a relationship with the triune God and is formed upon the redemptive narrative of the Bible. Moreover, the only tradition that will be fully effective in bringing fullness will be a tradition that correlates with the fundamental “grace-moral ecology” of reality that emphasizes the role of the conscience.<sup>36</sup> To merely re-focus the modern “empty self” on a community and tradition that remains at the human level alone will prove to be ineffective in comprehensively answering the dilemmas that Cushman so masterfully exposes.

As has been stated earlier, therapism has so permeated the modern West that many of its primary tenets are unconditionally accepted and promoted. One area where this permeation is obvious is in what Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes identify as

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<sup>35</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 32.

<sup>36</sup> See pages 19-23 of this dissertation.

“the dangerous rise of therapeutic education” and the “self-esteem movement.”<sup>37</sup> The primary focus and goal of much of the educational systems in Europe and America is to build each child’s self-esteem; this self-esteem ideology is a primary tenet of therpism. As psychiatrist Glynn Harrison notes, “The self-esteem movement took off nearly half a century ago, it resonated perfectly with the emerging spirt of the age. . . We overdosed on self-admiration, and, as a result, the self-esteem movement gained a powerful foothold in the Western mind, and reshaped secular and Christian cultures alike.”<sup>38</sup>

By its very nature, the self-esteem ideology focuses and ends on the self to the exclusion of everything and everyone else. The problem with this emphasis is that the self does not contain the resources to uphold the focus given to it in this approach. The “empty self” cannot be filled by positive thinking or mere self-referential esteem.<sup>39</sup> There must be a higher authority that speaks to the value of the self. The argument of this dissertation is that no one will form a fundamental and lasting identity if the terminus is within the self. The internal voice of conscience leads us to look “away from ourselves” and toward our relationship to the God of the universe.

This transition from God to self in therpism has led to the profound emptiness and ennui that marks the present generation. The self, in isolation, does not contain the resources needed to lead to holistic identity, purpose, and meaning. As Oliver O’Donovan writes of Augustine of Hippo, “There is an argument to which he returns constantly throughout his life, demonstrating that, since the supreme good could hardly be something ‘below’ man and is unlikely to be something of an equality with him, it

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<sup>37</sup> Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes, *The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 13.

<sup>38</sup> Glynn Harrison, *Ego Trip: Rediscovering Grace in a Culture of Self-Esteem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 18 (emphasis original).

<sup>39</sup> Therpism’s focus on acceptance and change through sheer positive self-regard will be addressed below in the section titled “Therapism: Acceptance through Self-Regard” (see pp. 114-120).

must be looked for ‘above’ him.”<sup>40</sup> Contrary to therpism, the search for identity only coheres in the context of the divine. Moreover, the conscience is a primary divinely given means of inhabiting this divine context.

### **Emphasis on “Authenticity”**

Charles Taylor calls the present time period in Western society “the Age of Authenticity.”<sup>41</sup> Authenticity is the highest virtue in the Western social imaginary. In therpism, authenticity trumps everything—at least an “authenticity” according to the fifth definition in Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary that states that authenticity is being “true to one’s own personality, spirit, or character.”<sup>42</sup> To be authentic is to be true to “who you really are” without any—or at least as minimal as possible—outside guidance, pressure, or input.

A clear illustration of Western culture’s growing commitment to “authenticity” in the late 1990s is the tragic life of famous basketball player Dennis Rodman. ESPN’s *30 for 30* documentary series covered Rodman’s life and described him as being the “height of individuality” or “authenticity.”<sup>43</sup> He was the “bad boy” who just “did his own thing,” living out his authenticity. The iconic expression of his authenticity was when he announced in 1996 that he was marrying himself at a bookstore in New York City. Therpism’s version of authenticity would argue that Dennis Rodman is just “being who he is.” One might ask, however, is Rodman’s authenticity a life of freedom or is he an example of someone lost and enslaved to the whims of his ever-changing desires?

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<sup>40</sup> Oliver O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in St. Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1980), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 476.

<sup>42</sup> *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam Webster, 2019), s.v. “authenticity”

<sup>43</sup> *30 for 30*, vol. 3, episode 31, “Rodman: For Better or Worse,” directed by Todd Kapostasy, aired September 10, 2019, on ESPN.”

Moreover, the authentic pursuit of his desires has led to one of the clearest examples of a lost identity. In an interview at the end of the ESPN documentary, sixty-year-old Rodman reflects on his many broken relationships and bad decisions and then says, “I just don’t know who I am.”<sup>44</sup> To merge Rodman’s confusion with Charles Taylor’s philosophy, Rodman does not know who he is because he does not know what is truly good and where he stands in relation to this “Good.”<sup>45</sup>

The focus on authenticity emerges from the “expressive individualism” emphasized in the Romantic Expressivism of the late 1700s.<sup>46</sup> Authenticity is the attitude that “each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that, it’s important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from the outside by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”<sup>47</sup> Therefore, authenticity is completely individualized and subjective. Every individual is autonomous, and one’s feelings or desires are the authority for the formation of one’s identity. To be truly authentic, one must follow one’s desires, emotions, and feelings wherever they may lead. The problem with this approach to life is that an individual’s desires are not unified or fixed. This kind of authenticity is an impossible ideal.

Moral relativism is the foundation for the reign of authenticity in Western culture. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith emphasizes the connection between relativism and authenticity in his studies on the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults:

Emerging adults have been raised in a world involving certain outlooks and assumptions that they have clearly absorbed and that they in turn largely affirm and

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<sup>44</sup> *30 for 30*, “Rodman.”

<sup>45</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 75.

<sup>47</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

reinforce. Stated in philosophical terms, their world has undergone a significant epistemic and axiological breakdown. It is difficult if not impossible in this world that has come to be to actually know anything objectively real or true that can be rationally maintained in a way that might require people actually to change their minds or lives. Emerging adults know quite well how they personally were raised in their families, and they know fairly well how they generally “feel” about things. But they are also aware that all knowledge and value are historically conditioned and culturally relative. And they have not, in our view, been equipped with the intellectual and moral tools to know what to do with that fact. So most simply choose to believe and live by whatever subjectively feels “right” to them, and to try not to seriously assess, much less criticize, anything else that anyone else has chosen to believe, feel, or do. Whether or not they use these words to say it, for most emerging adults, in the end, it’s all relative. One thought or opinion isn’t more defensible than any other. Some moral beliefs may personally *feel* right, but no moral belief can rationally claim to be really true, because that implies criticizing or discounting other moral beliefs. And that would be rude, presumptuous, intolerant, and unfeeling. . . .

Many know there must be something more, and they want it. Many are uncomfortable with their inability to make trust statements and moral claims without killing them to death of a thousand qualifications. But they do not know what to do about that, given the crisis of truth and values that has destabilized their culture. And so they simply carry on as best they can, as sovereign, autonomous, empowered individuals who lack a reliable basis for any particular conviction or direction by which to guide their lives.<sup>48</sup>

The moral relativism and authenticity of therapism distorts the balance of the objective and subjective elements of reality and identity. Subjectivity completely dominates life and approaches to therapy or well-being, and this subjective focus eliminates an objective sacred morality and any proper source of one’s identity. The end result is complete moral and existential confusion. There has been a recent shift in culture to a moral absolutism based on these secular ideals, but because this absolutism has its foundation on unstable secular ideas, the confusion remains. The chaos this brings to identity formation has been described in the opening chapter of this dissertation.<sup>49</sup> What is important to consider at this point is the way the conscience has been hijacked to support the agenda of authenticity in the West.

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<sup>48</sup> Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292-93, 294 (emphasis original).

<sup>49</sup> See pp. 9-24 of this dissertation.

Secularism has moved the conscience into the realm of complete subjectivity and authenticity. The traditional view of the conscience as interrelating the subjective experience and knowledge of the person to objective truth and a structure of morality has been transformed into an individualistic and neutral aspect of human personhood that is to be respected at every cost. In therapism, the individualized conscience is an important aspect of “authenticity.” This “repurposing”<sup>50</sup> of the conscience is evident in the 2016 edition of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*; its entry on conscience states that the conscience is “like an empty box that can be filled with any type of moral content.”<sup>51</sup> In this context, exact “moral content” is superfluous. Every person’s conscience must be respected—even if one’s moral framework (or lack thereof) is not sustained under scrutiny and evaluation.

On this point concerning the moral substance of the individual conscience, Tom O’Shea argues that the secular understanding of the conscience has led to a “gradual hollowing out” of the conscience. The excessive individualism of the West has led to the understanding that everyone forms the standards of their own conscience according to their shifting desires and feelings—their authentic selves. Before this “hollowing out” of the conscience, the conscience was formed by “shared ethical horizons,” not “individually divergent ones.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the conscience possessed and related to the necessary moral structures that are requisite for the formation of individual identity.

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<sup>50</sup> Tom O’Shea, “Modern Moral Conscience,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4, no. 26 (July 2018): 582-600.

<sup>51</sup> Alberto Giubilini, “Conscience,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified December 2, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/conscience/>.

<sup>52</sup> Tom O’Shea, “Modern Moral Conscience,” 6. Furthermore, Taylor writes, The agent seeking significance in life, trying to define him- or herself meaningfully, has to exist in a horizon of important questions. That is what is self-defeating in modes of contemporary culture that concentrate on self-fulfillment *in opposition* to the demands of society, or nature, which *shut out* history and the bonds of solidarity. These self-centred “narcissistic” forms are indeed shallow and trivialized; they are “flattened and narrowed,” as Bloom says. But this is not because they belong to the culture of authenticity. Rather it is because they fly in the face of its requirements. To shut out demands emanating beyond the self is precisely to suppress the conditions of significance, and hence to court trivialization. To the extent that people are seeking a moral ideal here, this self-immuring is self-stultifying; it destroys the condition in which the ideal can be realized. Otherwise put, I can

It is difficult to see the relevance and importance of respecting the “subjectified” conscience of the current social imaginary if there is no fixed moral horizon upon which it is based. In fact, it is impossible to always respect and tolerate the conscientious objections or assertions that lack any fixed moral framework. As good as it may sound to always “respect other consciences” in every way, this cannot and does not happen—there is always an assumed, if unspoken, moral horizon upon which evaluation occurs. This is becoming increasingly the case in the current Western mindset that is embracing a new absolute morality. This morality is not based on the fixed moral horizon of Scripture but the societal expectation immersed in secularism. The cancel culture of the West confirms this—especially visible in sexual identity and gender issues.

In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor argues that there must be something that is truly “significant” in order for a person to understand and define themselves. Isolated authenticity cannot determine what is significant and true. Taylor writes, “When we come to understand what it is to define ourselves, to determine in what our originality consists, we see that we have to take as background some sense of what is significant.”<sup>53</sup> There must be what Taylor describes as “pre-existing horizons of significance.”<sup>54</sup> These “horizons of significance” cannot be self-created. We cannot just decide, as Taylor argues, that “wiggling [our] toes in warm mud”<sup>55</sup> is significant. Without

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define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters. Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order *matters* crucially, can I define my identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands. (Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 40-41; emphasis original)

Elsewhere, Taylor writes, “Modern freedom was won by our breaking loose from older moral horizons. People used to see themselves as part of a larger order. . . . Modern freedom came about through the discrediting of such orders. But at the same time as they restricted us, these orders gave meaning to the world and to the activities of social life” (2-3).

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 38.

<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 37.

a fixed “horizon of significance” or “moral framework,” accurate identity formation is impossible. The lack of “significance” in authenticity leads to Kenneth Gergen’s three-fold characterization of the modern self as “poly-vocal, plastic, and transient.”<sup>56</sup>

As communities upholds and encourages the biblical teaching on the conscience and its relationship to what is significant—God and the divine moral horizon—identity formation and proper self-awareness will be possible and encouraged.<sup>57</sup> Western culture has been overwhelmed by a respect for and consideration of individual authenticity. The biblical teaching on the conscience stands in opposition to this overwhelming zeitgeist of Western culture. The essential morality of identity must be maintained in order to lead people to a sustainable and realistic understanding of themselves and the world in which they live. As David Wells writes, “When God—the external God—dies, then the self immediately moves in to fill the vacuum. But then something strange happens. The self also dies. And with it goes meaning and reality.”<sup>58</sup>

The biblical teaching on the conscience provides a wonderful response to the call for “mere authenticity.” The emphasis on authenticity sounds wonderfully positive, but the way authenticity presents itself in society reinforces the need for sacred moral horizons and an authoritative voice of approval and acceptance that alone can provide stability to an individual’s soul. Emma Scrivener’s honesty on this point is immensely helpful:

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<sup>56</sup> See pp. 15-16 of this dissertation.

<sup>57</sup> As Taylor writes, “What we ought to be doing is fighting over the meaning of authenticity, and from the standpoint developed here, we ought to be trying to persuade people that self-fulfillment, so far from excluding unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self, actually requires these in some form.” Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 72-73.

<sup>58</sup> David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 31. Wells continues, Many young people report that though they grew up in good homes, had all they wanted, went on to college, (perhaps) entered the workplace, they are nevertheless baffled by the emptiness they feel. Their self-esteem is high but their self is empty. They grew up being told they could be anything that they wanted to be, but they do not know what they want to be. They are unhappy, but there seems to be no cause for their unhappiness. They are more connected to more people through the Internet, and yet they have never felt more lonely. They want to be accepted, and yet they often feel alienated. Never have we had so much; never have we had so little. That is our paradox.



Our culture says authenticity is “being true to yourself.” That’s fine if your true self is a beautiful fairy princess. But what if she’s a warty toad? What if (like me) she’s authentically horrid? Should I be true to the self who has low blood sugar and feels like she’s a piece of rubbish? The self who wants to punch the driver who cut her off on the freeway? The self who wants another cocktail and doesn’t care about the consequences? The self who says, “Forget everything, except what makes me feel good”? The self who doesn’t do repentance, discomfort, or a crucified God? Sure, I can be true to this self. But it won’t leave a trail of magic.<sup>59</sup>

In the rest of her article, Scrivener argues that what most people really desire is not a “true authenticity” but a “filtered authenticity.” There are certain acceptable ways to be authentic: “Be yourself—as long as that self isn’t stressed or anxious or frightened or tired. Be real—but only if it’s filtered. Be beautiful—but only in these prescribed ways. Be on a journey—but don’t misstep, and make sure you’re headed where everyone else is going.”<sup>60</sup> The desire for authenticity points to a desire to be truly known and accepted, but the “way” of authenticity in therapism leads to a shallow knowledge of the other amidst the invisible and tacitly accepted norms of the prevailing culture.

The conscience is an instrumental aspect of the soul that provides a way to find rest from the pressure of therapism’s authenticity. Through the gracious work of God in the conscience, individuals are encouraged to recognize the totality and permeation of their sin and sinfulness and turn in confession to God in light of the gospel. True repentance and faith will lead to the only place of full and final acceptance through Jesus Christ. This path alone will lead to true “authenticity” before God and others.

### **Accentuates Disorder over Morality**

In opposition to the biblical teaching of moral accountability and ethical responsibility, therapism has emphasized and focused on an individual’s biological or psychological disorder, nurture, or traumatic history as the only explanations for negative behavior. Eva Moskowitz articulates therapism’s increased representation in society

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<sup>59</sup> Emma Scrivener, “The Problem with Authenticity,” *Gospel Coalition*, September 7, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-problem-with-authenticity/>.

<sup>60</sup> Scrivener, “The Problem with Authenticity.”

when she describes the growing list of “disorders” in the last few decades that were created to describe and explain human behavior:

If we are to believe what we are told by newspapers, popular magazines, and television talk shows, emotional ailments have reached epidemic proportions. Perhaps this is in part because there are so many of them. In the fifteen years that the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* has been available (Moskowitz is writing in 2001) the number of mental disorders listed has grown from 100 to more than 300. Old favorites such as schizophrenia and manic depression have been joined by such newcomers as oppositional defiant disorder, suffered by children who do at least four of the following for a period of six months: lose their temper, argue with adults, refuse to comply with adults’ rules, or spiteful; religious or spiritual disorder, involving a loss or questioning of faith, a problem associated with conversion to a new faith, or an emotional disturbance related to questioning of spiritual values; and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (basically crabbiness).<sup>61</sup>

Although focus on medical, mental, and social catalysts for behavior is a helpful and vital correction to approaches in the past that neglected these important concerns, therapism has overcorrected and comprehensively dismissed the moral/ethical category as a cause for behavior.<sup>62</sup> This overreaction in therapism occludes true and holistic help for anyone who is wrestling with negative behavior and its consequences because—as I argued earlier in this dissertation—humanity lives in a thick moral space. As David Powlison writes, “Wrong views of any disease always bring with them wrong views of the remedy.”<sup>63</sup> The transition to disorder or past trauma as the sole explanations of all “evil” or “immoral” actions has emasculated counseling, led to great trauma for victims of evil, and conceived ridiculous and ineffective approaches and responses to both those who commit evil and those who are traumatized by evil.

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<sup>61</sup> Eva Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust*, 4.

<sup>62</sup> For an insightful and balanced consideration of disorder and morality in the area of addiction recovery, see Kent Dunnington, *Addiction and Virtue: Beyond the Models of Disease and Choice* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

<sup>63</sup> David Powlison, “Cure of Souls (and the Modern Psychotherapies),” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 21.

Alan Wolfe writes that a “new nonjudgmentalism” reigns in the Western social imaginary.<sup>64</sup> Even the most heinous and evil actions and individuals are redefined and re-designated into categories of disorder of which people are not responsible. An explicit recent example of this is the development of the notorious fictional villain the Joker. Actor Heath Ledger depicted the Joker in the 2008 movie *The Dark Knight*. In 2019, Joaquin Phoenix portrayed the Joker in the villain origin story *Joker*. The difference between the two artistic depictions by the directors and actors is a fascinating demonstration of the growing permeation of therapeutics as the means to understanding evil human behavior. Heath Ledger portrayed the Joker as “undeniably evil,” and no one was tempted to “take his side.”<sup>65</sup> However, now with the Joker’s back-story in the 2019 movie, the cause for this iconic villain’s evil is primarily childhood abuse, untreated mental illness, and societal neglect.<sup>66</sup> The common understanding now is that of neurocriminologist, Arthur Raine, who writes, “I don’t think Joker had free will, given his life. He was a walking time bomb waiting to explode—all it took was some significant life stress, beating up, losing a job. You’ve got nothing left. . . . The well-documented risk factors—this was [the character’s] destiny. No one is born into that kind of violence.”<sup>67</sup>

A culture that accepts this rationale as the answer to evil is dispossessed of all hope for change and leaves those within the culture who experience trauma or societal neglect early in their lives doomed to repeat traumatic evil on others in “reactive

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<sup>64</sup> Alan Wolfe, *Moral Freedom: The Search for Virtue in a World of Choice* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 48, quoted in Sommers and Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, 78.

<sup>65</sup> Brett McCracken, “Is the ‘Joker’ on Us?,” *Gospel Coalition*, October 5, 2019, <https://www.hegospelcoalition.org/article/is-the-joker-on-us/>.

<sup>66</sup> Julie Miller, “Leading Criminologist Considers Joker ‘a Great Educational Tool,’” *Vanity Fair*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/10/joker-joaquin-phoenix-psychology>.

<sup>67</sup> Julie Miller, “Criminologist Considers Joker ‘a Great Educational Tool.’”

aggression.”<sup>68</sup> If the Joker did not have a free will, then he was not responsible for his actions—he is a victim, not a villain. This redefines everything. Moreover, those who have embraced this understanding of human nature have bought into therapism and its radically different approach to therapy and soul-care—to the detriment of many.

This current fixation on tolerating everyone and everything flows from the dismissal of moral structures. As has been considered throughout this dissertation, the move away from all moral horizons leads to chaos and confusion. If there is no sacred moral structure, then there is no moral responsibility, and nothing can be identified as “evil.” “Evil” is simply a result of brain chemistry or a negative nurturing environment that is outside of the individual’s control. To clarify, it is important to consider brain chemistry and the trauma people have faced in their individual histories. However, the chaos of therapism results from a focus on disorder and nurture and a complete dismissal of ethical or moral categories.

In their book *One Nation under Therapy*, Sommers and Satel insightfully demonstrate the dangers of moving from “sin to syndrome” in public discourse as they evaluate the Catholic Church’s response to the child abuse scandal among Catholic priests. Because the Catholic Church accepted therapism’s approach to the priest’s pedophilia, the priests who sexually abused young children were sent to short periods of therapy and then reassigned to different parishes. A high percentage of the sexual abuse that occurred in Catholic churches occurred by priests who were already exposed as child molesters and then “repaired” and reinstated through therapy. In “loving” and “caring” for the priests by not being “too judgmental,” many more minors were abused.

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<sup>68</sup> According to Raine,

Reactive aggression [stipulates that] when you get beat up, you beat other people up. Fascinatingly, the work we have done on mental health problems and people become aggressive, it’s all reactive aggression. . . . The medication which is effective in reducing aggression is an atypical antipsychotic medication that is effective in reducing aggressive behavior. Throughout the United States, children who are aggressive and you can’t control them—when other things don’t work—you prescribe Risperidone. None of us like medicating our children, but that, when other things don’t work, that, for sure, works. (Miller, “Criminologist Considers Joker ‘a Great Educational Tool’”)

Sommers and Satel cite the famous case of Father John Geoghan as an illustration of the dangerous acceptance of therapism in the Catholic Church: The church lost its bearings and medicalized the abuses. As early as 1984, church officials in the Boston Archdiocese knew that Geoghan was a child molester. The priest's predatory behavior was sinful, criminal, and the cause of great and enduring suffering. But again and again, Geoghan's superiors referred him for remedial therapy.<sup>69</sup> Geoghan's remedial therapy lasted a few months, and then he was placed back into the ministry, where he preyed upon many more victims.<sup>70</sup> Therapism could not provide the suitable categories to deal with the morally corrupt actions of many child-abusing priests. As Sommers and Satel conclude,

The problem with therapism is that it licenses tolerance of the intolerable. Its medicalized perspective on wrongdoers enabled Catholic officials to regard the criminal priests as victims, in need of compassion, care, understanding, and treatment. Even as late as 1996, Cardinal Law, by then fully aware of Geoghan's history of child abuse, wrote him a sympathetic letter, in which he used the amoral, pseudoscientific language of pathology and not the vocabulary of sin or vice or disobedience that are the hallmark of his Church. "Yours has been an effective life of ministry," he wrote, "sadly impaired by illness." . . . And here we see how the all-is-forgiven ethos of therapism leads not to "niceness," but to cruelty. . . . When Father Geoghan was given a clean bill of health after treatment for pedophilia in 1981, he reacted like someone who had been cured of bacterial pneumonia. "Thank God for modern medicine and good doctors." He was a new man. As he put it, "I feel like a newly ordained priest!" Geoghan had a vested interest in the no-fault theory of the self that is a feature of therapism. Baldly stated, the theory says that immoral acts are not the result of personal failings or malevolence, but manifestations of an illness, or brain disorder, requiring the attention of "good doctors."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sommers and Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, 81.

<sup>70</sup> Father Geoghan's case was not an isolated instance of the therapeutic response to pedophilia in the church. There were various centers throughout the country that specialized in treating this "sickness" in the priesthood. Sommers and Satel write that on one occasion, Geoghan was sent to "a luxurious mental health clinic in Hartford, Connecticut called the 'Institute of Living' that specialized in treating "impaired" clergy." Sommers and Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, 80. The authors go on to say, "Church officials sent errant priests to various centers where they received counseling, group therapy, psychodrama, role-playing therapy, and, according to a report in *The Economist*, 'holistic medicine [and] Christian forgiveness.' Once 'cured,' many were permitted to resume their duties" (81).

<sup>71</sup> Sommers and Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, 84-85.

Of course, Catholic Church leadership should treat child-abusing priests with care and understanding, investigating every factor that may have led them to heinous and horrible behavior—but not at the expense of justice and the protection of children. The leadership in the Catholic church should have sought to understand the offenders as they simultaneously held them responsible for their morally reprehensible actions. The foolishness of the Catholic Church on this matter has been rightfully exposed. The problem is that this aspect of therapism is permeating more and more of the social imaginary of the West. By turning every action into a malady, sickness, or disorder, human beings are severely diminished. They do not possess control of or responsibility for their actions, which reduces individuals to powerless responders to stimuli in and around them without a free will to choose how to live. Again, there are influential and forceful factors that provoke certain lifestyles and behaviors, but individual free will must be maintained in order to uphold and defend human capacity, freedom, and any moral order in this world.

Therapism’s overshadowing of the conscience is often supported and encouraged by the influential and expanding area of neuroscience. Sharon Dirckx, Sally Satel, and Scott O. Lilienfeld all warn of a greater “shift from blame to biology” in many segments and interpretations of neuroscientific studies.<sup>72</sup> In 2013, Satel and Lilienfeld asked, “Is neurodeterminism poised to become the next grand narrative of human behavior?” Neuroscience introduces brain imaging as another tool that allegedly establishes the connection between biology and human behavior:

The goal of brain imaging is enormously important and fascinating: to bridge the explanatory gap between the intangible mind and the corporal brain. But that relationship is extremely complex and incompletely understood. . . .

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<sup>72</sup> Sally Satel and Scott O. Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed: The Seductive Appeal of Mindless Neuroscience* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Sharon Dirckx, *Am I Just My Brain?* (Epsom, UK: Good Book, 2019).

Consider the law. When a person commits a crime, who is at fault: the perpetrator or his or her brain? Of course, this is a false choice. If biology taught us anything, it is that “my brain” versus “me” is a false distinction. Still, if biological roots can be identified—and better yet, captured on a brain scan as juicy blotches of color—it is too easy for nonprofessionals to assume that the behavior under scrutiny must be “biological” and therefore “hardwired,” involuntary or uncontrollable. . . .

Problems arise, however, when we ascribe too much importance to the brain-based explanations and not enough to psychological or social ones.<sup>73</sup>

Neuroscience and brain imaging may supply apparent support for a biology-based understanding of human behavior, but the same issues and contradictions remain. As psychologist and counselor Ed Welch writes, “The narrowness of psychological thought in this area is, in some ways, refreshing to the Christian. We are reminded that no system can explain man as comprehensively as Scripture.”<sup>74</sup> Scripture respects and considers the multifaceted causation of human behavior while upholding the basic and indispensable human freedom that marks human experience. In this way, the teaching of the Bible highlights a clear path toward acceptance, change, and growth.

The biblical teaching on human freedom of the will must be distinguished from the philosophy of libertarianism, which argues that if there is any *cause* influencing a person’s actions, then those actions are not free. According to philosophical libertarianism, a genuinely free choice is a choice without any causes. Therapism embraces a libertarianism view of freedom that logically only leads to a deterministic and nihilistic view of human behavior. Frame’s response to libertarianism is helpful. He writes, “A free action does not have to be without a cause. Indeed, an action without a cause would be an anomaly, a weird event, something that just happens, without our wanting it to . . . There is no reason to believe that any causality at all is a barrier to freedom.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Satel and Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed*, xvii.

<sup>74</sup> Ed Welch, “Why Ask, ‘Why?’ Four Types of Causes in Counseling,” *Journal of Pastoral Practice* 10, no. 3 (1991): 40-47.

<sup>75</sup> John Frame, *We Are All Philosophers*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 30-31.

This world is full of causal and influential factors for human behavior. These do not displace human freedom, control, and responsibility. An individual is free if one acts in the way one desires to act—amid many influential and causal factors. Of course, as the Bible teaches, every person is a moral being. Because of the entrance and acceptance of sin into this world, humans are bent toward sin and selfishness. This influences moral choice and action in a negative way, but it does not excuse it. Responsibility remains.<sup>76</sup>

The fact that there are some cases of mental disorder and trauma that heavily influence individual moral choice does not remove responsibility and the thick moral space that surrounds each individual. The history of counseling and the church has centered on reaction and overreaction to the different causes of human behavior. In response to the therapeutic focus on biology and nurture, some in the biblical counseling movement have overcorrected and only focused on the moral cause. The teaching of Scripture excellently balances the different causes to human behavior, and it encourages a way forward that will address the multifaceted need of counselees who have been on either the receiving or giving end of trauma and abuse. As students of Scripture, biblical counselors must consider the biblical view of the person as a psycho-somatic unity living in a social context—with God and fellow humankind. Just as “reductive physicalism” in therpism is dangerous, so also is “reductive spiritualism,” which is the error of some counseling approaches within the church.<sup>77</sup>

Welch differentiates four types of “causes” that should be considered in counseling. Basing his insights on Aristotle’s categories of causes (i.e., material, efficient, formal, and final), Welch demonstrates how these categories enable counselors

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<sup>76</sup> In Matt 15:18-20, Jesus says, “But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.”

<sup>77</sup> Michael Horton, “Faith and Mental Illness,” *Modern Reformation* 23, no. 4 (July-August 2014): 18-25.



to holistically care for individuals without drifting into one of the common extremes. An understanding of these four causes is essential to care for every aspect of the counselee. The first cause is the material cause, which is “the substance from which something is made; it is the tangible, physical components of an object or event.”<sup>78</sup> The material cause of a book is the ink and paper on which it is written, plus a little glue. If this understanding is transferred to the counseling realm, the possible “material causes” of a person’s depression would be issues such as brain chemistry, neuro-chemical imbalances, lack of sleep, lack of exercise and/or poor nutrition that impacts a person physically and emotionally, or brain disease (e.g., chronic traumatic encephalopathy [CTE], Alzheimer’s, dementia). An effective counselor will consider the possible “material causes” at the heart of a person’s behavior. Welch presents a very helpful example of an elderly man struggling with Alzheimer’s disease:

Why does he respond the way he does? I would suggest that the best explanation is his brain, the material substance that is wasting away. . . . Certainly a fragmented world does not provide license to sin; physical disabilities do not make us sin. But this man’s decreased brain abilities are clearly a culpable part of his responses, and families and counselors must be aware of this cause if they are to understand him and many other people biblically.<sup>79</sup>

One of the main issues with therapism, however, is that the “material cause” can be “extended improperly”<sup>80</sup> and made the primary and only way to understand all human behavior. This diminishing of causality to this one cause reduces one’s ability to truly and

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<sup>78</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 41.

<sup>79</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 41-42.

<sup>80</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 42. Moreover, Satel and Lilienfeld are helpful when they write, From being featured in a major documentary on HBO, on talk shows and *Law and Order*, and on the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*, the brain-disease model has become dogma—and like all articles of faith, it is typically believed without question.

That may be good public relations, but it is bad public education. We also argue that it is fundamentally bad science. The brain-disease model of addiction is not a trivial rebranding of an age-old human problem. It plays to the assumption that if biological roots can be identified, then a person has a “disease.” And being afflicted means that the person cannot choose, or control his or her life, or be held accountable.” (Satel and Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed*, 51)

effectively care for individuals. If individuals are not responsible, then they have no control and thus no hope for change.

The second cause considered by Welch is the efficient cause, which recognizes influential events, circumstances, and the social context of human behavior. Like the consideration of material causes, efficient causes are given priority in therpism. This has caused some biblical counselors—throughout the history of the biblical counseling movement—to overreact and completely neglect this important aspect of human motivation. However, the Bible addresses efficient causes and “clearly indicates that other people and prior events affect us; our personal histories make a difference. . . . The Bible provides a rich theology of victimization.”<sup>81</sup> The problem occurs when therpism gives complete focus to efficient causes to the neglect of moral responsibility. Efficient causality is helpful to consider as one of the facets in the motivation of behavior, but if it is given complete focus, moral responsibility disappears, change is unattainable, and victimization becomes the primary response to all personal and relational difficulties.<sup>82</sup>

The third cause is the formal cause, which is “the blueprint or structure of the object or event.”<sup>83</sup> Formal causality considers aspects of personality, human weakness, and the sin nature that afflicts all of humanity. In some situations, it is helpful to consider general human weakness and sin nature as a cause for misbehavior. This does not reduce responsibility for actions, but it may help—in part—to explain them. Therefore, it should be given careful attention in counseling.

The fourth cause Welch addresses is the final cause, which considers motives, loves, and the desires of the heart. According to Welch, “It is the only cause that assigns responsibility, because all other causes, ‘material,’ efficient,’ and ‘formal’ are unable to

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<sup>81</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 43.

<sup>82</sup> See pp. 164-167 of this dissertation

<sup>83</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 44.

see any culpability; they are morally blind. While they certainly help account for an event, they do not pinpoint underlying spiritual causes; they do not get to the ‘heart’ of the matter.”<sup>84</sup> The final cause is the place where the person is tethered to the moral horizon or structure of the universe; it is “biblically the most emphasized of all four causes.” However, this does not diminish the importance of considering the other causes, which are real factors that impact people’s lives. Much focus is given to the final cause because “when approached biblically, [it] can lead to the most change.”<sup>85</sup> As Sommers and Satel write, “Treating addicts [and other counselees] as morally responsible, self-determining human beings free to change their behavior is, in the end, more effective, more respectful, and more compassionate.”<sup>86</sup> Often, it is difficult—if not impossible—to change the other factors or causes in the counselee’s life, but through the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, amazing changes can take place in this realm of the heart. The final cause is not just a focus on sin and responsibility but on the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. This specific focus on the “grace-moral ecology” will lead to a recognition of the distinction between sin and suffering as well as an accurate understanding of the accepting love of God from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit.

The Bible teaches what has been described in this dissertation as a “grace-moral ecology.” According to this ecology, there is a universal moral framework that undergirds all of reality. Therapism subconsciously perceives the moral framework and moral lack in all of humanity—and thus seeks to dismiss these by focusing on other

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<sup>84</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 44.

<sup>85</sup> Welch, “Why Ask ‘Why?’,” 47. Welch also helpfully points out, We are reminded that no system can explain man as comprehensively as Scripture. The medical model borrows from the truth in stating that man is corporeal but then wrongly concludes that all behavior is reduced to “material cause.” Secular psychology takes distorted pieces of truth and tends to reduce behavior to “efficient cause.” The biblical view, however, is the comprehensive original which lays a framework that allows for investigation into all four causes but wherein no one perspective dominates to the point that personal responsibility (“final cause”) is diminished. (45)

<sup>86</sup> Sommers and Satel, *One Nation under Therapy*, 7.

factors and causes for malevolent behavior. It is probable that the incompleteness and ineffectiveness of the historically dominant “ritual-moral ecology” of the culture has been a motivating factor in the movement toward therpism. This coheres with the Bible’s teaching on the dangers of inauthentic, hypocritical, or legalistic religion. The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is willing and inclined to acknowledge the moral bankruptcy of humanity because the central message of Scripture is the revelation that through Jesus Christ, God freely provides humanity a way of rescue from their moral plight and the only way to find acceptance, change, and growth. The conscience, as taught in the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, tethers individuals to the inherent sacred moral horizon of the world; upholds human freedom, ethical responsibility and personal accountability; and directs individuals to the only source of an integrated identity founded upon true acceptance through the work of Jesus Christ. The “grace-moral ecology” is the only exhaustive perspective that will maintain personal integration and order, encourage self-acceptance through divine-acceptance, and protect individuals and cultures from descending into the moral chaos and the confusion of therpism.

### **Acceptance through Self-Regard**

American psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1902-1987) was the most influential of the founders of the humanistic (client-centered) approach to psychology. Rogers and his colleagues recognized two important principles in human nature and behavior: (1) people desire to be unconditionally accepted and loved and (2) growth, change, and human development proceed from a firm position of acceptance and love. With these two important principles, Rogerian therapy recognized the basic human longings that emanate from the presence of the conscience in each human soul. However, the Rogerian strategy for finding acceptance strayed from reality as it promoted an “unconditional positive

regard.”<sup>87</sup> Moreover, it is this “unconditional positive regard” that has saturated the therapeutic mindset or therapism of the West.

Therapism insightfully recognizes the problem of living with an internal accusing voice. It is unhealthy to live life while constantly being plagued and nagged by guilt. It leads to an unhealthy and debilitating despair, insecurity, and self-focus that drastically affects one’s self-awareness and ability to relate to others. In the Psalms, King David gives a vivid description of living under accusation:

There is no soundness in my flesh because of your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me. My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. (Ps 38:3-8)

The pain of guilt mimics physical pain. In fact, oftentimes, personal descriptions of the pain of guilt point to how it is more intense than physical pain. As the Roman essayist Plutarch wrote, “Any other pain can be reasoned away, but this remorse is inflicted by reason, on the soul which is so racked with shame, and self-chastised. . . . The cry, ‘none other is to blame for this but I myself’ coming from within upon the wicked man’s own sins, makes his sufferings yet harder to bear.”<sup>88</sup> Or as the Jewish philosopher Philo wrote, “It gives not peace, but makes war. Never does it depart by day nor by night, but it stabs

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<sup>87</sup> Christian psychiatrist Richard Winter is helpful on this point when he writes,

The psychologist Carl Rogers discovered that the first step to helping people change is to accept them with all their hang-ups and problems. Even though he wrongly believed that we can find all the answers to our problems in ourselves, he was still discovering something of the way God has made us. When we are accepted as unique and valuable to someone, that gives us a measure of security to take risks and make changes. When we feel unacceptable to anyone, we are often so insecure that we retreat into a corner and build a wall around ourselves to reduce the risk of change. How much greater can be our freedom when we know we are loved, accepted and forgiven by our Creator, who adopts us into his family, offers us his friendship and gives us his Holy Spirit to help us daily to become more like him? (Richard Winter, *When Life Goes Dark: Finding Hope in the Midst of Depression* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012], 189)

<sup>88</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives: Translated from the Original Greek, with Notes, Critical and Historical, and a Life of Plutarch* (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 54, quoted in C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1955), 47.

as with a goad, and inflicts wounds that know no healing, until it snap the thread of that soul's pitiful and accursed life."<sup>89</sup>

Again, the consideration of Wilfred McClay is very relevant at this point; the continued presence of guilt in the culture of therapism is very "strange."<sup>90</sup> Therapism does not possess the categories for the continued phenomena of guilt, so it must find a way to abolish the idea. Therapism addresses the continuing struggle with guilt by ascribing its persistent presence to socially constructed norms that have evolved as society has progressed. The process in therapism, then, is for individuals and communities to demolish the falsely constructed norms and thus eliminate the guilt. However, this "avenue of escape," as McClay describes it, is not an "entirely workable solution, since it is not easy to banish guilt by denying its reality."

Another related aspect of therapism's approach to guilt is the focus on authenticity that was considered earlier in this chapter. The authenticity of therapism denies the reality of guilt by accepting the "moral failure" as normal or as a part of the universal "brokenness" of humanity. The path of authenticity is to "accept ourselves as we are." The counsel of therapism is to not get too worked up about little snafus and mistakes that "we all have in our lives." Therapism's counsel centers on ideas like "Everyone makes mistakes" and "Don't you know that no one's perfect?" Therefore, therapism diminishes guilt by normalizing sin and moral failure. It denies or absolves

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<sup>89</sup> Philo, *On the Decalogue*, vol. 7 of *Philo's Works* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 87, quoted in Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, 46. Also, Herant Katchadourian writes, "In existential terms, guilt ties us down to the past, making it difficult for us to live in an authentic present. It undermines the trust we have in adequacy of our selves and leads to a loss of self-esteem and self-confidence. We feel diminished in our own eyes and the eyes of others. Under the weight of guilt, we feel at a loss to know how to behave in public and to show ourselves as we are." Herant Katchadourian, *Guilt: The Bite of Conscience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 23.

<sup>90</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," *Hedgehog Review* 19 (Spring 2017): 1.

guilt by lowering or erasing moral standards. The “unpalatable aspects of your own psyche” are “shuffled off, or worse denied altogether” so that you “accept” yourself.<sup>91</sup>

A teenage girl struggling with the affliction of severe acne serves as a helpful illustration to therapist’s approach to addressing guilt. The presence of the acne brings great pain and shame to this young girl’s life. She would do almost anything to rid herself of the disgrace of what she considers a mark on her personhood. Although it would be nice to hear that she could just decide to erase her acne and deny its reality, it would not just disappear because of her decision to rid herself of it. Acne is not banished by denying its reality; neither is guilt. Therapist’s approach may bring short-term relief, but guilt is not so easily managed and controlled. The desire for an objective response and accurate retribution to moral failure and guilt remains—both for individuals in their self-awareness and for the community at large.

This desire for an objective response and accurate retribution is highlighted by sociologists Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph in their research on “intuitive ethics.” Although Haidt and Joseph assume an evolutionary psychology, they argue that “human beings come equipped with an *intuitive ethics*, an innate preparedness to feel flashes of approval or disapproval toward certain patterns of events involving other human beings.”<sup>92</sup> One of the primary “patterns” innately present in human beings is “reciprocity.”<sup>93</sup> Satel and Lilienfeld helpfully summarize this aspect of Haidt and Joseph’s research when they write, “A quickening in our marrow compels us to balance

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<sup>91</sup> Harrison, *Ego Trip*, 42. Also, Vince Gilligan, director of the television series *Breaking Bad*, captures the absurdity of finding acceptance through mere self-regard in a scene where one of his main characters is in a group therapy session. Jessie Pinkman, a meth dealer, has a difficult time just “accepting” his actions without any objective payment. For him, to just “accept” and “move on” from his past and present failures leads him to see it correctly as absurd. *Breaking Bad*, season 4, episode 7, “Problem Dog,” directed by Peter Gould, aired August 28, 2011, on AMC.

<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* (Fall 2004): 55. Haidt and Joseph’s research is very interesting in light of the biblical teaching on the conscience in this area.

<sup>93</sup> Haidt and Joseph, “Intuitive Ethics,” 56.

the moral ledger. Intrinsic to the idea of retribution is that people must suffer in proportion to the suffering they inflicted. . . .The high degree of consensus across cultures regarding the value of fair punishment suggests that human intuitions about fairness and justice are so deeply rooted in evolution, psychology, and culture.”<sup>94</sup>

This desire for retribution and justice does not just apply to others’ actions; it also carries over into self-awareness and self-judgment. Guilt persists because people know that it cannot be banished without retribution and payment. A healthy conscience is testifying to a real and objective guilt. The only satisfaction for such guilt will be a “punishment” that “matched the crime.”<sup>95</sup> The healthy conscience exposes the true scope of an individual’s guilt and then directs the individual to the only place where those extensive crimes have been fully punished in history—the cross of Jesus Christ.

In giving focus to the need for acceptance and forgiveness, therpism is inadvertently supporting the central importance and necessity of having a good conscience—a conscience that identifies an approved status in one’s self-awareness. Therpism recognizes the vital importance of the healthy conscience, but it drastically veers off path when it redefines or abolishes guilt through mere choice and positive self-regard. There must be an objective standard and an authoritative assessment that is larger than the self. This objective standard and authoritative assessment will not be found in

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<sup>94</sup> Satel and Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed*, 139-40, 146. Also, Satel and Lilienfeld write,

Jonathan Haidt and colleagues showed clips from Hollywood films that portrayed injustice (one involving the rape and murder of a child, and another in which a slave’s foot is mutilated by a slave catcher). They next gave subjects a variety of endings and asked which one was the most “satisfying.” Among the alternative endings was the “revenge” option: The grieving mother violently kills her daughter’s rapist; the hobbled slave chops off part of the foot of the man who mutilated him. In the “catharsis” option, the mother undergoes “primal scream” therapy; the slave chops wood while visualizing the slave catcher’s foot. In the “forgiveness” ending, the victims joined a support group or become more active in church and learn to forgive the transgression that was committed. The viewers derived far less satisfaction from the scenarios in which the victims come to terms with their tragedies and forgive their transgressor. They wanted the perpetrators to pay. And it was most satisfying when the punishment matched the crime. At the same time, the viewers found gratuitous and less satisfying another ending in which the slave retaliated by murdering his catcher. (Satel and Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed*, 146)

<sup>95</sup> Satel and Lilienfeld, *Brainwashed*, 140.



the individual or even in one's community—neither of these are capable of providing stability and clarity in the evaluation of worth.

As Tim Keller writes,

We can't say to ourselves, "I don't care that literally everyone else in the world thinks I'm a monster. I love myself and that is all that matters." That would not convince us of our worth, unless we are mentally unsound. We need someone from outside to say we are of great worth, and the greater the worth of that someone or someones, the more power they have to instill a sense of self and of worth. Only if we are approved and loved by someone whom we esteem can we achieve any self-esteem. To use biblical terms, we need someone to bless us because we can't bless ourselves. We are irreducibly social and relational beings. We need someone we respect to respect us. We need someone we admire to admire us. Even when modern people claim to be validating themselves, the reality is always that they are socializing themselves into a new community of peers, of "cheerleaders," of people whose approval they crave.<sup>96</sup>

This concern for acceptance continues to be evident in the self-esteem ideology of therapsim mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter. In self-esteem ideology, the individual, or the self, is the agent self-referentially identifying esteem, worth, or value in oneself. There are two important questions to ask at this point: (1) Who is to be the primary agent in identifying esteem and worth in an individual? (2) What is the basis or foundation for the identification and recognition of worth or value? In therapsim, the agent is the self, and the basis is the "authentic" desires, emotions, and feelings of a deconstructed moral landscape.<sup>97</sup> In the "grace-moral ecology" of Scripture, the agent is the all-seeing and all-knowing God of the universe. An individual's conscience testifies to the perfect sight and knowledge of the divine. Therefore, the only basis for self-esteem will be something external to the morally bankrupt soul. Jesus Christ—and Jesus Christ

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<sup>96</sup> Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 125.

<sup>97</sup> Gail Sheehy writes,

You are moving away . . . away from institutional claims and other people's agenda. Away from external valuations and accreditations, in search of an inner validation. You are moving out of [social] roles and into the self. . . . Whatever counterfeit safety we hold form overinvestments in people and institutions must be given up. The inner custodian [i.e., conscience] must be unseated from the controls. No foreign [external] power can direct our journey from now on. It is for each of us to find a course that is valid by our own reckoning. (Gail Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* [New York: Bantam Books, 1976], 364, quoted in Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 125)

alone—is the one who provides the objective response and external approval for a person’s self-awareness and identity. Only being found “in Christ”<sup>98</sup>—that is, being connected to Jesus Christ and his atoning death on the cross—will provide the necessary objective and external approval for one’s self-awareness.

### **Therapism in the Christian Social Imaginary**

In Western culture as a whole, the move to therapism is part of the response to the imperious presence of the “ritual-moral ecology” of the early twentieth century. The harshly legalistic and self-focused tendencies in the “ritual-moral ecology” view of human nature and behavior overshadowed the social imaginary of that time period. Many came to realize that this approach was ineffective in producing vibrant life and upright moral behavior. This accurate critique of the deficiencies of a “ritual-moral ecology” led to the understanding that a “ritual-moral ecology” encourages pretense and endless religious or altruistic endeavors that are impotent in finding approval before God and others. Therapism rightly observed that human flourishing and moral vibrancy are impossible under this faulty “moral ecology.” However, therapism’s response to this critique has been found wanting—it is also unable to produce the human flourishing and moral vibrancy that it has been seeking.

Like the surrounding culture, the Christian “social imaginary” is heavily impacted by the therapism of the surrounding culture. The rest of this chapter considers this reality under the following headings: First, in much of the church, there is an embarrassment of law, sin, and guilt that leads to a refocusing of ministry that resembles the therapism of the surrounding culture. Second, therapism’s influence encourages the outsourcing of key pastoral ministry responsibilities to “professional therapists and counselors” because the focus of therapism is on disorder and past trauma, not on the

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<sup>98</sup> The phrase “in Christ” is a predominant theme of Paul (see, e.g., 2 Cor 5:17; Rom 6:3; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:6-10; 4:22-24).

moral and spiritual realm. Third, much of the church has embraced the “authenticity” of therapism instead of emphasizing the “gospel vulnerability” that focuses on Jesus Christ and is a fruit of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. Fourth, much of the church has given increasing focus to self through an inordinate attention to personality tests and self-knowledge at the exclusion of the soul-piercing and heart-discerning work of the Word of God (Heb 4:12).

Sadly, a major portion of the American evangelical church has been caught up in following the spirit of the age and mimicking the ideas and worldviews latent—but pervasive—in the surrounding culture. Much of the American church has developed a “religious secularization,” or what could be identified as secularization with a religious undercurrent. As Wells writes, “There are, in fact, gut-wrenching changes taking place in our Western societies. Our world is being shaken to its foundations. Instead of offering great thoughts about God, the meaning of reality, and the gospel, there are evangelical churches that are offering only littler therapeutic nostrums that are sweet but mostly worthless.”<sup>99</sup> An accurate exposure of the permeation of therapism in the church is the first step toward moving from therapism to biblical Christianity and the only way of offering the way of life and human flourishing to the world.

### **An Embarrassment of Law, Sin, and Guilt**

In the mid-to-late twentieth century, the influential pastor D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones insightfully exposed the increasing tendency for preaching and ministry to ignore the bad news about humankind’s moral dilemma and just focus on the positive aspects of the biblical message. Lloyd-Jones wrote, “There is something even worse than that about the situation as I see it, and that is that present-day preaching does not even annoy men, but leaves them precisely where they were, without a ruffle and without the slightest

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<sup>99</sup> Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 32.

disturbance.”<sup>100</sup> He then refers to Jesus’ teaching as a model for the church. He writes, “If ever anyone knew the love of God, if every “the love of God” was preached and understood by anyone, that one was Jesus Christ. . . Was his perfect ministry one in which no one was offended and at which no one took umbrage?” The ministry influenced by therapism leaves its listeners “precisely where they were” because where there is no exposure of sin and the individual’s moral dilemma, there is no need for God or the salvation he offers. Here, Lloyd-Jones acknowledged a problem that has only spread and increased in the evangelical church over the ensuing decades.

Apart from a radical fundamentalist sect within evangelicalism, the greatest fear of many pastors and churches is to be known as “the hell fire and brimstone” pastor or church. Of course, the response to the prevailing therapism is not to become harsh, judgmental, and unloving, but the great fear of being portrayed in this light often leads to a soft-pedaling of sin and judgment. Along with the surrounding culture, the church has, as Wells suggests, “drifted out of the moral world in which we once lived.”<sup>101</sup> Now, much of the church has shifted focus from sin and Christ’s atoning death to the psychological and therapeutic needs of the people. The emphasis is on how God is “there for you” and how God “provides what you need.” Again, Wells is insightful when he writes of therapism’s understanding of God’s love. Wells writes that therapism teaches that “God is love in that he makes us happy, that he gives us a sense of fulfillment, that he gives us stuff, that he heals us, that he does everything to encourage us each and every day. That is the prevailing view of God today.”<sup>102</sup> The biblical teaching is vastly different. The Bible presents a moral world where sin is the greatest barrier between humanity and true human flourishing, namely fellowship with God. Wells continues,

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<sup>100</sup> Quotation preserved in Iain Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899-1939* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Press, 1982), 207.

<sup>101</sup> Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 102.

<sup>102</sup> Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 34.

Ours (our world) today is deeply, relentlessly, and only therapeutic. The Bible's world is defined by God's character of holiness. Ours today is not. It is psychological. This is the difference between the God who is objective to us and the God who is subjective in the sense that he has disappeared into the self. . . . When postmoderns think about life in a psychological framework, they do so from the center of the self. It is the self that determines what salvation means and what life means. When we think about life within the moral framework that Scripture gives us, then we are thinking of it with God at its center.<sup>103</sup>

One of the major ways that therapism has permeated the Christian social imaginary is in a profound shift of focus. Instead of offering the unique and effective “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, many in the evangelical church have patterned their ministry after the approaches of consumer advertising and secular therapy. Moreover, as Cushman astutely recognizes in his analysis of the “empty self,” this type of ministry will be just as ineffective as advertising and therapy in filling up the “empty self”; it will only be able to “momentarily fill them [the empty selves] up.”<sup>104</sup> To accommodate Cushman's argument in a critique of the influence of therapism in the church, one could argue the following:

Unfortunately, many psychotherapies [or ministries] attempt to treat the modern self by reinforcing the very qualities of self that have initially caused the problem: its autonomous, bounded, masterful nature. The patient [or the parishioner] is diagnosed as empty and fragmented, usually without addressing the sociohistorical [and moral] predicament that caused the emptiness and fragmentation. Thus, through the activity of helping, psychology's [or a ministry's] discourse and practices perpetuate the causes of the very problems it is trying to treat.<sup>105</sup>

Only with a return to the clear teaching of Scripture, the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, will ministries be able to address the “empty self” phenomenon in the surrounding culture produced by therapism. When the church knowingly or unknowingly allows its message and mission to be altered by the permeation of therapism in the

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<sup>103</sup> Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 34.

<sup>104</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 11.

<sup>105</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 12.

Western context, its ministry is severely impoverished and impotent in its purpose of delivering hope to the world.

### **The Outsourcing of Counseling Responsibilities**

As David Powlison writes, “During eras when church life has been vibrantly responsive to Scripture, pastors have counseled well and wisely. They have understood that their pastoral calling includes a significant ‘counseling’ component.”<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, counseling is not just the pastor’s calling but that of every member of the church. As Paul establishes in Ephesians 4, a focus of the pastor’s role is to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry” (v. 12a). For a local church to effectively care for every member, a pastor cannot be the solo counselor. The pastor “equips” others; he gives the necessary tools and knowledge to members so that they may effectively care for one another. The goal, Paul writes, is

for the building up the body of Christ, until we all attain the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. (Eph 4:12b-14)

This passage of Scripture, along with the many “one another” passages of Scripture (Rom 12:5, 10, 16; 1 Cor 12:25; 2 Cor 13:1; Gal 5:13; 6:2), encourages every Christian to consider the counseling mandate given to them by Jesus Christ. Of course, there will be different gifts and abilities in the church, but each Christian is called to fulfill this mandate through the power of God at work in them. Each follower of Christ can strive to become a better counselor by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15a). Through this active—often organic—counseling ministry in the local church, the church will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole

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<sup>106</sup> David Powlison, “The Pastor as Counselor,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 26, no. 1 (2012): 23-39.

body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up on love” (vv. 15b-16).

Scripture does not mandate that every church have an official counseling ministry with staff, hours, and the like, but every healthy church is called to an organic counseling movement that encourages people to walk “side by side”<sup>107</sup> toward living under what has been described in this dissertation as the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. Through this method of counseling and member-to-member care, the church is equipped and able to manage many of the counseling needs in the church community. Through the influence of therapism, however, many in the church have been sidelined—or have sidelined themselves—from this essential calling of counseling toward human flourishing. The heightening of mental or physical disorder and the focus on past trauma as the definitive causations for all human maladaptive behavior have transitioned counseling from the church to the professional therapeutic realm.

Many in the church have willingly accepted this transition from church pastoral care to professional therapy, thus relinquishing the calling of the whole church to engage in pastoral care. The problem with this transition is that therapism is the predominant mindset and method for most secular therapy practices. As W. W. Meisner advises fellow therapists, “The therapist will not impose or otherwise induce his personal values on the patient . . . . The exploration and acquisition of more constructive and less neurotically determined values [is] conducted without ethical or moral pressures or suasions of any kind.”<sup>108</sup> Therapists who adhere to the major premises and guidelines of therapism will completely ignore the moral and ethical realm. They will counsel in a way that complies with “the assumption that in every human being there is a core selfhood

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<sup>107</sup> Ed Welch, *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

<sup>108</sup> W. W. Meissner, “The Psychotherapies: Individual, Family, and Group,” in *Harvard Guide to Psychiatry*, ed. Armand M. Nicoli, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 418-19.

that if allowed free and unconflicted expression would provide the basis for creative, adaptive, and productive living.”<sup>109</sup> This accepted instruction from *The Harvard Guide to Psychiatry* reinforces therapism’s dangerous tenets of tolerance, independence from authority, and focus on the self. These ideas will, as has been argued throughout this dissertation, only further entrench counselees in their cavernous selves and ultimately lead to chaos, confusion, and deeper needs. Although many in the church are intimidated by the training and titles of many therapists, an examination of what is actually happening in the therapy of therapism should give confidence to pastors and to individual Christians in their call to counseling. The resources of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture far outweigh the meager resources of therapism. Certainly, every Christian will not be at the level of maturity and giftedness needed to counsel in every situation. However, the church as a whole must step into this important and vital calling.

The church must not relinquish its calling to care for one another by “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). God’s Word presents a distinct and effective method of counseling that stands in stark contrast to therapism. Of course, counselors should never impose their tastes, preferences, and independent ideas on their counselees, but the heart of counseling is to lead people to see and live according to what is truly valuable and good. The moral values of God have been revealed in Scripture and placed in the heart of every human being (Rom 2:15). Only this moral focus of Scripture, which is in the context of the broader “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, will lead to true help and “creative, adaptive, and proactive living.”<sup>110</sup> When people are encouraged to find and live out their own individual values without any outside instruction and help, when they are counseled to “just look within and follow your desires,” they are led into selfishness, isolation, broken relationships, and greater heartache. The purpose of Christian ministry

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<sup>109</sup> Meissner, “The Psychotherapies,” 419.

<sup>110</sup> Meissner, “The Psychotherapies,” 41.



is to lead people to an awareness and receptivity of the truth of God. The call of God on the church community is to lead one another to wisdom and love. As David Powlison writes, “The whole nature of ministry is to “impose” light into darkness, to induce sanity, to form Christ’s life-nourishing values within us. Pastoral counseling openly brings “ethical or moral suasions” as expressions of genuine love that considers, the actual welfare of others.”<sup>111</sup> If the church abandons its call to counseling, it leaves people immersed in the ineffective—and even dangerous—focus, methods, and practices of therapeutics.

The church cannot pass off its responsibility of counseling to therapists who ignore the moral and spiritual realms. In this way, the core human problem will not be addressed. Human beings are persistently moral and spiritual. The context of human interaction is moral. The problem in human relationships is primarily moral. God, who brings wholeness and life, is moral. True help—effective help—cannot ignore the thick moral space of the human context. Sin must be defined and exposed. Moreover, unlike a “ritual-moral ecology,” the “grace-moral ecology” will most definitely lead to and focus on the place where sin has been completely and finally dealt with—the cross of Jesus Christ. The power for change, growth, and true human flourishing must be at the center of the counseling endeavor. The way of the cross, the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, is the ultimate resource for effective counseling. Every other aspect of the counseling endeavor is effective as it relates to this foundation.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote,

The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is. Worldly wisdom knows what distress and weakness and failure are, but it does not know the godlessness of man. And so it does not know that man is destroyed only by his sin and can be healed only by forgiveness. Only the Christian knows this. In the presence of a psychiatrist I can only be a sick man;

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<sup>111</sup> Powlison, “The Pastor as Counselor,” 26-27.

in the presence of a Christian brother I can dare to be a sinner. The psychiatrist must first search my heart and yet he never plumbs its ultimate depth. The Christian brother knows when I come to him: here is a sinner like myself, a godless man who wants to confess and yearns for God's forgiveness. The psychiatrist views me as if there were no God. The brother views me as I am before the judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.<sup>112</sup>

A restoration of focus on the reality of the conscience as it is taught in Scripture will equip and encourage Christians to move toward one another with the love and in the authority of Jesus Christ. The most effective counseling is connected to the objective realities of life—the moral horizons in which all people live, the moral dilemma into which all have fallen, and the moral and loving response of Jesus Christ. The counselor who inhabits the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is able to lead people to the “judging and merciful God in the Cross of Jesus Christ.”<sup>113</sup> This moral world is situated in the social or relational world, of which God is the center. When people, through the grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, are led to forgiveness and acceptance in the moral world, they are at the same time led to a right relationship with God that will affect all relationships. The moral and social contexts of humanity are deeply connected and overlapping.

The moral world deeply matters because through an understanding of one's relationship to what is moral, individuals are led to an understanding of their “relation to the good.” Returning to the key insight of Charles Taylor, “to know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand to the good.”<sup>114</sup> The central question of identity is either lost or established through the content of the counseling people receive. Therapism's message leads to greater chaos and confusion because people “attempt to treat the modern self by

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<sup>112</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 115.

<sup>113</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together and Prayerbook of the Bible*, 115.

<sup>114</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

reinforcing the very qualities of self that have initially caused the problem.”<sup>115</sup> This approach just perpetuates the internal struggles of the individual. While a counseling based on the truths of God will lead to a correct understanding of self, one’s identity, and of one’s purpose in this world. It is the responsibility of the church to address the predominant influencing factors of the moral and relational contexts in which all people live in light of the centrality of the cross.

### **Authenticity instead of Gospel Vulnerability**

The authenticity of therapism has permeated the teaching and practice of the evangelical church. In response to the bleak and austere “ritual-moral ecology” of parts of the church, many have emphasized authenticity as the mark of real Christianity. As Brett McCracken writes, “Evangelicalism—both on the individual and institutional level—is trying hard to purge itself of a polished veneer that smacked of hypocrisy.”<sup>116</sup> However, the wrong turn that many have made at this point is to see “living out of conformity to how one feels” as hypocrisy. According to this understanding of hypocrisy, the “authentic” Christian will always search for and live according to one’s deepest feelings and desires. Furthermore, the honest portrayal of one’s brokenness, weakness, and faulty or sinful feelings (i.e., struggles with temptation and sin) becomes the height of spirituality and the purpose of Christian community. However, hypocrisy is not living contrary to one’s desires, but living contrary to what one believe is true. As McCracken writes, “To live in conformity with what I believe, in spite of what I feel, isn’t hypocrisy; it’s integrity.”<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Cushman, *Travels with the Self*, 12.

<sup>116</sup> Brett McCracken, “Has ‘Authenticity’ Trumped Holiness?,” *Gospel Coalition*, January 26, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/has-authenticity-trumped-holiness-2/>.

<sup>117</sup> McCracken, “Has ‘Authenticity’ Trumped Holiness?”

In thought and practice, “Christian authenticity” is eerily similar to the “authenticity” of therapism, with just a thin religious overlay. In this emphasis on authenticity in the church, God is referenced; he is a support to individuals “being true to themselves” and an aide to the process of “finding the authentic self.” The problem with this focus on authenticity and brokenness in the church is that it diminishes the clear biblical challenge of growing in the awareness of sin, moving toward repentance and faith in the work of Jesus Christ, followed by a pursuit of righteousness and holiness through the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The authenticity that has infiltrated the church leads to a distorted understanding of sin. Sin and moral failure become the point of contact with others. Instead of turning and hating sin, it seems to be almost applauded in certain Christian settings.

The Christian social imaginary is merely acquiescing to the modern social imaginary of therapism. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor references the French Writer Andre Gide. Gide equates true morality and authenticity. For Gide, the greatest moral commitments flow from the “authentic life.” Like many others following the spirit of the age, Gide’s moral compass is guided by “find yourself, realize yourself, release yourself.”<sup>118</sup> This is displayed in Christian communities when individuals are encouraged to be authentic without an emphasis on one’s gospel identity and gospel transformation.

This paradigm shift toward authenticity drastically affects the ministry desired and given in the church. As Colin Hansen asks, “Has the preaching of their churches and teaching of their parents weaned them off a need for individual authenticity?”<sup>119</sup> This is a “test of genuine faith,” Hansen continues, “where you see holiness, sacrifice, and love, you see religion that delights in God, religion that can survive a secular age. . . In our

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<sup>118</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

<sup>119</sup> Colin Hansen, ed., *Our Secular Age: Ten Years of Reading and Applying Charles Taylor* (Deerfield, IL: The Gospel Coalition, 2017), 11.

modern language, they're signs that we're following the risen Christ and not just treating therapeutic needs." If the primary aspect of a person's situation is "brokenness," then the focus of the ministry is healing, encouragement, and hope. To be clear, this feature should mark every ministry. However, there is more to a person's situation than "brokenness." Sin is a fundamental reality that produces profound damage in individuals and communities. If sin is recognized, the focus of ministry will also include repentance, atonement, and a new way of life through the Holy Spirit.

Sadly, the therapeutic payoff of authentically sharing "brokenness" with others often serves as a faux-atonement and temporary fix for the ongoing struggle and guilt of sin. This therapeutic payoff keeps many in the church from a true turning from sin and real forgiveness through the atonement provided through Christ's work on the cross. Many within the church have voiced concerns about the common pattern in men's accountability groups where each person shares his struggles and defeats in the area of pornography and then the men go around affirming God's love. The danger is in the partial truth of this type of community. The church is called to "confess our sins to one another" (Jas 5:16). Recognition of the rebellious nature and moral disgust of sin is an essential part of true confession of sin. If this part of confession is neglected, the cross and its work is diminished. Certainly, the church is called to remind one another of the unending love of God. However, God loves his children so much that he will not leave them in their "brokenness" and continual bondage to sin. He works to release and free. The church is called to "remind one another of the deceitfulness of sin" and point to the path of repentance and faith in the cross. This approach will lead to a mortification of sin that looks much different from the "authenticity" that marks much of church culture.

The biblical teaching on the conscience is an important part of the correction to this tendency in the church. The conscience leads to a consideration of an individual's deepest problem—sin and separation from God. The pain of the healthy conscience accurately interprets the significance of sin in a person's life, and it continues to work by

not stopping at conviction and guilt but by leading to the only place of help and healing—the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ in the place of sinners. This reality impacts one’s initial break from sin and connection to God, and it impacts the ongoing battle with sin throughout one’s life. As Harrison writes,

Moments of spiritual restlessness, questioning, even downright terror, are a blessing, not a curse. They are servants of . . . an “awakened conscience,” a growing awareness that we are adrift from our Maker, that something has gone badly wrong with the world, and indeed that there is disorder in our own hearts. The simplistic blandishments of boosterism [therapism] can be an ally in the hardening of conscience, promoting resistance to the gospel, because they shore up the illusion of self-importance. So there *is* no self-esteem solution to metaphysical insecurity. There is a gospel solution. . . . God in his grace has pursued us, paid the penalty for our sin at the cross and given us a new identity as loved sons and daughters. This is the only basis for a realistic view of ourselves that is grounded in truth, capable of dealing with ultimate questions of human existence.<sup>120</sup>

### **Pursuit of Self-Knowledge through Personality Analysis**

Another way in which therapism has permeated segments of the Western evangelical church is in a focused pursuit of self-knowledge through personality analysis at the expense of interaction with the soul-piercing Word of God (Heb 4:12-13). This movement of focus from Scripture to personality analysis has been a capitulation to the self-focus of therapism and a distraction from the Word of God as the primary means of pastoral care, self-knowledge, and Christian growth.

Throughout its history, the church has faced challenges to its focus on the Word of God. Various forms of mysticism have arisen at different times within the church that have given focus to and emphasized the internal dynamics of the soul to the detriment of the instrumental work of the Word of God.<sup>121</sup> The church’s fascination with different approaches to personality analysis produces the same dangerous tendency of

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<sup>120</sup> Harrison, *Ego Trip*, 136.

<sup>121</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Thy Word Is Still Truth: Essential Writings on the Doctrine of Scripture from the Reformation to Today*, ed. Richard Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: Westminster Seminary Press, 2013), 654.

diminishing focus on God's Word as the key to understanding the world, the self, and the God of the universe.

From the end of the twenty-tens and now into the twenty-twenties, the Enneagram test has become a very influential approach to personality analysis in the Western evangelical church. The Enneagram, an ancient esoteric self-discovery tool, resurfaced in the Fourth Way spirituality movement in the mid 1900's. The Enneagram's popularity grew when it started making inroads into psychoanalysis in the 1980's. The "Christian" version of the Enneagram is a recent phenomenon. Although it may provide some value in a growing awareness of the tendencies and strengths and weaknesses in one's personality, the current focus of many Enneagram teachers and disciples leads to and climaxes in a therapeutic quest that ends in the self. Many Christians' focus on the Enneagram are well-intentioned, but the Enneagram subtly encourages a mimicking of the therapeutic focus in the surrounding culture. The Enneagram's primary focus is a deeper quest into the knowledge of the self as the primary means to human flourishing. As has been argued in this dissertation, self-knowledge and awareness are important. However, they cannot—and must not—be the final goal and focus of Christian discipleship. Going deeper into the self is not the way to find meaning, purpose, one's identity, or guidance for behavior and relational interaction.

An awareness and understanding of the surrounding culture's ideology of therapism is very helpful in discerning the weaknesses of the focus on the Enneagram in the life and ministry of the church. By encouraging a focus on the Enneagram as a path to self-awareness, segments of the church have unknowingly shifted the focus of ministry away from a knowledge and pursuit of God to a knowledge and pursuit of self. One is hard-pressed to find anything in Scripture that is similar to the Enneagram's approach to self-awareness and personal growth.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, the focus on an individual's

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<sup>122</sup> Also, the history and origin of the Enneagram should give Christians pause in their adoption of its framework for self-understanding. William Patrick Patterson, *Taking with the Left Hand: Enneagram*

personality tendencies often leads to a reserved acceptance of sinful behavior and a lessened responsibility for individual and relational faults. As Christa Threlfall writes, “Sometimes instead of using our personality-test results as a tool, we can almost view them as an infallible declaration of who we are and how we will act. Even worse, we can use them as an excuse for sin.”<sup>123</sup>

Just as therapism has led the broader culture to a dangerous inward turn that entrenches people in themselves, so too has an inordinate focus on personality analysis in the church. The Enneagram and other personality tools that have received focus in the recent history of the church support specific ideological commitments of the therapeutic, pop-gnostic emphasis of the last fifty years: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. . . . Value, above all, knowledge—the self-knowledge which is insight.”<sup>124</sup> Jamie Manson’s critique of therapeutic culture also serves as a critique of this inordinate focus on personality analysis. Manson writes, “‘The self’ becomes an individual’s vocation.”<sup>125</sup> Christians who focus on the Enneagram still speak of sin, but often the emphasis is on a therapeutic definition of sin. According to the Bible, sin is a lawlessness under the fixed moral horizons of God. According to Richard Rohr—one of the most influential Christian Enneagramists—and Andreas Ebert, “Sins are fixations that prevent the energy of life, God’s love, from flowing freely. [They are] self-erected blockades that cut us off from God and hence from our own authentic

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*Craze, People of the Bookmark, and the Mouravieff ‘Phenomenon’* (Fairfax, CA: Arete Communications, 1998), 21-46.

<sup>123</sup> Christa Threlfall, “Personality Tests Don’t Excuse Your Sin,” *Gospel Coalition*, January 25, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/personality-tests-dont-excuse-sin/>.

<sup>124</sup> Julia Yost, “Spirituality of the Suburbs,” *First Things* 296 (October 2019): 12-14.

<sup>125</sup> Jamie Manson, “Oprah and the Triumph of the Therapeutic,” *Grace on the Margins* (blog), *National Catholic Reporter*, May 25, 2011, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/oprah-and-triumph-therapeutic>.



potential.”<sup>126</sup> This alteration of definition and focus in the Enneagram profoundly adjusts the process and goals of soul-care in the church.

Many Christians committed to the Enneagram, and to other similar personality matrixes, will cite John Calvin as a support for their focus on this path to self-awareness. In the opening sentences of his monumental work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes that “the whole sum of our wisdom—wisdom, that is, which deserves to be called true and assured—broadly consists of two parts, knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.”<sup>127</sup> Calvin is upholding the importance of accurate self-awareness and knowledge, but his approach is not remotely similar to the therapeutic approach to self-awareness and knowledge. Calvin’s statement reveals that for him, knowledge of self is in the context of the voice of conscience and one’s essential relation to God and his law. Calvin writes, “the purpose of the second [the knowledge of self] is to show us our weakness, misery, vanity and vileness, to fill us with despair, distrust and hatred of ourselves, and then to kindle in us the desire to seek God, for in him is found all that is good and of which we ourselves are empty and deprived.”<sup>128</sup> Whereas the therapeutic focus of many of the supporters of the Enneagram would emphasize discovering and reclaiming “our God-given identity, with which we lost connection shortly after our arrival in this fallen world.”<sup>129</sup> The focus of Calvin aligns with the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture that emphasizes the discovering and reclaiming of a person’s imageness, fallenness, and foundness through the work of Jesus Christ.

As Wells writes,

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<sup>126</sup> Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective*, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Crossroad, 2019), 34.

<sup>127</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Robert White (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2014), 1.

<sup>128</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.

<sup>129</sup> Ian Cron and Suzanne Stable, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), 230.

We know ourselves to be wanderers from the path of what is true and right, to be rebels who lift up fists in defiance of God's rule in life. And it is only when we have plumbed our own weaknesses, our own waywardness, our willfulness, and have done so in light of who God actually is that we are ready to see the depths in his goodness, righteousness, and grace. We will not see him clearly in these ways until we *long* to see him. And we will not yearn to see God in this way until we have stood terror-struck in his presence. Strange as it sounds, our relationship to God is established, as Luther said, not on the basis of our holiness but on the basis of our sin. That is our *entrée* into the knowledge of God.<sup>130</sup>

Knowledge of God is the path to life and the means to human flourishing.

Calvin emphasized self-knowledge through the Word of God as a means to having an accurate understanding of God. The purpose of knowledge of God is that humankind may worship, honor, and find their lives in God alone. In contrast to a pursuit of self-knowledge through personality analysis, Scripture is presented as a soul-penetrating means to accurate knowledge of self that probes much deeper than any study that reveals one's personality tendencies, strengths, and weaknesses. The writer of Hebrew articulates this important function of Scripture, saying, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:12-13).

A focus on the Word of God will give more penetrating insights into aspects of an individual's personhood than any man-made personality analysis tool. The Word of God is effective and powerful to reveal weakness and sin to a person's conscience. It is able to help an individual discern the accuracy or inaccuracy of the presence of guilt and shame in one's self-awareness. Furthermore, the Word of God leads to a correct understanding of the justice and mercy of God and one's relation to these central realities through the cross of Jesus Christ. As Peter T. O'Brien writes, these verses in Hebrews are "a warning about the trenchant character of God's word and its ability to render people

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<sup>130</sup> Wells, *God in the Whirlwind*, 127 (emphasis original).

naked and helpless before the living God himself, the Judge of all, to whom we must give an account.”<sup>131</sup> Then, in the following verses, “we are urged to approach the throne of grace with boldness in order to receive grace and mercy (Hebrews 4:14-16). We are completely at the mercy of God; the more desperate we are before his all-seeing eye, the more wonderful is his provision for our needs.” A focus on the self at the expense of the Word of God leads individuals in the wrong direction—away from the source of restoration and life. A focus on the self as revealed in Scripture and in the context of God leads individuals in the right direction—to the restoration of life and human flourishing.

### **Conclusion**

Observing the negative influence of therapism on the culture, as a whole, and on the Christian community, specifically, should lead to a resurgence of a focus on the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. A major aspect of this resurgence will be a consideration of the biblical concentration on the role of the conscience in self-awareness and identity formation. The culture and much of the church “both preach the same message: prosperity through realizing your own inner potential . . . . The American version has a veneer of orthodox religiosity”;<sup>132</sup> but, this veneer does not make the message any less dangerous. In fact, the subtle nature of the secularized and therapeutic may make it even more dangerous than the overt forms and ideologies in broader culture.

An essential task of the church is to recognize and respond to the therapism that permeates both the broader culture and the church. As Paul S. Williams has written, “If we are to love God with our minds, the first duty of a Christian is to be attentive and aware of the cultural stories around us that carry dangerous half-truths or falsehoods

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<sup>131</sup> Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 179.

<sup>132</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *Republocrat: Confessions of a Liberal Conservative*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2010), 27.

destructive to human flourishing.”<sup>133</sup> The biblical teaching of the conscience in the biblical context of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is the only way to effectively respond to the dangers and influence of the “half-truths” and “falsehoods” of therapism. The next chapter will outline the substance and practice of addressing the conscience in soul-care as an essential strategy for withstanding and opposing the pervasive influence of therapism in the culture and church.

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<sup>133</sup> Paul S. Williams, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians Can Thrive in a Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020), 157.

CHAPTER 4  
THE SUBSTANCE AND PRACTICE OF ADDRESSING  
THE CONSCIENCE IN SOUL-CARE

As a counselor seeks to care for individuals, it is essential that they guide them to the path of stable identity formation. This path necessarily addresses the moral context of each person's life. The counselee's conscience, when it is operating according to divine design, will help guide them to their moral situation, their moral need, and the only moral fix in the atoning death of Jesus Christ and an individual's union with him by faith. God designed the conscience as a tool for the proper formation of one's identity as found "in Christ." As Anthony Hoekema writes, "The ultimate basis for our positive self-image must be God's acceptance of us in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Christian scholars have articulated their concerns that the conscience has been neglected in current models of ministry and soul-care. R. C. Sproul writes, "Today, we rarely hear about any reference to the conscience. Yet, throughout church history, the best Christian thinkers spoke about the conscience regularly. . . . When we turn to Scripture, we find that our consciences are a significant aspect of God's revelation to us."<sup>2</sup> Kevin DeYoung agrees with Sproul when he writes, "As much as the Bible talks about the conscience, it's remarkable how little we hear of it today."<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis of the conscience in both God's revelation and in the history of the church needs to encourage more of a focus on the formation and daily maintenance of

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Christian Looks at Himself* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 102.

<sup>2</sup> R. C. Sproul, "Is Your Conscience Captive to God?," *Desiring God*, January 23, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/is-your-conscience-captive-to-god>.

<sup>3</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *The Art of Turning: From Sin to Christ for a Joyfully Clear Conscience*. (Leyland, UK: 10Publishing, 2017), 13.

the conscience in counseling today. Counseling that follows the pattern of God’s revelation will emphasize this important category of the human soul. The conscience is initially cleansed and formed through conversion—repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The conscience is continually cleansed through a daily attention to the conscience by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Identity formation and human flourishing only proceed from a healthy conscience focused on the cross of Jesus Christ.

One of the clearest expressions of this focus on the conscience in the current Biblical Counseling movement is found in the ministry of Bob Kellemen. Kellemen’s book, *Counseling under the Cross*, explains how Luther’s focus on the conscience has impacted Kellemen’s approach to soul care.<sup>4</sup> In a chapter entitled, “Grace’s Prescription for the Soul,” Kellemen describes how Luther’s pastoral counseling gave focus to applying the gospel to the individual’s conscience. Kellemen describes Martin Luther’s approach as focusing on the following areas of the conscience: “calming the conscience, enlightening the conscience, liberating the conscience, renewing the conscience, strengthening the conscience, forgiving the conscience, and battling the fleshly conscience.”<sup>5</sup> Kellemen summarizes lessons from Luther’s approach in this way, “Grace is Christ’s prescription for our disgrace—forgiving medicine for sin, preventative medicine for victory over temptation, and cleansing medicine for victory over Satan’s condemnation.”<sup>6</sup> Kellemen encourages counselors to focus on addressing the conscience through the gospel of Jesus Christ that focuses on union with Christ by faith. This emphasis on grace is the focus of Scripture.

The argument of this dissertation is that the biblical teaching on the conscience provides a guide for the counselor as she seeks to guide her counselees in stable identity

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<sup>4</sup> Bob Kellemen, *Counseling under the Cross: How Martin Luther Applied the Gospel to Daily Life* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Kellemen, *Counseling under the Cross*, 148-68.

<sup>6</sup> Kellemen, *Counseling under the Cross*, 167.

formation. The counselor's calling is to inform, assess, and train the moral horizon and moral self-awareness of their counselees. This three-fold emphasis is particularly important in light of the ways therapeutics has permeated much of society, including many in the church. The path toward an increased focus on the conscience in soul-care will include the three following emphases: First, individuals must be led to an awareness of their conscience as a gift from God. They must understand that God designed the internal working of the conscience to explain the subjective and objective moral realities within which each person lives. Second, individuals must be instructed to train and inform their conscience by the "grace-moral ecology" of Scripture and not the competing moral "ecologies" of the contemporary age. This focus on the "grace-moral ecology" of the Bible will lead to a balanced instruction of the law of God in the context of the redemptive storyline of Scripture. Third, individuals must be encouraged to find appeasement for the guilt of conscience only through the atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross and not in the inadequate means promoted by the modern social imaginary.

In coming to an understanding of the biblical focus of counseling toward an awareness of the conscience, it is important to see the distinction between the biblical approach of addressing morality identity and the psycho-therapeutic and religious approaches to addressing this aspect of human personhood. As has been established in a previous section of this dissertation, the "grace-moral" ecology of Scripture uniquely addresses the moral identity of the person. Understanding the common approaches in psychology and religion that inhabit a "ritual-moral" or "therapeutic-moral" ecologies helps clarify the focus of Scripture on addressing moral identity. Throughout this section, the psycho-therapeutic and religious approaches to addressing guilt and morality will be examined in contrast to the "grace-moral" approach. Much of modern therapy and religious counsel focuses on activities like admission of sin, ritual, altruism, victimhood, and distraction as a response to a person's moral guilt. These approaches may temporarily assuage the sense of guilt in a person's experience, but they will not adequately address

the objective and subjective aspects of guilt in which people live. The atoning work of Jesus Christ must be held up as the only sufficient foundation for the removal of guilt, the awareness of true and lasting acceptance, and a stable sense of identity. Following the consideration of these three emphases on the conscience, this chapter will conclude with a methodology for counseling toward stable identity formation in light of the conscience.

Chapter 2 of this dissertation defended the importance of the healthy conscience for identity formation and human flourishing. This biblical teaching and emphasis on the conscience was distinguished from a natural religious or “ritual-moral ecology” understanding of ethics and the conscience. Chapter 3 explained how the secular and therapeutic social imaginary of Western culture has established a contrary “moral horizon” and has overshadowed considerations of the biblical conscience in counseling. The present chapter outlines the substance and practice of addressing the conscience in soul-care in the subversive moral contexts of therapism and natural religion that were considered earlier in this dissertation under the moral ecology frameworks of “ritual-moral” and “therapeutic-moral” ecologies.

Only the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture provides a correct understanding of the conscience and its role in identity formation. Therefore, effective counseling must proceed from a specific epistemology that centers on the special revelation of God in the Bible. Since the conscience is active in every human life and is a part of the natural revelation of God, many discussions on the conscience neglect to incorporate the important teaching and emphasis on the conscience that is evident in the special revelation of God.

The conscience is not just an ethical aspect of human experience that evaluates specific actions and behaviors, it is a divinely designed tool that informs an individual’s identity and position before the God of the universe. As the writer of Hebrews taught, through the blood of Jesus, an individual can obtain a “perfected conscience.” Moreover, Grant Macaskill writes, the Apostle Paul “speaks of the moral transformation of believers



themselves and not just the actions that they perform.”<sup>7</sup> This only happens through the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

When God’s special revelation is neglected or misinterpreted by religious and non-religious scholars, the conscience is skewed and misunderstood. As was argued earlier in this dissertation, those who are moral realists and hold to a “ritual-moral ecology” have a proper understanding of the existence of moral standards and laws. However, the focus of their understanding of the conscience specifically leads to a focus on the individual instead of the transforming work of God through Jesus Christ. Christian soul-care focused on the conscience and identity formation must maintain a focus on the cross and the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. The cross of Christ, and its implications for human living, are necessary in coming to a full-orbed understanding of the conscience and one’s identity. Therefore, this section will begin with a consideration of the role and intersection of special and natural revelation and the impact of a proper epistemology on addressing the individual’s conscience in soul-care.

### **Counseling Toward an Awareness of the Conscience**

Regardless of the faith commitments of individuals counselees, it is safe to assume that secularism and therapism have heavily influenced their perception of reality—including their understanding of themselves. Secularism and therapism have permeated the Western social imaginary to such an extent that both Christians and non-Christians carry certain assumptions about reality that stand in opposition to God’s Word and true reality. Harry Blamires accurately criticizes much of contemporary Christian thinking when he writes, “There is no Christian mind . . . . The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness unmatched in Christian

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<sup>7</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 25.

history.”<sup>8</sup> In the early 1990s, James Patterson and Peter Kim wrote that even though nearly all Americans would state that they believe in God, “the overwhelming majority of people (93 percent) said that they—and nobody else—determine what is and what is not moral in their lives. They base their decisions on their own experience, even on their daily whims.”<sup>9</sup> In the decades since, the percentage of Americans that believe in God has not drastically changed, but the emphasis of morality and human freedom as autonomous and individualized has drastically increased.

The counselor must investigate and inform the counselee’s foundational perspectives on God, morality, and self-awareness because these perspectives affect every aspect of the counselee’s situation, including their understanding of personal identity. Therefore, a foundational step in counseling must be to lead the counselee to consider the basis for her understanding of reality. The argument of the Christian worldview is that God’s revelation is the only stable foundation for an understanding of life and reality. Therefore, a proper understanding of Scripture will most accurately correspond to the individual’s personal experience. It is at this point that there is an important connection between one’s relation to the Word of God and one’s conscience. The Bible reveals the conscience as a fundamental tenet of an accurate understanding of reality. The Bible’s description of the role of the conscience conforms to the common experience of individuals. In this process of understanding human experience, the individual’s conscience is in the unique position of being an aide to the study of God’s Word. An understanding of God’s Word leads to a clearer understanding of life. The conscience is intended to testify, in accordance with the Scriptures, to what is real and true in a person’s experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (London: SPCK, 1963), vii, 3.

<sup>9</sup> James Patterson and Peter Kim, *The Day America Told the Truth* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 60.

## **Awareness of Conscience: Revelation**

An essential step in the counseling endeavor will be to assess and correct the foundations of the counselee's understanding of reality by leading the counselee to understand the central place of God's revelation in his life. From the foundation of God's revelation, the counselee will gain a better understanding of God, himself, and his position or standing within God's moral framework. Moreover, God's revelation alone can correct the common assumptions presented both in secular therapy and religious counseling absent the gospel of Jesus Christ. As has been argued in this dissertation, the conscience is a vital part of God's revelation of human nature and experience that leads to an understanding of moral identity, moral need, and moral reparation.

The secular mindset centers all knowledge on individuals' intuition, reason, and feelings. This subjective approach to knowledge only leads to chaos and confusion in their understanding of the world and themselves.<sup>10</sup> The religious approach may state that knowledge and awareness proceed from revelation, but absent a gospel-centered hermeneutic, this approach also misses the emphasis on grace in Scripture. Both the secular and religious approach must be corrected by the proper pursuit of reality through the God-given revelation of God in his Word. Although this is counter-cultural in the autonomous, relativistic, and secular world of the twenty-first century that holds to a new and divergent absolute morality, this foundational step is central to leading people to a correct view of themselves.

As K. Scott Oliphint argues in his book *Covenantal Apologetics*, "we are to think about and live in the world according to what it really is, not according to how it might at times *appear* to us."<sup>11</sup> There often is a difference between what seems true and what is true. The question counselors must ask of each of their counsees is "How do we

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<sup>10</sup> See pp. 92-96 of this dissertation.

<sup>11</sup> K. Scott Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics: Principles and Practice in the Defense of Our Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 35.

accurately learn the truth about the world and ourselves?” The Christian claim is that God is both Creator and covenant Lord. By calling God covenant Lord, the Christian faith is asserting that God, the glorious Creator, has entered into a relationship with humanity. The revelation of God in Holy Scripture is a declaration of God’s initiative in this relationship with humanity. In the revelation of Scripture, God communicates the truth concerning his nature, human nature, and the means of a covenant relationship between God and humanity. The Bible is the ultimate authority for an understanding of reality and human experience. As Oliphint writes, “Since he is Lord, his truth is truth in every place and for every person.”<sup>12</sup>

Individuals are led to a more accurate understanding of reality as they humble themselves before the Word of the covenant Lord. In this way, counselors must lead their counselees in a consideration of their ultimate authorities. The revelation of God presents the only authoritative witness to life in this world. Therefore, it is the only accurate guide to human flourishing. Again, the counselee must be brought to the understanding that Jesus is Lord, and Jesus has spoken. As Oliphint writes, “The Bible is authoritative not because we accept it as such, but because it is the Word of the Risen Lord. It has a claim on all people. Its truth is the truth for every person in every place.”<sup>13</sup> As has been argued in chapter 1 of this dissertation, the secular approach to knowledge is inaccurate and dangerous.<sup>14</sup> The revelation of God is the only authority that will lead to a cohesive and authentic understanding of the world and to individual identity.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Oliphint, *Covenantal Apologetics*, 37. In another book, Oliphint writes that the Bible is “the eyeglasses through which we see everything. If our eyesight is poor, no matter how wide we open our eyes, we do not have a clear view of things we see. But through the 20/20 vision of the Bible, we can see clearly.” K. Scott Oliphant, *Know Why You Believe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 11.

<sup>14</sup> See pp. 3-11 of this dissertation.

<sup>15</sup> John Frame writes, “What prevents us from constructing an absolutely crazy world? Only our faith. Only our faith assures us that there is a ‘real world’ that exists apart from our interpretation. Only God’s revelation provides us with a sure knowledge of that world and so serves to check our fantasies. Non-Christians, then, have no safeguards against such craziness, except for their tendency to live

Cornelius Van Til articulates the emphasis of revelation in the acquiring of accurate knowledge when he writes that “man’s mind is derivative.”<sup>16</sup> Van Til is communicating that contrary to the emphasis on individual “ultimacy and self-sufficiency” in human thinking, God’s revelation and human experience clearly present man as being in a dependent relationship with God. People will only understand the world and themselves through the revelation in which they are immersed. Van Til expounds the derivative nature of man’s mind:

As such it [man’s mind] is naturally in contact with God’s revelation. It is surrounded by nothing but revelation. It is itself inherently revelational. It cannot naturally be conscious of itself without being conscious of its creatureliness. For man self-consciousness presupposes God-consciousness. . . . God’s natural revelation was within man as well as about him. Man’s very constitution as a rational and moral being is itself revelational to man as the ethically responsible reactor to revelation. And natural revelation is itself incomplete. It needed from the outset to be supplemented with supernatural revelation about man’s future. Thus the very idea of supernatural revelation is correlatively embodied in the idea of man’s proper self-consciousness.<sup>17</sup>

As counselors sit before an individual, couple, or family, they are faced with the immensity of the task of connecting broken, hurting, and often confused people with care that will bring actual relief and guidance into their counselees’ lives. It is essential to recognize that part of the confusion in people’s lives originates in their embracing the social imaginaries of the West that rejects authority, ignores the revelation of God, or, if attentive to God’s Word, misunderstands the gospel focus of the Bible. Biblical counselors must interact “between two worlds”<sup>18</sup>—the world and experience in which counselees resides from day to day (with a secular-therapeutic or misguided religious

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parasitically off Christian capital” John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1987), 100.

<sup>16</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphant, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2008), 113.

<sup>17</sup> Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 113-14.

<sup>18</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Michael R. Emler, *CrossTalk: Where Life and Scripture Meet* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2009).

focus) and the world God has designed and described in Holy Scripture. The effectiveness of counseling directly correlates to counselors' abilities to discern and uphold truth as they contrast these "two worlds." They will need to determine which of counselees' thoughts, affections, and choices they expel and correct and which they should preserve and enforce. Similar to J. I. Packer's description of the "church's theologian," counselors are to be "the church's [and their counselee's] plumbers and sewage men, securing a flow of pure truth and eliminating theological effluent."<sup>19</sup>

Counselors must practice "plumbing" and "sewage work" of the soul that will bring the pure water of God's revealed truth into people's hearts, thus pushing out the heart "waste" produced by the secular-therapeutic or religious ideas and practices that dominate the Western mindset concerning morality and identity. As counselors function in this "plumbing" role, it is necessary that they continue to be aware of the biases of their own hearts and that they bring those biases into the light of Scripture.

Richard Lints points out the necessary interplay between two principles in theology and ministry: the reality principle and the bias principle. Lints is responding to the subjectivist dilemma that haunts evangelicalism, postmodernism, and the social imaginary in Western culture. The "reality principle" upholds the notion that there is objective truth and a reality that human beings can know. The "bias principle" recognizes that everyone interprets and understands the objective truth and reality of this world

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<sup>19</sup> J. I. Packer, "God's Plumber and Sewage Man," *Christianity Today* 36, no. 4 (April 1992): 15. See also Paul S. Williams's counsel to consider the power of cultural narratives:

We are tempted to assimilate or withdraw in light of the cultural dissonance of exile because all cultures are disciple-making cultures, whether they intend to be or not. The contemporary culture of late-modern capitalism is most certainly a disciple-making culture, and intentionally so. Every moment we are bombarded with messages designed to support and stimulate a cultural story of happiness, security, and health achieved through individual consumerist choices about what we have, invest, wear, do, and eat. Moreover, our very status as a worthy human is presented as our responsibility and choice to secure as part of the culture's encouragement that we endlessly reinvent our self-identity. (Paul S. Williams, *Exiles on Mission: How Christians can Thrive in a Post-Christian World* [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2020], 109).

through the grid of their individual and cultural experiences.<sup>20</sup> For counseling to be effective and holistically helpful, counselors will lead their counsees to progressively know and live under the “plausibility structure” of Scripture. Moreover, an important aspect of the “plausibility structure” of Scripture that is overshadowed or misunderstood by the therapism and secularism of culture or the legalism and man-centered focus of religion is the dynamic conscience in each person. A proper understanding of Scripture will lead to a greater awareness and understanding of the importance of possessing and maintaining a healthy conscience. A healthy conscience relates the objective truth of Scripture with the subjective experience of the individual. The healthy conscience is God’s way of leading an individual toward accurate self-awareness, self-acceptance, and human flourishing.

**Awareness of Conscience:  
Human Experience**

An important step in the counseling endeavor is to show how Scripture confirms and clarifies an individual’s inner experience. An individual’s struggle with guilt and a desire for acceptance must be understood in light of the truth-paradigm of God’s revelation. The Bible accurately describes human experience as dwelling in thick moral space. The expectation of revelation is that because of the work of the conscience, normal human experience would be characterized by a natural understanding of morality. This universal context of morality informs individuals’ identity and leads to their desire for acceptance and approval along with a concern for justice for themselves and their relational contexts.

A key aspect of the response to many of the soul-pathologies and psychiatric disorders of the present generation will be to establish both the moral context of the

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 19-28.

world and the individual's place in this moral context. This emphasis on morality and one's relation to moral space should not overshadow other aspects of the response to soul-pathologies and psychiatric disorders (e.g., medical, emotional issues).<sup>21</sup> The current social imaginary has overshadowed this central focus on morality in soul-care. Therefore, in order to correct the neglect of this important aspect of soul-care, counselors should direct counselees to the foundation of God's revelation. Moreover, from this foundation, counselors should also emphasize how their counselees' normal human experience as inherently moral is confirmed and clarified by the teaching of Scripture.

In the opening chapters of his classic work *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis gives focus to how normal human experience emphasizes the workings of the conscience through a personal concern for morality and the desire for acceptance and justice. His argument is that these natural aspects of human behavior and thinking presuppose and argue for a higher law and thus a higher power—namely, God. Lewis writes,

Every one has heard people quarrelling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?" – "That's my seat, I was there first" – "Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm" – "Why should you shove in first?" – "Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine" – "Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.

Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. . . . It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or rule or fair play or decent behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what

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<sup>21</sup> See pp. 108-14 of this dissertation.



Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.<sup>22</sup>

Lewis then summarizes his opening argument in two points:

These, then are the two points I wanted to make. First, that human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it. Secondly, that they do not in fact behave that way. They know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in.<sup>23</sup>

It is not hyperbole to claim that Lewis's apologetic approach in *Mere Christianity* provides counselors with an essential foundation for every counseling situation. Counselors must not assume that this moral foundation is present in their counselees' understanding of the world and themselves. As has been argued in chapter 3 of this dissertation, materialism and therapism have inundated the social imaginary of the West. This inundation has affected every person living in this environment. Counselors must take the time to explain the thick moral space in which all of humanity lives along with the individual's relation to morality—the conscience being God's designed element of man that testifies to man's position in God's moral framework.

Many of the soul-pathologies that dominate the Western world today flow from, or are intimately related to, the individuals' understanding of themselves and their relation to the good. Many who struggle with a feeling of being unacceptable, unworthy, or of loneliness feel this way because of their relation to God and his universal moral framework. An awareness of these moral categories is a necessary foundation for leading an individual to true human flourishing. Certainly, only a properly working conscience, properly communicating one's relation to God's moral framework, and directing to the only place of appeasement—the cross of Jesus Christ—will lead individuals to true human flourishing. Counselors must lead their counselees toward an understanding and

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<sup>22</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: HarperCollins, 1977), 15-16.

<sup>23</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 19.

awareness of their conscience and its roles in identity formation and human flourishing in light of Jesus and his death.

### **Counseling Toward the Formation and Daily Maintenance of the Conscience**

The second step in a focus on the conscience in counseling is to help the counselee in the formation and maintenance of her conscience according to the “grace-moral ecology” of God. For a counselee to understand how she must form and maintain her conscience, she must understand the key elements of moral law, moral uprightness, and moral acceptance in the “grace-moral ecology” of God in Scripture (see appendix 2 for a historical example of focus on the conscience in counseling). At this point in the counseling process, discernment of the major moral ecologies is vitally important.<sup>24</sup> When the moral categories of law, moral behavior, and acceptance are understood through the lens of the other competing moral ecologies, they become distorted and destructive to identity formation and the flourishing of the human person. The major cultural assumptions of secularism or religion in the modern West distort people’s understanding of these important moral categories.

For example, in Jonathan Sacks book on the importance of morality, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times*, he clearly and wisely articulates the need for the recovery of morality for the common good, but he gives focus to the power in the individual as the main impetus for change. He writes, “It (a return to morality and a concern for the common good) can be done in the future because it has been done in the past. And it begins with us, each of us as individuals. The moment we turn outward and concern ourselves with the welfare of others no less than with our own, we begin to change the world in the only way we can, one act at a time, one day at a time, one life at a

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<sup>24</sup> See pp. 14-15 of this dissertation.

time.”<sup>25</sup> These directives are inspiring and important, but if they are not grounded in the Scriptural ethic or the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible, individuals will either become proud in themselves for their manner of life and service or they will become discouraged with their inability to “concern themselves with the welfare of others.”

Certainly, the arguments of Sacks and others are important and helpful, but they miss the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ for moral transformation and the formation of one’s identity. Counselors must understand that most individuals, including many Christians, who come for counseling will be living in one of these competing moral ecologies and not the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. A natural bias in each human heart is to assume and lean into a form of “ritual-moral ecology.” Often, in time, the insufficiency of a “ritual-moral ecology” becomes evident. The easy response for many who come to see the weaknesses of a “ritual-moral ecology” is to embrace the predominant moral ecology of the West—a “therapeutic-moral ecology.”

The counselor must lead their counsees to, first, discern and examine their operating moral-ecology. Then, second, the counselor will present the alternative of living in the “grace-moral ecology” that is freely offered to all through the work of Jesus Christ. Although the last two sentences look like a simple two-step process, no counseling situation is that straightforward. The argument of this dissertation is that a foundational goal of counseling should be to expose the operating moral ecology of counsees and then establish the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. However, because these “ecologies” and “mindsets” are so ingrained in people’s worldviews, much focus must be given to move people more and more into the “grace-moral ecology.” Because of the natural aversion to a “grace-moral ecology” in every human heart, including the counselor’s heart, this work of living under God’s moral ecology will be life-long and

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<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Sacks, *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 309.

continual. Therefore, throughout the counseling endeavor, effective counseling will take great care to lead individuals toward more and more clarity in their operating moral ecologies. In different ways, counselees' moral-ecology will be exposed, and the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the assumed "moral ecology" should be contrasted with the "grace-moral ecology" that is central to Scripture. A key aspect of this endeavor will be leading counselees to a corrected understanding of law, morality, and acceptance within the "grace-moral ecology" of Scripture.

### **Moral Law, Moral Uprightness, and Moral Acceptance in the Grace-Moral Ecology**

The growing "therapeutic-moral ecology" of the Western mindset is at war with moral law and moral uprightness. Individual autonomy establishes a relativistic pursuit of each person's desires and impulses as the only "moral" certainties. The individual feelings of the authentic self are presented as the only "laws" of the land. In this mindset, objective law and morality are profoundly negative and enslaving ideas that are perceived to only diminish human flourishing. Likewise, the continued presence of a "ritual-moral ecology" also distorts and misunderstands the place of God's law.

Although the dominant mindset of a "ritual-moral ecology" is different from the "therapeutic-moral ecology" denial of objective law and morality, it encourages a low view of God's law and a burdensome and unmanageable pursuit of morality and acceptance. The "ritual-moral ecology" upholds law and morality as ideals, but the "law" and "morality" of this mindset become enslaving pursuits that are vastly different from the teaching of Scripture. Therefore, the skewed versions of "law" and "morality" in the "ritual-moral ecology" are dangerous ideals that greatly diminish human flourishing. Counselors must take great care to expose the wrong views of law, morality, and acceptance as they lead their counselees to a biblical, life-giving understanding of these categories.

## The Christian's Law

Moral law, moral uprightness, and moral acceptance are profoundly positive and life-giving categories in the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. As is emphasized in the Psalms, “the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than hone and the drippings of the honeycomb” (Ps 19:9-10). Later, the psalmist exclaims, “Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Ps 119:97). These exclamations of the goodness of the law of God are made within the context of the redemptive narrative of Scripture. They are made in light of the essential “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture of which Jesus Christ is the center. Jesus is the fundamental context for having a proper understanding of moral law, moral uprightness, and moral acceptance. Edmund Clowney is very perceptive when he writes, “without Jesus we can have no true understanding of the law.”<sup>26</sup> Many Christians who come for counseling are operating in a “Jesus-less” understanding of law and law-keeping. This mindset will either lead to discouragement under the exacting standards of the law of God or lead to pride through a diminishment of the law of God. Only a Jesus-context, or “grace-moral ecology,” is able to uphold the exacting standards of God’s law without leading to devastation for the individual. The biblical teaching on moral law, moral uprightness, and moral acceptance profoundly impacts human flourishing.

It is important to understand that God’s law functions as prophecy. The law reveals God’s purpose for humanity. The law provides a clear picture of God’s design for how people ought to live. In the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, a key purpose of the law is that it serves as a standard of life that is only “fulfilled” by Jesus Christ, the one who lived the perfect life. In his well-known Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaimed,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

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<sup>26</sup> Edmund Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), xiii.

Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:17-20)

In these words, Jesus upholds the whole of the Old Testament as well as, very specifically, the moral commandments presented within the Old Testament. He did not come to annul God's commands but to "fulfill" them. Jesus fulfills the law by "obeying it, but also by revealing its promise."<sup>27</sup> The law is only accurately understood as it is seen in the whole context of the redemptive story of Scripture that centers on Jesus Christ. In order for counselees to understand the important role of the law in forming and maintaining their consciences, they must be taught a proper perspective on the law of God as it is revealed in Scripture. Jesus Christ fulfills the whole law. This fulfillment of the law by Jesus Christ changes everything about people's interaction with the law.

The whole story of Scripture emphasizes the law of God and the essential relationship each person has to God and his law. A person only understands the place of God's law in her life when she understands Jesus's impact on the law. His work on the cross did not set aside the law.<sup>28</sup> His ministry did not merely affirm the law. Jesus fulfilled the law. He fulfills the law, as Patrick Schreiner writes, "by both performing the law and giving its true interpretation. . . . The law is still the law, but it now is in the mouth of the true lawgiver, law abider, and law liver. He takes the entire Torah (the yoke) upon himself. The *authority* of the OT law continues, but it does not *function* in the same way, because it inhabits a different epoch. . . . His performance and presence give new life to it."<sup>29</sup> Now, Christians can live with the law, with a clean conscience, because

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<sup>27</sup> Clowney, *How Jesus Transforms the Ten Commandments*, 8.

<sup>28</sup> See Patrick Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe: The First Gospel and its Portrait of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 141.

<sup>29</sup> Schreiner, *Matthew, Disciple and Scribe*, 146-48.

Jesus Christ has fulfilled and accomplished the law. He forgives and empowers his followers.

The law functions as universal standard that every person has not been able to meet. The law reveals God's purpose, design, and instructions for proper human behavior. However, an individual's consideration of the law quickly leads to a knowledge of moral lack. The "strange persistence of guilt," which Wilfred McClay references, and the "nagging sense of unworthiness," described by Robert Lifton, both confirm the presence of a universal moral standard in each individual's heart.<sup>30</sup> All human beings live and act as if there are right and wrong actions as well as a right and wrong manner of life. The only common-sense response to an examination of human living and experience is to assume a universal recognition of law in each person's heart—that is, the conscience. The standard of God's law must be upheld if people are going to make sense of the thick moral space in which every person lives. However, the result of upholding the innate standard of God's law will only lead to despair if the central message of the Bible—Jesus Christ—is absent.

The despair of not meeting the perfect standard of God's law is intended to lead individuals to a focus on Jesus Christ and his work on behalf of lawbreakers. The standard Christ upheld leads to clarity in discerning the universal problem. The standard of the law met in Jesus Christ leads to a stable hope. Jesus obeys the law and, by doing so, reveals the promise of God through his obedience. By his perfect life of obedience and through his propitiatory death in the place of sinners, Jesus fulfills the law and opens a way for lawbreakers to be forgiven and accepted as righteous in him. Therefore, biblical

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<sup>30</sup> See p. 5 of this dissertation.

Christianity is not a “guilt culture”<sup>31</sup> as Richard Sorabji claims, but a “grace culture” because of the centrality of Jesus Christ and his work in the place of guilty sinners.

The law, as upheld in Scripture, primarily directs individuals to Jesus Christ. The law works with the revelation of God and the Holy Spirit to convict and then point to faith in Jesus Christ as the way to a renewed relationship with God. This important response to God’s law leads to a very different way of forming and maintaining the individual conscience. The focus turns from mere obedience to repentance and faith in Jesus that leads to obedience. Jesus is the one who obeyed. Jesus is the one who perfectly met the standards of God’s law. Counselees will only find acceptance and peace of conscience through an intimate connection to Jesus Christ.

In certain phases of the church, this manner of forming and maintaining the conscience was remarkably understood and applied to individual Christians. Both the Reformers and the Puritans emphasized this approach to the conscience. Through their clear preaching and teaching, individuals were challenged to strive for obedience in the context of returning each day to an assurance of God’s love and acceptance in Christ. The gospel was central to “keeping the conscience.” For example, Puritan William Fenner wrote, “If we find that we have sinned, we must runne presently [at once] to the blood of Christ to wash away our sinne. We must not let the wound fester or exulcerated, but presently get it healed. . . . As we sinne daily, so he justifieth daily, and we must daily go to him for it. . . .”<sup>32</sup>

In his ministry, Fenner presented the clear teaching of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture on forming and maintaining one’s conscience. When one’s conscience convicts, one must listen. If the conviction is directing a person toward a

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Moral Conscience Through the Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 17.

<sup>32</sup> William Fenner, *A Treatise on the Conscience* in *Works of Fenner* (London: W. Gilbertson, 1657), 108, quoted in J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 115.



certain behavior or activity, it is important to respond in obedience. If an individual is concerned with the accuracy of the conscience's conviction, he must return to God's Word to form the necessary moral structures of the conscience.<sup>33</sup> If the conviction of conscience is from a wrong already committed—an offensive action or word—the person must continue forward under the eye of a loving God. As Fenner writes in another place, “we must labour to have our hearts grounded in the assurance of the love of God.” In Jesus Christ, God is not against his people. The cross of Christ leads people to his “grace in which we stand” (Rom 5:2) because “we have peace with God” (Rom 5:1). God is for his people—to support them and lead them to a flourishing life. The blood of Christ shed for his people is a cleansing for every sin. Counselors must encourage their counselees to see the centrality of the cross of Christ for the internal peace that flows from a cleansed conscience.

Every individual will continue to break God's law and sin daily. God, in his grace, “justifies daily.”<sup>34</sup> This cleansing of conscience is a necessary daily activity for the formation and maintenance of human flourishing. The path of repentance and faith is opened up through the work of Jesus Christ.<sup>35</sup> As was seen earlier in John Owen's comments on the book of Hebrews, through Jesus Christ and his death, “there is a state of perfect peace with God to be attained under imperfect obedience.”<sup>36</sup> The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is the only moral ecology that upholds the law of God and offers true peace and human flourishing.

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<sup>33</sup> See pp. 20-24 of this dissertation.

<sup>34</sup> Fenner, *A Treatise on the Conscience*, 108, quoted in Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 115.

<sup>35</sup> Seventeenth-century Baptist Theologian Andrew Fuller addresses this concern in one of his fictional letters between Crispus and Gaius: “When did Christ or his apostles deal in such compromising doctrine (preaching morality alone)? Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, were the grand articles on which they insisted.” Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2007), 305.

<sup>36</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 6, *Hebrews 8:1-10:39* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 251. See also p. 68 of this dissertation.

The next section of this dissertation will further explain the distinctive approaches of the differing moral ecologies in responding to moral guilt. The faulty responses to moral lack that will be considered are based on the “ritual-moral” or “therapeutic-moral” ecologies that are present in much of secular and religious counseling. The only legitimate and effective response to moral lack is a focus on Jesus Christ and his work on behalf of individuals. This response is inherent in the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture.

### **Attempts at Appeasing the Guilt of Conscience**

The more one investigates the clear moral dimension of human experience, the more one will see how certain behaviors and thought patterns fit with the assumed moral context of life. Following Lewis’s arguments from the opening pages of *Mere Christianity*, whether or not people acknowledge the thick moral space in which they live, they operate under universal moral categories in their life. Only those content with nonsensical and nihilistic views of human life even attempt to erase all moral categories. Because this reality is the case, there are several ways in which people pursue moral sanity in this morally insane world. Counselors must discern and explain how certain activities and response patterns in their counselees’ lives are either attempts at appeasing the guilt of their conscience or, as Dorothy Sayers writes, “defense mechanisms against self-questioning because, to tell the truth, we are very much afraid of ourselves.”<sup>37</sup> Whether or not it is recognized, people are continually operating in moral categories. Individuals consider their thoughts, behaviors, and actions as moral currency. Sadly, however, so many people are weighed down with massive moral debt, and their attempts at getting out from under its weight have been ineffective and oppressive.

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<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Sayers, *Letters to a Diminished Church: Passionate Arguments for the Relevance of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 8.

The argument of Scripture is that guilty feelings often point to a guilty status. Many of the attempts at appeasing the conscience are faulty in that they may alleviate the subjective feeling of guilt for a time and thus provide psychological benefit, but they do not address the fundamental and objective guilty status of individuals. First, this section will consider the five inadequate attempts at appeasing the guilt of conscience. These five inadequate attempts at appeasing the conscience are admission, altruism and good works, ritual, victimhood, and distraction and diversion. These attempts do not address the guilty status of individuals. Therefore, they are unable to adequately lead people to a freedom from guilt and a true sense of acceptance before God and others.

Second, this section will consider the only legitimate means of appeasing the guilt of conscience which is the forgiveness and cleansing divinely given through the cross-work of Jesus Christ. Only the approach of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, which focuses on the work of Jesus Christ, will lead to true cleansing, forgiveness, and freedom.

### **Admission**

The internal struggle of guilt in one’s conscience often feels like a pressurized compartment of moral filth in one’s soul. There is a great desire for relief from the pressure. Thomas Watson remarks that church father Origen of Alexandria called confession the “vomit of the soul whereby the conscience is eased of that burden which did lie upon it.”<sup>38</sup> Throughout history, in the religious and therapeutic spheres of soul-care, admission of guilt has been promoted as a valuable way to release the internal moral pressure. To be clear, confession of sin is encouraged and taught in Scripture (e.g., Ps 38:13; Prov 28:13; Jas 5:16; 1 John 1:5). However, when confession of sin is removed

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 32.

from the context of the cross and the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, it becomes something drastically different from a biblical confession of sin.

Similar to the observations made earlier in this chapter about understanding God’s law in the context of the “moral ecology” of Scripture, if confession is *merely* the admission of sin, it is distorted and detrimental to human flourishing. A confession that is taken out of the context of the gospel emphasis of Scripture will only provide temporary relief and inadequate help to the individual.

Whether the admission of sin is in a Christian accountability group, an AA meeting, or just in casual conversation with friends, it is ineffective if the person does not own his sins and bring them to the place of divine punishment—the cross of Jesus Christ. Rosaria Butterfield wisely distinguishes between a person “admitting” and “confessing” his sins when she writes, “When we only admit a problem or concern or difference or something about us that we know is not right, we posture in blame shifting.”<sup>39</sup> Content with “admitting” sin, we casually remove our real and deep connection to it and ask others to “understand” it. Confessing, on the other hand, is the path of true repentance. “When we confess sin, we own it.” Owing sin leads away from excuses and toward the cross of Jesus Christ. Again, Butterfield is extremely helpful when she writes,

Christians who indulge the habit of admitting rather than confessing sin over time tend not to see their sin as sin at all. It just seems like life. At first, they may hate the sin. They may truly wish to be free of it. . . . Indeed, strong personalities can and do make behavioral changes on the grounds of will, many of these for the good of their health and well-being. But there is no new life found in the fruit of a self-willed behavioral change. Only the risen Lord can give new life. What separates the admitting of sin from the confession of sin is the cross of Jesus Christ. . . . We come to the cross in repentance, and it is at the cross that we are, over time and affliction, transformed, partly here on earth, but completely in glory (1 John 3:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). . . . As believers, what makes us “us” is not that we all struggle with lust or anger or laziness or sex addiction. What makes us “us” is that we have been broken in our sin, and we find our identity in the risen Christ.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rosaria Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered: Further Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert on Sexual Identity and Union with Christ* (Pittsburg: Crown and Covenant, 2015), 68.

<sup>40</sup> Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*, 70-71.

In the early days of the Reformation, a major impetus for Martin Luther's stand against the church of his day was his study of the process of confession and repentance in the life of the Christian. Luther came to realize that the Roman Catholic church wrongly viewed confession in a "ritual-moral ecology" context. Although many who respond to guilt by mere admission of sin are not directly influenced by the Roman Catholic Church, the Catholic understanding of confession is a clear example of the hollowness of this approach. The act of confession in the Catholic Church of Luther's day was seen as the first step in the act of appeasing the guilt of one's conscience. Upon the confession of sin, the individual was then encouraged to "do penance" in order to find complete cleansing.

The practice of the Roman Catholic Church continues to present the act of confession in this pre-Reformation way, and this marks many religious approaches to addressing guilt. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that confession confers grace through "signs, gestures, and works of penance."<sup>41</sup> The sacrament of Penance in the Catholic Church, of which confession is a part, is described as a threefold process. First, there must be contrition in the heart of the individual. This is a grief and hatred over one's sin with a commitment to avoid it. Second, there must be auricular confession of the sin to a priest, who is granted the ability to absolve the sin of the individual. Third, the church grants satisfaction of sin, which is the "willing acceptance or performance of some task imposed as compensation and as a token of good faith and willingness to accept the penal consequences of sin."<sup>42</sup> To be fair, the official teaching of the Catholic Church states that the absolution of sin takes place in the second step, when the priest absolves sin on the basis of the work of Christ. However, the practice and emphasis of the

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<sup>41</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 1430, quoted in Gregg Allison and Chris Castaldo, *The Unfinished Reformation: What Unites and Divides Catholics and Protestants after 500 Years* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 109.

<sup>42</sup> V. White, *God and the Unconscious* (New York: World, 1952), 182.

sacrament of Penance upholds a “ritual-moral ecology,” whereby forgiveness and cleansing are often tied to the auricular confession and to the “do penance” focus of Catholic confession and penance.<sup>43</sup>

Counselees who have been raised in a Roman Catholic context must be encouraged to see the proper place of confession of sin in the appeasement of the guilt of conscience. Forgiveness and cleansing come through Jesus Christ and his work on the cross, not in any auricular confession combined with acts of penance. However, as was stated earlier, the Catholic Church’s confusion on the role of human activity in appeasing

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<sup>43</sup> Gregg R. Allison helpfully explains the Sacrament of Penance in more detail when he writes,

As for the acts of the penitent, three are required: contrition, confession of sins, and satisfaction. In first place is *contrition*, which is “sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed, together with the resolution not to sin again.” Contrition is of two types: (1) *perfect contrition* (also called *attrition* and *contrition of fear*) “is born of the consideration of sin’s ugliness or the fear of eternal damnation.” The fruit of perfect contrition is the remission of venial sins as well as the “forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes the firm resolution to have recourse to sacramental confession as soon as possible.” The fruit of imperfect contrition is the disposition to initiate the process leading to absolution, but by itself such contrition “cannot obtain the forgiveness of grave sins.”

The second act of the penitent is the *confession of sins*, which entails acknowledgement of one’s sins, taking responsibility for them, and opening oneself to God and to the Church. There is more. “Confession to a priest is an essential part of the sacrament of Penance: ‘All mortal sins of which penitents after a diligent self-examination are conscious must be recounted by them in confession.’” Such sins include both open and secret sins. The penitent says, “Forgive (or bless) me, father, for I have sinned. It has been \_\_\_\_ [the length of time; e.g., three months] since my last confession and these are my sins: \_\_\_\_” (they are confessed). After the priest has given counsel, the penitent makes an act of contrition; for example: “O, my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended you. I detest all my sins because of your just punishment, but most of all because they offend you, my God, who are all-good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin.” Participation in the sacrament of Penance is required once a year as a minimum. Access to the sacrament of the Eucharist is barred in the case of unconfessed mortal sin, even if the person “experiences deep contrition” but has not yet had the mortal sin absolved through the sacrament of Penance. . . .

Following contrition and confession, the third penitential act is *satisfaction*, which is the reparation of the harm caused to others by one’s sin. Specific acts include restitution of stolen property, restoration of the reputation of others who have been slandered, and payment of compensation for injuries sustained by others. “Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must ‘make satisfaction for’ or expiate’ his sins. This satisfaction is also called ‘penance.’” The priest who hears the confession (called a “confessor”) imposes the appropriate satisfaction or penance, taking “into account the penitent’s personal situation” and aiming for “his spiritual good. It must correspond as far as possible with the gravity and nature of the sins committed. It can consist of prayer, an offering, works of mercy, service of neighbor, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear.” The *Catechism* offers the rationale for such acts of satisfaction: They “help configure us to Christ, who alone expiated our sins once for all. They allow us to become coheirs with the risen Christ, ‘provided we suffer with him’ [Rom. 8:17; Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:1-2].” Accordingly, satisfaction is rendered through, and finds its effectiveness in, Jesus Christ, who strengthens penitents to offer it. (Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2014], 331-32).

the guilt of conscience is not unique to them. Catholic theology complies with the natural tendency toward a “ritual-moral ecology” in each human heart. Most people feel the need to “do something” to make up for the wrongs that mark their moral record. In the next sub-section, there will be a consideration of altruism and good works as an attempt to alleviate the guilt of conscience. There is much overlap between admission and altruism as attempts at appeasing the conscience. However, this sub-section focuses on the common attempt of appeasing one’s conscience through mere admission of fault, sin, or moral failure.

In every context, there is a universal tendency to feel a certain appeasement of guilt through mere admission of sin. Nevertheless, this mere admission of sin is ineffective in dealing with the objective guilt of the individual. In the early 1900s, Anna Robeson Burr accurately portrayed this phenomenon: “The uneasiness of thought, concealed, the pain of having something ‘on one’s mind,’ the relief when one is rid of it—these rank surely among our most familiar mental sensations.”<sup>44</sup> Burr is pointing to the clear psychological benefit of the admission of guilt. However, the psychological benefit that appeases the individual’s subjective struggle with guilt does not address the objective guilt of the individual. Only when an individual brings her sin and its guilt to the actual and objective place of atonement for sin will there be an actual and objective appeasement of the guilt of conscience. Only within the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture will a person find lasting and real appeasement of conscience.

The counselee may feel better if she “comes clean” by voicing her discontentment, envy, greed, or lust. This is a positive step in the right direction. However, the next essential step is to move from admission of sin to true confession of sin within the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. The counselee’s confession of sin in

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<sup>44</sup> Anna Robeson Burr, *Religious Confessions and Confessants: With a Chapter on the History of Introspection* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 19.

the context of the cross-work of Jesus Christ will encourage the counselee to an accurate recognition of her sin. There is no need for pretense or hiding if the sin has already been punished through the cross. The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture will lead individuals to a continual desire for a true confession of sin, deeper repentance, and faith in the work of Jesus Christ on the behalf of sinners.

### **Altruism and Good Works**

The most common and natural response to individual moral lack and the guilt of conscience is to pursue moral good that will assuage the guilt of conscience. As was observed in the previous sub-section, there is psychological and subjective benefit to this attempt at appeasing the conscience. However, like admission of sin, this attempt falls short in similar ways in that it cannot address the lack in the objective position of the individual. As Richard Lovelace writes, “The fully enlightened conscience cannot be pacified by any amount of grace inherent in our lives, since that grace always falls short of the perfection demanded by God’s law for our justification (Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10). Such a conscience is forced to draw back into the relative darkness of self-deception.”<sup>45</sup> Some of the philosophers cited earlier in this dissertation—Alasdair MacIntyre and Philip Rieff—fall short in this area of addressing moral guilt. For example, as insightful as he is in addressing the weaknesses of secularism and therapism, MacIntyre writes in the postscript to the second edition of his classic book, *After Virtue*, that “Any reconciliation of biblical theology and Aristotelianism would have to sustain a defence of the thesis that only a life constituted in key part by obedience to law could be such as to exhibit fully those virtues without which human beings cannot achieve their *telos*.”<sup>46</sup> Noticeably

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<sup>45</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979), 99.

<sup>46</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 278.



absent is the biblical emphasis on the obedience and death of Jesus Christ as the transformational shift leading to true virtue. Altruism, good actions, and virtue are to be understood in light of the central message of the Bible

Therapists and religious counselors direct people to altruistic or good actions because of the therapeutic benefit—good deeds or actions help people to feel good about themselves. These activities can even lead to a feeling of alleviation of past wrongs in his life. Nevertheless, the proper understanding of the moral world, God’s moral law, and man’s position in God’s moral space, will expose how ineffective this approach is in appeasing the guilt of conscience.

In assisting counselees in considering their motivation for altruistic pursuits and good deeds, counselors must be careful to recognize sincere desires to help and love those in need. The concern of the counselor is to expose the possibility that alongside genuine desires to help and love others, there may be a hidden motive to pursue altruism or good works as a satisfaction or appeasement to the guilt of conscience. Larissa MacFarquhar’s research on extreme altruism in her book, *Strangers Drowning*, is relevant to the consideration of the proper place of altruism in moral self-understanding. She recognizes that many “do-gooders,” as she calls them, vastly improve the world. However, in their extreme pursuit of good they often lose an aspect of their own humanity. They have turned morality into a god. The extreme altruist locates their identity and complete life purpose in their morality or good deeds.<sup>47</sup> Their skewed view of morality and good deeds stand in contrast to the grace-moral ecology of Scripture.

Good works have an important place within the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. They are a necessary aspect of Christian living, but they are not intended to lead to forgiveness of sins or the appeasement of the guilt of conscience. Volumes and

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<sup>47</sup> Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning: Grappling with Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and the Overpowering Urge to Help* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015).

volumes of books have been written on the relationship of good works and justification in Christianity. This is not the place to get into the details of this debate. This dissertation is concerned with counseling people toward a correct understanding of their moral position before God. Counselees need to be led to understand the proper role of good works in the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture because good works are often wrongly employed as a means of addressing moral lack and appeasing the guilt of conscience.

The clarity of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is helpful when it states, “We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins.”<sup>48</sup> This understanding of good works is at the very heart of the reformation. Sinclair Ferguson writes that when Martin Luther had written his ninety-five theses,

Luther had been studying the new edition of the Greek New Testament published by the humanist scholar Erasmus. In these studies he had come to realize that the Latin Vulgate, the official church Bible, had misleadingly rendered “repent” in Matthew 4:17 by *poenitentiam agite* (“do penance”), thus completely misconstruing Jesus’ meaning. Luther saw that the Gospel called not for an act of penance but for a radical change of mind that would lead to a deep transformation of life. Later he would write to his vicar Johannes Staupitz about this glowing recovery: “I venture to say they are wrong who make more of the act in Latin than of the change of heart in Greek”

So began the Reformation, and at its heart lay Luther’s great discovery: Repentance is a characteristic of the whole life, not the action of a single moment. Salvation is a gift, received only in Christ, only by grace, only in faith.<sup>49</sup>

Similar to the Roman Catholic misunderstanding of the place of good works, other religions that hold to a “ritual-moral ecology” wrongly emphasize the human role and the place of good works in forgiveness and salvation. For example, the Church of

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<sup>48</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Together with the Larger Catechism and the Shorter Catechism with the Scripture Proofs*, 3rd ed. (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications PCA Bookstore, 1990), 71.

<sup>49</sup> Sinclair Ferguson, *The Grace of Repentance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 13-14.

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (commonly known as the Mormon Church or LDS Church) teaches that confession is a part of a five-step process of repentance that includes “(1) conviction of and sorrow for sin, (2) abandonment of sin, (3) confession of sin, (4) restitution for sin, (5) doing the will of the Lord.”<sup>50</sup> Although LDS doctrine points to the atonement of Christ as an important aspect of dealing with guilt, it combines Christ’s atonement with personal change and the other steps mentioned in the process of repentance. This mixture combines human action with divine action and thereby leaves individuals focusing on themselves and their good works as a response to the guilt of their conscience.

There is great confusion about good works in both the “ritual-moral” and “therapeutic-moral” ecologies that dominate the Western social landscape. Counselors must carefully lead their counselees to see that altruism and good works cannot appease the guilt of their counselee’s conscience. Although they are inherently good, altruism and good works must not be utilized in addressing moral lack. As Sproul writes, “The only way any person can satisfy the demands of God is through the work of Christ.”<sup>51</sup> The distinction of the “grace-moral ecology’s” emphasis on the atonement of Christ is clearly opposed to a dependence on altruism or good works.

## **Ritual**

Another common but ineffective method of appeasing the guilt of conscience is through worship attendance and religious rituals. Like altruism and good works, these are positive and important activities when they are in their proper place. Counselors need

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<sup>50</sup> Edward L. Kimball, “Confession in LDS Doctrine and Practice,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 36, no. 2 (1996-1997): 7.

<sup>51</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019), 376.

to be careful not to discourage their counselees' participation in these areas while they seek to discern any reliance on these activities as an appeasement of one's guilt.

The Roman Catholic understanding of grace as something diffused through sacraments misleads many worshippers into relying on religious activities for restitution or conciliation with God. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, salvation comes from the “fullness of grace and truth that Christ has entrusted to the Catholic Church.”<sup>52</sup> Gregg Allison and Chris Castaldo helpfully explain the Catholic position on the sacraments when they write, “The grace that is communicated through the sacraments is infused—instilled or imputed—into their recipients, whose very nature is transformed. By this infusion of grace, Catholics are enabled to cooperate with God to merit eternal life. . . . Catholics believe that grace must be communicated through nature.”<sup>53</sup>

If the *counselee* comes from the Roman Catholic religious context, it will be helpful to delineate the nature of grace and the means of forgiveness in individual lives. Grace is not a resource people stock up on through ritual activities; grace is God's kindness to individuals through the work of Jesus Christ. As Dane Ortlund writes, “His [i.e., God's] grace in kindness is ‘toward us (Ephesians 2:7).’ You could translate this ‘to us’ or even ‘over us’ or ‘on us.’ This is personal. Not abstract. His heart, his thoughts, now and on into eternity are toward us.”<sup>54</sup> Grace is God's kind disposition toward those who by faith are “in Christ.” This view of grace is essential to the “grace-moral ecology” that stands in contrast to the “ritual-moral ecology” of the Roman Catholic Church.

In the counseling relationship, however, it is important to recognize that those brought up in a Roman Catholic religious context are not the only ones who struggle with relying on religious ritual, worship attendance, and participation in ministry as means of

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<sup>52</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 819.

<sup>53</sup> Allison and Castaldo, *The Unfinished Reformation*, 112.

<sup>54</sup> Dane Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 211.

appeasing the guilt of conscience. Those who have been brought up in other religious contexts—even Protestant and evangelical—need to consider how they understand the role of these religious activities in their lives as well.

When faced with a personal shortcoming or moral lack, some individuals just tries to do a better job and “make it right” by their actions or they pursue rituals as a means to address guilt. The natural heart of man tends to rely on religious activity, worship attendance, and participation in ministry as moral currency. Moreover, in the new absolute morality that flavors secularism, this same “ritual” approach to dealing with guilt displays itself in the virtue signaling and actions of many in the West. This is manifest in multitudinous ways—from recycling to sexual ethics, and from organic food to political commitments.

The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture rescues people from this endless pursuit of moral acceptance through ritual endeavors. Counselees must be led to see that their moral failure is so complete that the only way to moral acceptance and a resilient internal peace is by looking away from themselves and their moral or religious efforts and looking to Jesus Christ and his substitutionary death on the cross.

## **Victimhood**

Even though it is often difficult to lead counselees to see their reliance on admission of sin, altruism, or ritual as attempts at appeasing the guilt of their conscience, these faulty attempts are straightforward and easy to demonstrate. The current focus on victimhood as a means of appeasing the guilt of conscience requires more discernment. Wilfred McClay writes that “identification with victims, and the appropriate victim status, has become an irresistible moral attraction.”<sup>55</sup> Identifying oneself primarily as a victim due to one’s race, lack of privilege, sexual orientation, or experience of trauma is a

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<sup>55</sup> Wilfred M. McClay, “The Strange Persistence of Guilt,” *Hedgehog Review* 19 (Spring 2017): 4.

way that some people attempt to deal with their struggles of personal guilt and individual responsibility. Again, McClay insightfully writes, “One workable way to be at peace with oneself and feel innocent and ‘right with the world’ is to identify oneself as a certifiable victim—or better yet, to identify oneself with victims.”

In the last ten years, the appeal to victimhood has drastically increased. In their article *Microaggression and Moral Cultures*, Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning explain the contemporary focus on victimhood by detailing the emergence of microaggression. Campbell and Manning cite Derald Wing Sue’s definition of microaggressions: “the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, and sexual orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group.”<sup>56</sup> The focus on microaggressions encourages individuals to assume the worst in others and to always take offense. This criticism of microaggressions does not imply that every perceived slight should be ignored. Individuals should pursue constructive interaction that helps others see and understand the possible offensiveness of their words and actions. However, for a person to automatically assume hostility on the part of the other person and to step into the role of victim leads to a focus on self and an unnecessary division between individuals.

Haidt and Lukianoff provide helpful counsel when they write, “It is not a good idea to start by assuming the worst about people and reading their actions as uncharitably as possible. This is the distortion of mind reading; if done habitually and negatively, it is likely to lead to despair, anxiety, and a network of damaged relationships.”<sup>57</sup> They continue by writing that a more “charitable approach” would engage the other person by

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<sup>56</sup> Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2010), 15, quoted in Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, “Microaggression and Moral Cultures,” *Comparative Sociology* 13, no. 6 (2014): 694.

<sup>57</sup> Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (New York: Penguin Press, 2018), 41.

saying something like, “I’m guessing you didn’t mean any harm when you said that, but you should know that some people might interpret that to mean . . . .” They conclude by helpfully showing how this approach would lead people from embracing a victim narrative to a healthy understanding of personal agency. Moreover, “it would make it far more likely that the interpersonal exchange would have a positive outcome.”

It is this increasing focus on victimhood that encourages people to ignore their personal guilt because they are encouraged to focus on the guilt of everyone else around them. Guilt is perceived as being primarily with the “other.” To be fair, victimhood is not merely a tactic people take up to assuage their guilt. In certain situations, victimhood is an acknowledgement of real invasive suffering in one’s life that even causes great levels of false guilt. Counselors must proceed with great caution and care in this area. In the last five years, advocates like Rachel Denhollander have exposed the harmful and damaging ways that the church and other institutions have responded to allegations of abuse.<sup>58</sup> Everything written in this section needs to be understood in light of the importance of caring for those who have been abused. Many victims have faced increased intensity of suffering by the way authority figures have responded or neglected to respond to their abuse. Overlooking intense suffering and abuse in order to emphasize moral responsibility only compounds the suffering of counselees. However, with great love and wisdom from the Spirit of Christ, counselors should address the relationship of suffering, victimhood, and moral responsibility. The emphases in this section is on discerning when an individual uses victimhood status to assuage real guilt. Wilfred McClay addresses this concern when he writes,

With moral responsibility comes inevitable moral guilt . . . . So if one wishes to be accounted innocent, one must find a way to make the claim that one cannot be held morally responsible. This is precisely what the status of victimhood accomplishes. When one is a certifiable victim, one is released from moral responsibility, since a

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<sup>58</sup> Rachel Denhollander, *What is a Girl Worth? My Story of Breaking the Truth About Larry Nassar and USA Gymnastics* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2019).

victim is someone who is, by definition, not responsible for his condition, but can point to another who is responsible.

But victimhood at its most potent promises not only release from responsibility, but an ability to displace that responsibility onto others. As a victim, one can project onto another person, the victimizer or oppressor, any feelings of guilt he might harbor, and in projective that guilt lift it from his own shoulders. The result is an astonishing reversal, in which the designated victimizer plays the role of the scapegoat, upon whose head the sin comes to rest, and who pays the price for it. By contrast, in appropriating the status of victim, or identifying oneself with victims, the victimized can experience a profound sense of moral release, of recovered innocence. It is no wonder that this has become so common a gambit in our time, so effectively does it deal with the problem of guilt—at least individually, and in the short run, though at the price of social pathologies in the larger society that will likely prove unsustainable.<sup>59</sup>

Like the other faulty attempts at appeasing the guilt of conscience, there is a psychological and subjective relief in identifying oneself as a victim. However, the status of victimhood will not absolve the objective guilt of the individual. Although a person's conscience may be quieted for a time, the appeasement is only temporary and shallow. This faulty attempt at addressing guilt will only lead to greater problems individually and relationally.

Mez McConnell, in his personal memoir *The Creaking on the Stairs*, explains how moving from primarily understanding himself as a victim to understanding his moral responsibility helped him to find internal peace and a sense of acceptance. McConnell details his childhood experience of abuse. His description of the abuse he faced during his childhood is deeply disturbing and evil. However, he came to a point in his life when he realized that he would only flourish as a human being if he moved away from only identifying himself as victim. He writes,

My abusers and tormentors were definitely sinners. But, so was I.

Not only had I been blind to the truth about Jesus, but I had been blind to my own sins and faults. Oh, I knew they were there. But I had ready-made excuses for my defects. *I was a victim! I had been through trauma!* That was my get-out-of-jail-free card for every occasion that my conscience troubled me. If that didn't work, then I could always be placated by my social workers and counsellors who were only too

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<sup>59</sup> McClay, "The Strange Persistence of Guilt," 4.



happy to spoon-feed me the same philosophy. They told me I wasn't a bad person, even though I knew I was. They told me that my bad decisions were the results of a chaotic childhood when, in fact, they were also often the result of my own foolishness. They told me that the answers to my *issues* lay within me, when I clearly knew that wasn't true.<sup>60</sup>

When past trauma is presented to the counselor in the counseling situation, the counselor must listen well and truly process the depth of hurt and damage in the counselee's life.<sup>61</sup> However, if the counselee is primarily embracing a victim status, and is unwilling to consider her moral position, she will be stuck in an endless cycle of blame, judgment, and hatred. In time, the counselor must graciously lead the counselee in a consideration of her moral standing before God. Because the counselee has individual moral failure and lack as well, her objective guilt must also be addressed, and her conscience must be appeased by the atoning work of Jesus in the "grace-moral ecology" of Scripture. Jesus Christ, the perfect Son of God, stepped into abuse, betrayal, and trauma so that we—both the abused and the abusers—might find peace and rest.

### **Diversion and Distraction**

The last faulty attempt at appeasing one's conscience considered in this section is diversion and distraction. Slightly nuanced from the other attempts, diversion and distraction deal with guilt by ignoring it. Even when one's conscience is hardened, an aching guilt afflicts most people. Diversion and distraction often provide a temporary escape from any nagging sense of guilt in the soul. The poet, John Donne, captured this response to one's conscience well when he wrote the following prayer to God, "Though hast imprinted a pulse in our soul, but we do not examine it; a voice in our conscience, but we do not hearken unto it. We talk it out, we jest it out, we drink it out, we sleep it

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<sup>60</sup> Mez McConnell, *The Creaking on the Stairs: Finding Faith in God through Childhood Abuse* (Geanies House, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2019), 159-60.

<sup>61</sup> See Brad Hambrick, ed., *Becoming a Church That Cares Well for the Abused* (Nashville: B & H, 2019), 63-76.

out.”<sup>62</sup> The opportunities to rid oneself of the voice of conscience have drastically multiplied over the last few decades.

Blaise Pascal, the fifteen-century philosopher and mathematician, initiated a focus on diversion and distraction as escape attempts from self-awareness and self-analysis. Pascal argued that “as men have not been able to cure death, misery, or ignorance, they have taken to not thinking about them so as to become happy.”<sup>63</sup> Diversion is usually understood as pursuing constant activity (e.g., work, education, clubbing, bar-hopping). Distraction focuses more on the input of some sort of entertainment (e.g., television, movies, social media). Furthermore, alcohol and other substances are common aides to many people’s attempts to neglect the deeper realities and questions of life through distraction. However, the details of substance abuse and addiction are not given focus in this dissertation. For this discussion, it is important to see these as identifiers of this larger category of diversion and distraction from the guilt of conscience.

Carl Trueman helpfully explains Pascal’s emphasis on diversion and distraction when he writes,

To express the idea in modern form: once you have spent most of your day dealing with the nightmare that is the modern workplace, you get home and switch on your TV or go to the movies, being entertained or projecting some fantasy onto a celebrity figure. . . . Pascal is not, of course, saying that entertainment is wrong in and of itself, any more than hard work or concern for the wellbeing of one’s family is illegitimate. . . . His point is not to outlaw all pleasure, but rather to criticize the use of entertainment as a way of distracting men and women from the realities of life. Pleasure and fun are good things; but when they become means to keep us from facing up to the truths of our creaturely existence, they are profoundly bad for us.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions and Death’s Duel* (New York: Random House, 1999), 10.

<sup>63</sup> Blaise Pascal, “Thoughts on Religion and Other Subjects,” in *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal’s Pensées Edited, Outlined, and Explained*, ed. Peter Kreeft (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 172.

<sup>64</sup> Carl Trueman, “Boring Ourselves to Life,” *Themelios* 28, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 3.

The critique of Trueman, with Pascal before him, is that people's lives become shallow and diminished if they give themselves completely to diversion and distraction. The more people avoid the nagging feelings of guilt in their consciences, the more they will need to pursue entertainment, activity, and substances for a faux rest and a veneer of peace. These attempts to ignore the workings of the conscience is not just a recent phenomenon; they have marked human nature since the fall of man into sin. Similar to the attempts of the first man and woman in hiding from God in the garden, many of their descendants sought to ignore the realities of their moral condition by diversion and distraction. Atheist philosopher Frederick Nietzsche captures this tendency well: "Haste is universal because everyone is in flight from himself."<sup>65</sup>

Counselors caring for people in the twenty-first century must see the unique and increasing challenge of leading people to a consideration of their conscience in this age of intensifying distraction and diversion. Read Schuchardt insightfully comments, "Electronic media tends to keep our eyes and minds on the surface of things, very fleetingly, before offering us the next thing. As the pundit put it, How can you tell anymore if you have ADD or just a really bad case of the twenty-first century?"<sup>66</sup> The statistics of media intake over the last seventy years are staggering. Initially, television

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<sup>65</sup> Frederick Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11. Also, David Foster Wallace writes,

To me, at least in retrospect, the really interesting question is why dullness proves to be such a powerful impediment to attention. Why we recoil from the dull. Maybe it's because dullness is intrinsically painful; maybe that's where phrases like "deadly dull" or "excruciatingly dull" come from. But there might be more to it. Maybe dullness is associated with psychic pain because something that's dull or opaque fails to provide enough stimulation to distract people from some other, deeper type of pain that is always there, if only in an ambient, low-level way, and which most of us spend nearly all our time and energy trying to distract ourselves from feeling, or at least from feeling directly or with our full attention. Admittedly, the whole thing's pretty confusing, and hard to talk about abstractly . . . , but surely something must lie behind not just Muzak in dull or tedious places any more but now also actual TV in waiting rooms, supermarkets' checkouts, airport gates, SUVs' backseats. Walkman, iPods, BlackBerries, cell phones that attach to your head. This terror of silence with nothing diverting to do. I can't think anyone really believes that today's so-called "information society" is just about information. Everyone knows it's about something else, way down. (David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King* [Boston: Little, Brown, 2011], 85)

<sup>66</sup> Read Mercer Schuchardt, *Media, Journalism, and Communication: A Student's Guide* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 78.

was the primary point of contact for distraction. Television viewing has continued to increase, but in the last ten years, the platforms for distraction have multiplied.

Now, with the invention of the iPhone, there are unprecedented opportunities for distraction. A Pew Research study from 2019 reveals that 81 percent of Americans own smartphones.<sup>67</sup> That figure is up 46 percent from 2011, just seven years earlier. Among 18-to-29-year-olds, 96 percent of Americans own smartphones. The opportunity for constant distraction has drastically increased over the last ten years, and all signs point to even greater increased opportunity for distraction in the future.

This intake of media and entertainment has radically affected individual's interaction with their conscience. Internal moral discourse is canceled via information and entertainment overload. This drastic change in individual time usage is an important aspect of leading people to stable identity formation through a healthy conscience. There must be space to consider the voice of one's conscience if one is to have a healthy conscience and stable identity.

Often, a trigger event or psychological struggle is what leads individuals to pursue counseling. The usual patterns of thoughtless entertainment and media intake no longer serve as a cover-up for the nagging pain in the individual's heart. Counselors must use this opportunity to lead people to a lifestyle change that gives focus to what matters most—the state of their inner life. As Socrates so famously said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>68</sup> Counselors must recognize the context in which individuals live—constant diversion and distraction is the norm. Counselees must be led to slow down and step out of this context and into a serious dialogue with their conscience.<sup>69</sup> The healthy

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<sup>67</sup> Pew Research Center, “Mobile Fact Sheet,” last modified June 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>.

<sup>68</sup> Plato, *The Apology*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: From Thales to Aristotle*, ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 38a.

<sup>69</sup> Of course, Christian counselors must be living this out themselves before they can lead others to this way of life. As Schuchardt writes,

conscience will lead people to a correct knowledge of themselves, their actions, and their position before God in light of the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

### **The Only Legitimate Way of Appeasing the Guilt of Conscience: Access to the Atonement of Jesus Christ**

Throughout this chapter, the only legitimate way of appeasing the guilt of conscience has been contrasted with the faulty attempts at appeasing guilt. As Paul Tournier writes, counselors just need to “open your eyes! And you will see among your patients that huge crowd of wounded, distressed, crushed men and women, laden with secret guilt, real or false, definite or vague; even a sort of guilt at being alive, which is more common than we think.”<sup>70</sup> Guilt is an ever-present reality in the counseling room because it is a persistent reality in each person’s soul. Counselors must carefully lead their counselees away from faulty moral ecologies that lead to ineffective attempts at appeasement and toward the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture that leads to the perfect response to humanity’s guilt—the atoning death of Jesus Christ.

In his classic work *Christianity and Liberalism*, J. Gresham Machen summarizes the reason why the atoning death of Jesus Christ appeases the guilt of all who put their faith: “According to Christian belief, Jesus is our Saviour, not by virtue of what He said, not even by virtue of what He was, but by what He did. He is our Saviour, not because He has inspired us to live the same kind of life that HE lived, but because He took upon Himself the dreadful guilt of our sins and bore it instead of us on the cross.”<sup>71</sup>

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If Christians wake from the somnambulistic trance that modern mass media has put us into, then perhaps we can be of use to a mass culture seemingly intent on sleepwalking itself off the cliff. If it was for freedom that Christ has set us free, then it is crucial to consider that the medium of Christ’s message was embodied communication, and that this may indeed be the only salvation from an otherwise technologically determined enslavement. (Schuchardt, *Media, Journalism, and Communication*, 63)

<sup>70</sup> Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), 60.

<sup>71</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 117-18.

Through faith in Jesus Christ, individuals are united to him. Their identity being meshed with his through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. This is the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible.

Only as counselees understand and accept the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture and the atoning death of Jesus Christ will they be able to appease the guilt of their conscience, understand themselves accurately, and progress in true flourishing of life. Therefore, there are four important foci that counselors must lead their counselees to consider. First, counselors must explain and uphold the thick moral space in which counselees lives. The design of God for the counselees’ life must be contrasted with the competing moral ecologies in which they are immersed from day to day. Counselors will pursue this by practicing and modeling a correct interpretation of Scripture that focuses on the unified story centered on the revelation of Jesus Christ and not, as was referenced earlier in this dissertation, “the processed McNuggets of individual verses (and moral commands).”<sup>72</sup> As has been explained, the law of God is only understood correctly when it is considered in light of Jesus Christ and union with him in his death and resurrection.<sup>73</sup>

Second, counselees must see their moral standing in the context of the perfect law of God. This accurate view of self is contrary to everything promoted in therapism and the modern social imaginary. At this point, counselors are not building up their counselees but are humbling, exposing, and revealing the inner darkness of their heart. The personal conscience of counselees serves as an aid to counselors in this process. It is through this humbling and weakness that counselees will find their desperate need and Jesus Christ’s perfect response to their need. Throughout church history, the Latin phrase *felix culpa* has described this seemingly paradoxical phenomenon of tearing down in

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<sup>72</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Hearers and Doers: A Pastor’s Guide to Making Disciples through Scripture and Doctrine* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2019), 179

<sup>73</sup> See p. 152 of this dissertation.

order to build up. *Felix culpa* means “happy fault” or “happy guilt.” People’s “fault” or “guilt” is “happy” because it leads to looking for and finding grace in Jesus Christ. Third, counselors will highlight and proclaim the perfect appeasing and atoning work of Jesus Christ for sinners. Only Jesus’s perfect work of atonement on the cross will bring peace to an individual’s conscience. Fourth, counselors will explain the way of faith in Scripture. The way of faith connects individuals to the accomplished work of Jesus Christ. Trusting in Jesus Christ—faith in him—leads to the possession of all of the resources found in Christ. Trusting, resting, and looking to Christ for forgiveness of sins and cleansing of conscience is all that is necessary for this intimate connection and union of Christ to form with an individual.

This way of the gospel is open for everyone. Jesus proclaims to everyone, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt 11:28). Jesus provides a continual rest for all who trust in him and his work on their behalf. The book of Hebrews points to a “perfected conscience” through the blood of Christ (Heb 10:5-14). As Christians continue to live their lives, their “perfected conscience” is “erected” and maintained “on grace.” The conscience continues to examine and assess individuals’ moral behavior, but, when healthy, it operates in the context of grace and union with Jesus Christ. Christians should have a tender conscience that leads them through the steps of repentance and faith in Christ every day. The focus of healthy spiritual living is on the desperate moral and spiritual need and Jesus Christ’s answer to that specific need. Only when individuals are focused on the cross of Jesus Christ will they possess true peace of conscience. As Christopher Ash so wisely counsels, “Paul’s daily striving to maintain a clear conscience is not a denial of God’s grace to him in Christ but encouraging evidence that he really is a beneficiary of that grace.”<sup>74</sup> Christians

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Ash, *Pure Joy: Rediscover Your Conscience* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 174.

will listen to their conscience, recognize the reality of guilt within, and turn again and again in repentance and faith in Jesus Christ recognizing their new moral identity “in Christ.”



CHAPTER 5  
CONCLUSION

**The Conscience, Personal Identity,  
and Human Flourishing**

Individuals must be directed to find their identity through the healthy workings of their conscience as they are centered in the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. The only accurate answer to the question of identity is, as Charles Taylor articulated, knowing “where I stand to the good.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the conscience as the personal witness to the individual’s relation to the good is an essential aid in the accurate formation of personal identity. The gospel concerning Jesus Christ, the one who is the ultimate “good,” invites individuals to live in his identity. Union with Christ means that the “Christian life involves donning the identity of someone else and not simply improving our own.”<sup>2</sup> The Christian’s identity is now “in Christ.”

Many of the soul-pathologies in the West originate in the ever-increasing confusion in the areas of morality and identity. A socially constructed identity is, as Paul Vitz described, “polyvocal, plastic, and transient.”<sup>3</sup> The instability of the secular identity crushes individuals and leads them to an “enslavement, to a treadmill of self-reinvention.”<sup>4</sup> The secular formation of identity focuses on a subjective construction of

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27. See also p. 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>2</sup> Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 71.

<sup>3</sup> Paul C. Vitz and Susan M. Felch, eds., *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), xiii. See also p. 9 of this dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Glynn Harrison, “Who Am I Today? The Modern Crisis of Identity,” *Cambridge Papers* 25, no. 1 (March 2016): 6.

identity based on one's desires. This focus leads to an endless quest for identity, purpose, and meaning because there is a desperate pursuit of acceptance in each human soul.

Although the current social imaginary emphasizes self-acceptance as the path to fulfilling this desire, this path has proved to be incoherent and impossible. The individual conscience cannot find appeasement and acceptance through sheer positive self-regard.

As Tim Keller writes,

In the end, we can't say to ourselves, "I don't care that literally everyone else in the world thinks I'm a monster. I love myself and that is all that matters." That would not convince us of our worth, unless we are mentally unsound. We need someone from outside to say we are of great worth, and the greater the worth of that someone or someones, the more power they have to instill a sense of self and of worth. Only if we are approved and loved by someone whom we esteem can we achieve self-esteem. To use biblical terms, we need someone to bless us because we can't bless ourselves. We are irreducibly social and relational beings. We need someone we respect to respect us. We need someone we admire to admire us. Even when modern people claim to be validating themselves, the reality is always that they are socializing themselves into a new community of peers, of "cheerleaders," of people whose people they crave.<sup>5</sup>

As was argued at the beginning of chapter 4, a counselor who is seeking to care for individuals must guide them to the path of stable identity formation. This path necessarily addresses the moral context of each person's life. The counselee's conscience will help guide them to their moral situation, their moral need, and the only moral fix in the atoning death of Jesus Christ and an individual's union with him by faith. God designed the conscience as a tool for the proper formation of one's identity.

The argument of this dissertation is that the biblical teaching of the conscience is a necessary foundation for every counseling situation. Leading people to a healthy conscience is not a cure-all for every psychological and emotional struggle, but it is a necessary foundation for an accurate understanding of self—which is a fundamental starting-point for addressing all human struggle (see appendix 1). The other aspects of the

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016), 125.

counselee's situations and struggles must still be addressed, but there will be little progress without the foundation of peace brought about by a healthy conscience centered on the cross of Jesus Christ. The healthy conscience directs the individual to the atoning death of Jesus Christ and leads the individual to grace, blessing, and a certainty of acceptance before God. A healthy conscience is a necessary foundation for an understanding of identity, purpose, and meaning.

Although the persistence of guilt is described as strange in the current social imaginary, life is incoherent and unlivable without moral categories. As Tim Keller writes, "You may not believe in sin; you may not believe in hell; you may not believe in divine law—and yet, you've got a sense of condemnation that you can't shake. There is a voice (is there not?) that calls you a fraud, an imposter, says you are not living up." This internal voice cannot be explained away by "saying it's some kind of psychological complex." This voice communicates a real and present guilt that only makes sense in light of fixed moral categories. Keller continues, "Deep down, we know we aren't what we should be because Somebody keeps telling us. There's a court before which we all stand. There's a justice with which we all must deal. There's a standard we've all violated, and we all know it, and we all stand before it underdressed, without defense."<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, leading people to the appeasement of the guilt of the accusing conscience is a fundamental aspect of soul-care. The conscience affects every counseling situation. This conclusion will consider two brief examples. First, a young man comes for counseling with feelings of self-hatred that have led him to self-harm. The young man's home situation is in chaos. He has suffered abuse for years. His father tells him that everything about him has been a disappointment. Instead of giving the necessary and natural nurture that every son needs, the father has diminished and greatly damaged his

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<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller, *Loving the City: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 107-8.

son. What does this young man need? It will be necessary to address his circumstances and how these circumstances have shaped him emotionally, spiritually, socially, and physically. It will be necessary to come alongside this young man as a sufferer, to sympathize with him. However, it will also be necessary to lead this man to a greater sense of self-worth. Only the Christian counselor has the resources to lead this young man to a self-worth and self-acceptance that is much more meaningful than any earthly father could give to a son. Through the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture, the Christian counselor is able to lead this young man through the process of accurate self-understanding. The counselor is able to lead the counselee to see himself as one who has not “measured up” to God’s calling and standard for humanity, as one in need of divine approval, and as one who is able to find perfect acceptance before God because of faith in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ as a payment for his sin. Only this process quiets the conscience and leads to a healthy understanding of self that is found “in Christ.”

The second example of how the conscience influences counseling is in the current confusion with sexual identity. The self-constructed identity of secularism has led individuals to form their identities on the shallow basis of their shifting desires, feelings, and perceived needs. Individuals who form their identity in this way may speak of internal relief at finding their true selves, but it is a shallow and unstable relief that is sadly and disastrously exposed in many lives. One’s identity must be based on something solid, stable, and secure if there is to be any permanence in one’s sense of self. The healthy conscience connects individuals to “the good”—namely, God himself. When the biblical teaching on the conscience is upheld and encouraged, people are led through the dark maze of the formation of sexual identity in this secular age. The hyper individualism of the secular West leads to “the interiorization of human consciousness.”<sup>7</sup> The problem is that this interiorization “has led us up what feels like a blind alley where our so-called

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, *Sources of The Self*, 25.

inner life seems disjoined from our physical surroundings. . . . We find ourselves living at a time when the traditional categories for thinking of the self have made us strangers to ourselves and to the world around us.”<sup>8</sup> The healthy conscience tethers an individual to the stability of the moral world, and it connects an individual to God’s gracious answer to every moral and spiritual need.

A major problem in ministry and soul-care practices today is that the church has completely acquiesced to the therapism of the surrounding culture. A few decades ago, Henri Nouwen wrote that

few ministers and priests think theologically. Most of them have been educated in a climate in which the behavioral sciences, such as psychology and sociology, so dominated the educational milieu that no true theology was being learned. Most Christian leaders today raise psychological and sociological questions even though they frame them in scriptural terms. Real theological thinking, which is thinking with the mind of Christ, is hard to find in the practice of ministry. Without solid theological reflection, future leaders will be little more than pseudo-psychologists, pseudo-sociologists, pseudo-social workers. They will think of themselves as enablers, facilitators, role models, father or mother figures, big brothers or big sisters, and so on, and thus join the countless men and women trying to help their fellow human beings cope with the stresses and strains of everyday living. But that has little to do with Christian leadership.<sup>9</sup>

The disparate view of therapism on morality, identity, and human purpose must lead Christian counselors to stand firm in their calling to care and help others by directing them to the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. Christian counselors possess the resources to lead individuals to true peace, proper self-understanding, and, therefore, human flourishing. The calling of the Christian counselor is to help people see their true need, their moral dilemma, and their falling-short of God’s perfect standard. Then, from this position of need, the counselor has the privilege of pointing them to Jesus Christ—the One who has perfectly met their need. This is the foundation upon which all soul-care

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 65-66.

must operate. The conscience testifies to the individual's need; the conscience testifies to the perfect acceptance that comes in union with Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus Christ is central and necessary for any clear formation of identity.<sup>10</sup> The cross is not just for Christians. The cross of Jesus Christ is the only “moral currency” that is able to lead broken and sinful people into the place of acceptance and true self-worth. The secular and therapeutic mindset of the surrounding culture scoffs at the need for atonement as the basis for self-worth. Their folly has been described and exposed. This mindset has been around for generations. As the wise King Solomon stated centuries ago, “Fools mock at the guilt offering, but the upright enjoy acceptance” (Prov 14:9). The “strange persistence of guilt” that remains in each heart is just one of the signs that all of humanity lives in a thick moral space. The competing moral ecologies only provide a shallow and ineffective answer to the human need. The “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture is the only path that leads to a durable sense of self-worth. For the Christian, living each day in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, “repentance and faith are like breathing.”<sup>11</sup> The healthy conscience exposes sin, encourages repentance, and through God's grace, leads to the cross. The healthy conscience will have a heart transfixed by the cross of Christ. This cross-shaped conscience is the foundation of human purpose, and it leads to true human flourishing in the thick moral space of this world. A prayer of John Donne provides a fitting conclusion to this consideration of the conscience:

O Lord, enable me, according to your command, to commune with my own heart upon my bed, and be still; to provide a bed for all my former sins while I lie upon my bed, and a grave for my sins before I come to my grave; and when I have deposited them in the wounds of your Son, to rest in that assurance, that my conscience is discharged of further anxiety, and my soul from further danger, and my memory from further calumny. Do this, O Lord, for his sake, who did and

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<sup>10</sup> John Stott writes, “Who are we, then? How should we think of ourselves? What attitude should we adopt toward ourselves? These are questions to which a satisfactory answer cannot be given without reference to the cross.” John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 267.

<sup>11</sup> Rankin Wilbourne, *Union with Christ: The Way to Know and Enjoy God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2016), 221.

suffered so much, that you might, as well in your justice as in your mercy, do it for me, your Son, our Savior, Christ Jesus.<sup>12</sup>

### **Methodology and Key Questions for Counseling**

One of the greatest issues of the current context is the struggle for a stable and enduring moral identity. The various attempts of addressing and forming a moral identity have been described and explained throughout this dissertation. This closing section will provide a summarized approach to the assessment and counseling of individuals towards an awareness and proper focus on the conscience and a person's moral identity. It is important that counselors both carefully assess a person's operating "moral ecology" as well as lead their counsees to the "grace-moral ecology" of the Bible. A methodology for addressing a counselee's moral identity will typically proceed through two emphases: first, a survey of the individual's personal moral ecology. This assessment will consider the sources and authority of the counselee's understanding of morality along with how their understanding of morality affects both their personal identity and their response to personal guilt. Then, secondly, the counselor will present and describe the unique "grace-moral ecology" of the Bible. Here, the counselor will be able to establish the Bible as the unique source for an accurate understanding of morality and identity. The counselor has the opportunity to tell the "better story"<sup>13</sup> of identity formation in light of the redemptive storyline of Scripture. Christianity uniquely and beautifully answers the present cultural confusion in the area of one's moral identity.

### **Survey and Explore the Counselee's Personal Moral Ecology**

In the initial stages of counseling, the counselor needs to lead the counselee to a healthy assessment and understanding of the counselee's sources for understanding

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<sup>12</sup> John Donne, *The Works of John Donne*, vol. 3, ed. Henry Alford (London: John W. Parker, 1839), 507.

<sup>13</sup> Joshua D. Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story: How to Talk About God in a Skeptical Age* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 13.

morality, identity, and personal guilt. As has been argued in this dissertation, the socially constructed identity based on a relative morality found in the inner life of an individual is unstable, fragile, and transient. The counselor's goal is to help their counselee see how the sources they use to construct these central aspects of their lives greatly affect their moral identity—sense of self and self-acceptance. Many counselees live oblivious to the “moral ecologies” that are at work in their lives. Without a clear understanding of their position and approach to moral identity, many counselees are immersed in a “therapeutic-moral” or “ritual-moral” ecology that impacts their approach to self-understanding and moral identity.

Some questions that can be employed to survey and explore the counselee's operating moral ecology are the following: How do you understand what is good, true, and beautiful in your life? How do you know and understand your life? How do you approach self-understanding and self-acceptance? What do you think of authority? What place does authority have in the foundation of morality? Is there an objective morality? How does your subjective existence relate to objective reality? How can a person understand or come to know objective morality? What would the world and your life be like without objective morality? What do you do when your morality conflicts with someone else's understanding of morality? How does your identity affect your day to day living? What, in your identity, is fixed and stable—able to last through major life changes? How do you come to form your identity? What does morality have to do with identity? Do you feel accepted by others? If you believe in God, do you feel accepted by him? Do you struggle with guilt? Where do you think your guilt originates? Would you say that you are “good?” By what standard do you evaluate your life and actions? Do you have a conscience? What is your conscience? How do you respond to your conscience? How do you know that your standard of evaluation is good, accurate, and enduring? How does your relation to the “good” affect your identity?



The goal of this aspect of the counseling conversation is to lead the counselee to understand the inconsistencies and weaknesses in their understanding of morality and identity. A socially constructed identity is inherently unstable and ever-changing. Self-acceptance through positive self-regard cannot endure the tests of life. This survey and exploration is intended to help the counselee see the weaknesses and impotence of identity formation through unbiblical moral ecologies.

### **Describe and Demonstrate the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible**

After the counselor exposes the inconsistencies and weaknesses of the counselee’s operating moral ecology, the next goal in counseling is to show the consistency and strength of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. Instead of a “polyvocal, plastic, and transient” identity, the teaching of the Bible centered on Jesus Christ leads to a unified, secure, and enduring sense of identity that is fixed in the finished work and eternal character of Jesus Christ. The counselee’s conscience is to be formed and maintained in light of the obedience and death of Jesus Christ. In light of the ways that therapism and ritualism dominate the moral social imaginary, great care will be needed to graciously lead counselees through this process of understanding a clean conscience and their moral identity as “in Christ.” The emphasis of union with Jesus Christ in the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible stands in beautiful contrast to the other moral ecologies. As Joshua Chatraw writes, “Christians . . . cannot simply critique secular assumptions but must learn to interact with them and show how the biblical story makes far better sense of these noble, moral longings.”<sup>14</sup> Counselors must carefully define, contrast, and present the beauty of the “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible for counselees to understand how to walk before God with a “good conscience.”

Some questions that can be employed to lead the counselee to understand the role of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture for identity formation are the following:

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<sup>14</sup> Chatraw, *Telling a Better Story*, 34.

Do you think there is an answer to the “strange persistence of guilt” that pervades society? In what ways have you attempted to respond to the guilt of your conscience? Have you ever read or studied the Bible? If you feel you did something wrong, how do you seek to correct it? How do you think the good news of Jesus Christ and his death on the cross will impact your identity and acceptance before God, others, and yourself? How does the Christian faith—as taught in the Bible—instruct people to deal with personal guilt? How is this different from what is presented in a “ritual-moral ecology?” Why does the Apostle Paul emphasize the “in Christ” nature of the Christian life? Is there a way to find peace with God while you continue to struggle with sin? What does it mean to be “in Christ?” How does union with Christ lead to peace of conscience?

The “grace-moral ecology” of the Bible leads to a stable, solid, and fixed identity in Jesus Christ. The only path to an accurate self-understanding and a secure self-acceptance is through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The role of the Biblical Counselor is to promote and share the amazing resources for identity formation and self-acceptance in the central message of the Bible—the “grace-moral ecology” centered on Jesus Christ.

## APPENDIX 1

### PERSONAL BACKGROUND

The early years of my spiritual walk were marked by great confusion in the areas of morality, identity, and the conscience. A brief synopsis of my personal background provides an example of the importance of possessing biblical clarity in this area. Although I am thankful for the early spiritual influences in my life through my schooling and church upbringing, there was a legalistic discipleship emphasis that led to detrimental effects in my life as a young Christian. The discipleship emphasis was on the duties and requirements of the Christian life at the expense of a proper focus on the cross of Jesus Christ and union with Christ by faith. The gospel was not absent, but the general tone of teaching focused on a “ritual-moral ecology” instead of the “grace-moral ecology” of Scripture. For me, this inversion led to great internal confusion, angst in my soul, and various struggles in my conscience. On the one hand, some of the requirements and expectations were man-made and extra-biblical, focusing on outward form alone. This external focus led to occasions of pride and a weakened conscience that focused on tangential issues in Christian living and, thus, stifled true Christian growth in my heart. On the other hand, some of the requirements and expectations were biblical and good, but they became overwhelming because ministry leaders did not present them in the proper context of our new identity “in Christ” and our necessary dependence on the power of God at work in our hearts.

Overall, for many of us in this spiritual atmosphere, there was a great shifting struggle between two fundamental consequences of a badly working conscience—either nagging feelings of failure and being unacceptable or feelings of pride and superiority due to moral conformity. As I matured in the faith and branched out from this initial

spiritual environment, God began to show me the joy of the gospel way for Christian living. Similar to Martin Luther's epiphany in the castle tower in Wittenberg, I came to see the beauty of God's way of freely granting acceptance and righteousness not based on anything in me but solely through the work of Jesus Christ. This beautiful gospel way was to shape every aspect of my life, including my self-awareness and moral position before God (i.e., my conscience) because my new moral identity was "in Christ."<sup>1</sup> This work of the gospel in my heart transformed the inner workings of my soul, cleansed my conscience, and gave me a great joy in God and a growing love for others (see 1 Tim 1:5). Over the years, I have become more convinced that this gospel way is the only effective means to finding true and lasting purpose and happiness in life.

At the same time that God was leading me to a clearer understanding of the path to acceptance, joy, and love as found in Scripture, there were other situations in my family that encouraged me to thoughtfully consider the role of the conscience in human inner experience. During a ten-year period (ca. 2003-2013), both of my grandfathers entered what would be the last phase of their lives. As they did, they increasingly

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<sup>1</sup> The before and after of my awareness of God's ways truly transformed my self-awareness, identity, and relationship with God. My heart echoed the clear testimony of Martin Luther when he wrote,

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.'" There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 34 ed. Lewis W. Spitz and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960, 336-337, quoted in Randall C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993], 35)

struggled with great pangs of conscience due to years of selfish living and broken relationships. During their middle-aged years, both of my grandfathers were unfaithful to their wives on numerous occasions, living very selfish and destructive lives that brought great damage to their families. Each of them responded differently to the guilt from their years of selfish living, but both of them found their attempts at appeasing the guilt of their consciences ineffective and futile.

My maternal grandfather, in response to his guilt, noticeably increased his expressions of love for his family and others around him.<sup>2</sup> Although he never darkened the door of a church during most of his life, he began to have an interest in spiritual things, and he began to attend church and give generously to it. I believe a major cause for this drastic change in his life was due to a growing guilt from his past failures. He was actively seeking to correct or atone for his previous selfish ways. As nice as these reformed behaviors were for our family, they did not assuage his haunting feelings of guilt from his past actions. Many of us in the family attempted to point him to the love of God found in the work of Jesus Christ, but he was unable to humbly accept anyone else, even Jesus, “paying for what he had done in his life.” “It was his responsibility,” he said. Sadly, as he aged, he began to have a paranoia that “people” were out to get him. He turned away from some of the people who loved him the most because he thought they were deviously planning ways to kill him. I believe the guilt from his past was the main impetus for his paranoia and turning away from those he loved at the end of his life.<sup>3</sup> If he had understood the biblical ideal of obtaining and maintaining a good conscience, he would have been able to remove so much of the turmoil in his heart and around his experiences. He would have concluded his life without being dominated by regrets and

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<sup>2</sup> I am not questioning the sincerity of his love for his family, but I do believe his increasing love was partially motivated by a conscience plagued with guilt.

<sup>3</sup> I believe there were other factors as well (e.g., old age, mental illness) that were interconnected with the profound guilt that he struggled with for many years.

guilt. It was very sad for me to watch someone I loved struggle as he did in the closing years of his life.

My paternal grandfather's struggles with guilt looked very different than my maternal grandfather's struggles because of the former's pride and abuse of alcohol. During most of my paternal grandfather's life, alcohol was his main source of diversion from the difficulties of life and the pangs of a guilty conscience. Even in his final years, he turned to alcohol. Yet, as he aged, it became increasingly clear that no substance could fully deliver him from the increasing and constant guilt due to his selfish life. I believe he, too, sought to atone for his past sins through his own effort and love for his ailing wife. Throughout my paternal grandparents' marriage, my grandfather was a very selfish and severe man to my grandmother. He was distant, harsh, and unfaithful on a number of occasions. Near the end of their lives together, however, he cared for my grandmother in amazingly sacrificial ways as Alzheimer's disease ravaged her body and mind. My grandfather was a model of self-sacrifice, love, and care. Like my maternal grandfather, I think a reformed lifestyle was his attempt to correct or atone for the way he lived his life in the past. Sadly, I do not believe he ever came to a place of peace and rest in his life.

I deeply loved both of my grandfathers, and my heart is saddened by their life-long struggles with guilt and their futile attempts at finding atonement and forgiveness. If they had only understood and accepted the beauty of the work of Jesus Christ and the possibility of finding their identity in him, they could have found rest and peace in their souls as they walked before God with clear consciences.

Along with the personal and familial case studies in the workings of the conscience, the ten years I have been in pastoral ministry have also caused me to wrestle with the role of the conscience in counseling and soul-care. In my experience in counseling as a pastor, it has become increasingly evident that there has been a "triumph of the therapeutic" that now forms the assumptions of most people—both non-Christian

and Christian alike.<sup>4</sup> With this therapeutic focus, many Christians ignore and neglect the conscience and its role in the human heart. The conscience is overshadowed and ignored. There is a major divorce of thinking and living when it comes to psychological, emotional, and relational issues. The focus has shifted away from moral responsibility and biblical love to disorder and positive self-regard. Most people today have turned from the “comprehensive internal resources” of Scripture and have focused instead on contrary teachings that bring great damage into individual lives and relationships.<sup>5</sup> It is disheartening to see people led down paths that bring further disorder and damage into their lives. Even if there is short term progress, deeper issues are either exacerbated or left untouched by the therapeutic focus on self, disorder, and a faux resolve to their guilt. God offers a different and a much better path. He directs people to the way of peace and a new identity in Christ through a healthy and cleansed conscience. This “new way” leads to a true and healthy self-awareness and a sense of acceptance that permeates all of one’s life.

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<sup>4</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud*, by Philip Rieff, 40th anniversary ed. (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), 199.

<sup>5</sup> David Powlison, *The Biblical Counseling Movement: History and Context* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2010), 275.

## APPENDIX 2

### HISTORICAL MODEL OF SOUL-CARE FOCUSING ON MAINTAINING A GOOD CONSCIENCE

In a letter of spiritual advice and encouragement to his daughter, Andrew Fuller directed his daughter to rely on God as she sought to live for Jesus Christ. In this brief letter, he summarized his view of what it means to live in the “ways of the Lord” by pointing his daughter to the importance of “preserving a conscience void of offence toward God and towards man”:

And is it so, my dear Mary, that your desire is to the Lord and to the remembrance of his name? Are you convinced of your having done deeds worthy of death, eternal death; and that all your hope and help is in the Lord Jesus Christ? Is he precious to your soul? And are you willing to give up all your sins and to be his servant for ever? If so, I know of nothing that ought to hinder your being baptized in his name. To see you thus put on the Lord Jesus Christ will afford the greatest pleasure to us, though it may be a pleasure mixed with trembling. You are at present, my dear, but little acquainted with the snares and temptations of the world, with the fickleness and sinfulness of your own heart, *and with the difficulty on these accounts of persevering in the good ways of the Lord, preserving a conscience void of offence toward God and towards man*; but if God has begun a good work in you, it will be carried on. There is strength to be had from above, and we are encouraged to ask it of him.<sup>1</sup>

Fuller recognized that his daughter, in her youth and immaturity, did not yet have a keen awareness of the temptations she would face in this world and the extent of the sinfulness and weakness of her own heart. He desired for her to understand that she still had much to learn about the difficulties of living the Christian life. He called her, in God’s strength, to “persevere in the good ways of the Lord” in a very specific way—by

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<sup>1</sup> John Ryland, *Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller* (London: Button and Son, 1818), 497-98, quoted in Michael A. G. Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb: The Spirituality of Andrew Fuller* (Toronto: Joshua Press, 2002), 137.



diligently focusing on “preserving a conscience void of offence towards God and towards man.”

By focusing on the conscience, Fuller pointed to the crucial issue of self-awareness before God found in the teaching of Scripture. Scripture points to a gospel-shaped identity that moves from an inward to an outward awareness of the self before God. The Christian way of life includes both an accurate inward look at one’s heart in light of God’s law along with an accurate outward look to the person and work of Jesus Christ and his response to the plight of sinners.<sup>2</sup> This two-fold aspect to the gospel is important in one becoming a Christian, and it is essential as one continues as a Christian.

A Christian is someone who lives in a life-long pattern of “inward and outward looking.” Another way to describe this would be to say that a Christian is called to a life of repentance and faith. Repentance is the confessing of, and turning from, the sinfulness exposed through an inward look at one’s heart. Faith is the outward look. It is trusting and resting in the external work of Christ as applied to the person. From the freedom found in this gospel way of continual repentance and faith, a Christian pursues a life of obedience and holiness by the strength that God alone can supply.<sup>3</sup> This two-fold consideration is what Fuller was referring to when he called his daughter to “preserve a good conscience void of offence toward God and towards man.” Fuller focused on the conscience in his soul-care because he viewed it as a necessary element to live a life of goodness and true human flourishing.

Fuller’s focus on the conscience in soul-care was not unique to him. This focus marks all biblical soul-care, and it marked the broader tradition of which he was a part—

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<sup>2</sup> See sermon XI and XII in the collection of Andrew Fuller’s sermons in Fuller’s works. Sermon XI focuses on the “solitary reflection; or the sinner directed to look into himself for conviction.” Sermon XII focuses on “advice to the dejected; or the soul directed to look out of itself for consolation.” Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Press, 2007), 584-91.

<sup>3</sup> Fuller addresses this in one of his letters between Crispus and Gaius: “When did Christ or his apostles deal in such compromising doctrine (preaching morality alone)? Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, were the grand articles on which they insisted.” Fuller, *Complete Works*, 305.

The English Nonconformists<sup>4</sup> or Particular Baptists of the seventeen through nineteenth centuries. The leaders in this tradition emphasized maintaining a good conscience in all of their soul-care work. In this way, they provide a historical example of this central biblical emphasis of obtaining and maintaining a good conscience for the restoration and preservation of true human flourishing. The men considered here are Benjamin Keach (1640-1704), John Gill (1697-1771), and Andrew Fuller (1754-1815). These men were not uniform in their theology and pastoral practice,<sup>5</sup> yet they all ministered while being mindful that they were heirs of Reformation truth and Puritan pastoral care.

Why look to these men as an example of biblical soul-care that gave focus to the conscience? Many other leaders from church history could also provide us with excellent examples in this area. However, these men will serve as our example because they modeled a clear commitment to Scripture as the organizing principle of life and ministry, maintained the essential balance of a commitment to the truth with love for all people, and impacted the future global mission of the church in an unprecedented way.<sup>6</sup> They were from a tradition that displayed great “theological wisdom and spiritual inspiration for the Christian life,” and they held “theological and spiritual convictions” that Michael Haykin judges “to be as close to Scripture as those of any Christians in the history of the church.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I propose that the broader church would come to appreciate these men more if their identity was not so tied to their Baptist theology. I understand that this is a major part of their identity and that they were proud to identify as Baptists. However, I do think these men are neglected by some segments of the church because their Baptist identity is sometimes emphasized to the neglect of the other aspects that shaped their identity.

<sup>5</sup> Part of the impetus for Andrew Fuller’s focus on the free offer of the gospel and world missions seems to be in a response to Gill’s inclination to a High-Calvinistic view of Scripture.

<sup>6</sup> Of these three men, Andrew Fuller had the most impact on the increase of the missionary activity of the church. Again, Gill’s inclination toward a High Calvinism impeded his influence on missions. However, I would argue that the predominant influence of the Particular Baptists during this time period led to the increase in missions that marked Fuller’s day.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Haykin, foreword to *History of the English Calvinistic Baptists 1771-1892: From John Gill to C. H. Spurgeon*, by Robert W. Oliver (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Press, 2006), xi.

## Heirs of Reformation Truth and Puritan Pastoral Care

Keach, Gill, and Fuller were Reformation men. They read and immersed themselves in the teachings of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the other Reformers, often citing them in their works. This focus and connection to the Reformation heavily shaped their understanding and practice of theology and ministry. As Reformation men, they emphasized the authority of Scripture for all of life, highlighted the universal problem of sin and the breaking of God's law that impacted every human heart, centered their ministry on justification by faith alone in the work of Christ alone, and comforted God's people with the freedom that is only found in living each day in the light of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These men also identified with the pastoral practice and ministry of the Puritans. Keach often cited John Owen, Gill frequently turned to John Lightfoot, and Fuller was greatly indebted to Jonathan Edwards for his understanding of theology and practice. What Tom Nettles writes of Keach is true of all three men:

Keach's writings and preaching is in vital unity with that great body of Puritan divinity which mastered the art of pastoral theology. At its core, Puritan thought (and Particular Baptist thought) scrutinized and unveiled the biblical teaching on the organic relationship between the objective and external in the work of Christ and the subjective, experiential, and internal by the work of the Spirit.<sup>8</sup>

A major focus of their pastoral care was applying the objective work of Christ to the subjective consciences of the people of God.

In what follows, I give a brief biographical introduction to each man, followed by a summary of their collective understanding of the conscience and its place in their soul-care practices. My intention is not to give exhaustive biographies of each man to

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<sup>8</sup> Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming Baptist Identity*, vol. 1, *Beginnings in Britain* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor Press, 2008), 180. In addition, Robert Oliver states that "Gill's doctrinal approach to matters of Christian experience is in harmony with the Puritans of the previous century and is healthier than that of some of his nineteenth-century admirers." Oliver, *The History of the English Calvinistic Baptists*, 13.

place these men in their historical context and show how they valued the crucial importance of the conscience in biblical soul-care.

**Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)  
and “The Way of Peace”**

While the surviving portraits of Benjamin Keach may cause one to wonder if he was a stern and harsh man, his life, ministry, and writings reveal a deep-rooted joy in God that he longed to share with others. Keach was the pastor of Horselydown<sup>9</sup> Congregation in London for most of his ministry. He served as a prominent leader among the Nonconformists and Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century. One of the key marks of his influence is seen in his leadership in the crafting of the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith.

Keach was a man who lived and ministered in exceedingly difficult days. He faced severe persecution for many years because of his commitment to biblical truth. Yet, he continued to fight diligently for the truth of the gospel while living and rejoicing in what he often called “the way of peace.” In his ministry, he understood the important connection between upholding the truth and lovingly caring for those under his charge. He understood that only the truth concerning Jesus Christ leads to a life of peace and joy. In his writings and pastoral ministry, he modeled a passionate and loving ministry for all people, striving to lead both young and old, educated and uneducated to understand the beautiful “way of peace” found in gospel-living. As Charles Spurgeon writes,

Very sweetly did Mr. Keach preach the great fundamental truths of the gospel, and glorify the name and work of Jesus. . . . [He was] one who loved the whole truth in Jesus, and felt its power. . . . He was very solid in his preaching, and his whole conduct and behavior betokened a man deeply in earnest for the cause of God. In

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<sup>9</sup> Alternate spelling: Horse-ly-down.

addressing the ungodly he was intensely direct, solemn and impressive, not flinching to declare the terrors of the Lord, nor veiling the freeness of divine grace.<sup>10</sup>

In the early years of his ministry, Keach wrote a primer for children and young people that served as a catechism for his and other Nonconformist churches. The Anglican Church authorities of the time viewed this as heretical teaching and an attack on the Church of England. After a very quick and unfair court case,<sup>11</sup> Keach was sentenced to pay a fine, spend fourteen days in jail, and be confined two days in a pillory in two different towns while copies of his books were burned in front of him. Even after facing persecution, Keach was not dissuaded from faithfully proclaiming the gospel because of his love for God and the people around him. Keach was motivated to stay true to his convictions because he knew that biblical teaching directed people to the only way to live a life of peace before God. As Nettles writes, “The desired outcome of his writings was not principally that he might be shown right and his opponents wrong, but that God’s people would enjoy all the blessings of the covenant of grace in purity.”<sup>12</sup>

Keach cared for children through his catechetical writings. Through allegories, he communicated the truth to young adults and uneducated people. His most popular work, *War with the Devil, or The Young Man’s Conflict with the Powers of Darkness*, was an appeal for young people to consider the way of salvation. His *Travels of True Godliness* and *The Travels of Ungodliness* confronted both young and old from all walks of life to consider the truths of the gospel. Keach’s love for people motivated his truth-focused ministry and writing.

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle: Its History and Work* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1876), 31, quoted in Michael Haykin, foreword to *The Excellent Benjamin Keach*, by Austin Walker (Toronto: Joshua Press, 2008), xiv.

<sup>11</sup> The foreword to Keach’s *Travels of True Godliness* explains, “The assizes commenced at Aylesbury, Oct. the 8th, 1664, and Sir Robert Hyde, Chief Justice of the King’s Bench, presided. The account of the trial shews the shameful prostitution of justice resorted to, in order to punish the nonconformists in those days of persecution.” Benjamin Keach, *The Travels of True Godliness* (Sydney: Leopold Classics Library, 2016), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:166.

Another important contribution Keach made to the church was the reinstating of congregational singing in worship. He lived in a time when singing had disappeared from public worship. However, he labored for the reinstating of singing because he knew that it instilled the truths of the gospel in people from all walks of life—young and old, educated and uneducated. He vehemently argued for this important biblical practice because he wanted God’s people to get the truth of the gospel “by heart” so that “they may be more affected with the matter, and receive the greater advantage” of the truth at work in their lives.<sup>13</sup> His arguments and labors in this area restored congregational singing in Baptist life and many other branches of the church.

His theological writings were written with the motive of bringing an understanding of “the way of peace” to more and more people. He fought for the upholding of the doctrine of justification by faith in God’s covenantal arrangement for salvation because he viewed this as the primary source of consolation for God’s people. Through his remaining writings and sermons, we see a clear focus on directing people to finding peace with God in his soul-care ministry. He accomplished this by focusing his teaching and writing on the only way people can obtain and preserve a good conscience before God—an awareness of one’s own heart and receiving and resting on Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners.

### **John Gill (1697-1771) and “The Cause of God and Truth”**

Benjamin Keach served as the pastor of the Horselydown congregation until his death in 1704. Fifteen years later, John Gill was called as pastor of this same congregation.<sup>14</sup> Gill served as pastor of Horselydown for fifty-one years. His teaching,

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<sup>13</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:174.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Stinton, Keach’s son-in-law, was the pastor of Horselydown Congregation from 1704-1718.

preaching, and writings have had a profound influence on the church. He labored all of his life for the “cause of God and truth” out of love for God and God’s people.

Most of the Gill’s influence comes from his two largest works—*A Body of Natural Divinity* (his complete systematic theology) and his exhaustive verse-by-verse commentary on every verse in the Bible. Due to the sheer volume of his writings, he was referred to as “Dr. Voluminous” during his life.<sup>15</sup> He was so diligent in his study of Scripture that “as sure as Dr. Gill is in his study” became a common expression of the certainty of something happening.<sup>16</sup> Gill was an ardent defender of the truth of the gospel. Like his predecessor, Keach, he modeled a balance of truth with love—seeing and communicating the important connection between upholding the whole truth of the gospel alongside a genuine love and care for people and their souls.

Gill boldly confronted the errors of his generation with the clear truth of Scripture. One of Gill’s first works was a monumental argument against the anti-gospel moralism of his day. In his work *The Moral Nature and Fitness of Things Considered*, Gill responded to a speech of Samuel Chandler that was a clear representation of the philosophical and religious spirit of the eighteenth century. Nettles refers to Chandler’s approach as “Glib Naturalistic Moralism.” Gill saw Chandler’s speech as an attack on the truth of God and as a grave danger to people’s souls. Chandler was reducing Christianity to “little more than the light of nature and the dictates of reason.”<sup>17</sup> Embracing Chandler’s argument would lead a person to have a diminished view of God, an elevated view of man, and a much-weakened understanding of God’s law and revelation. Chandler’s “fitness ethic” upheld human reason as the final test for all morals, which inevitably led to an autonomous “every man does what is right in his own eyes” approach

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<sup>15</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:213.

<sup>16</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:214.

<sup>17</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:195.

to ethics. Gill directly confronted Chandler with the truth. First, he clearly argued for the revelation and law of God as the foundation for ethics. Second, he established that mankind is not basically good, as Chandler argued, but “thoroughly depraved with an ‘instinctive prejudice,’ not for good, but against it.”<sup>18</sup> Gill’s response to Chandler serves as an example of Gill’s ability not only to keenly perceive the philosophical emphases of his day but also to respond and correct these emphases with the truth and light of Scripture.

This diligent and scriptural response marked all of Gill’s teachings and writings. Although he disagreed with Keach and Fuller in some important ways,<sup>19</sup> Gill had a profound experiential knowledge and love for Christ and the church. His ministry was marked by pointing people to the hope found in Jesus Christ alone. In a moment of reflection after forty years of ministry, he summarized his goals for his life and ministry in the following way:

What doctrines may be taught in this place, after I am gone, is not for me to know; but, as for my own part, I am at a point; I am determined, and have been long ago, what to make the subject of my ministry. It is now upwards of forty years since I entered into the arduous work; and the first sermon I have preached from these words of the apostle, ‘For I am determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified’; and, through the grace of God, I have been enabled, in some good measure, to abide by the same resolution hitherto, as many of you here are my witnesses; and I hope, through divine assistance, I ever shall, as long as I am in this tabernacle and engaged in this work.<sup>20</sup>

Similar to Keach, the focus of Gill’s soul-care ministry was pointing people to the peace found in Jesus Christ. He emphasized the importance of listening to the voice of conscience. He understood that the purpose of a healthy conscience (formed by the right rule of the law of God) is to direct people to the substitutionary work of Jesus

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<sup>18</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:198.

<sup>19</sup> Important to consider the inclination toward High Calvinism mentioned earlier.

<sup>20</sup> John Gill, “Attendance in Places of Religious Worship,” (London: n.p., 1757), 43-44, quoted in Timothy George and David Dockery, eds., *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 2007), 83.



Christ. Contrary to Gill’s reputation among some scholars, Gill called people to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.<sup>21</sup> He may have influenced later generations toward a High- or Hyper-Calvinist position, but his “High-Calvinist” followers clearly moved further away from true Calvinism. While Gill’s theology and preaching seemed to limit the “free offer of the gospel,” he directed his hearers from a view of their sins to the cleansing effect of Christ’s blood. He knew that the only way to “persevere in the good ways of the Lord” was to “preserve a conscience void of offence before God and others.”

**Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and “I Am a Poor, Guilty Creature; but Christ Is an Almighty Saviour”<sup>22</sup>**

Charles Spurgeon described Andrew Fuller as “the greatest theologian” of his century.<sup>23</sup> Fuller’s greatness flowed out of his experiential knowledge of himself and his God. Growing up under the ministry of the High Calvinist John Eve, Fuller ignored the gospel as a result of Eve’s preaching’s having “little or nothing to say to the unconverted.” God used the writings of John Bunyan and Ralph Erskine to awaken conviction in Fuller as a young man. After years of conviction, Fuller came to see the “the great deeps of his heart’s depravity,”<sup>24</sup> and he turned empty-handed to Jesus Christ. As Nettles recounts,

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<sup>21</sup> Gill invited people to come to Christ:

Come to the Lord as humble penitents; let backsliders come for the fresh application of pardoning grace and mercy; let sensible sinners come to the person, blood, and righteousness of Christ for justification and salvation; let them come to his word, and to his ordinances; *The Spirit and the bride say, Come*; and *whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely*; and such who come to Christ aright, will hear another day those words spoken to them; *Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world*. (John Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts* [London: George Keith, 1773], 1:34, quoted in Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:226)

<sup>22</sup> John Ryland, *The Indwelling and Righteousness of Christ no Security against Corporeal Death, but the Source of Spiritual and Eternal Life* (London: W. Button and Son, 1815), 2-3, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Laws, *Andrew Fuller: Pastor, Theologian, Ropeholder* (London: Calvary Press, 1942), 127, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 24; Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:245.

His conversion happened one morning in November of 1769 when he walked out by himself, with an unusual load of guilt upon his conscience. His remembered sins, broken vows, and extinguished affections reproached his conscience “like a gnawing worm of hell. The fire and brimstone of the bottomless pit burned in my bosom.” He had never before known what it was to feel himself an odious, lost sinner, standing in need of both pardon and purification. He knew that “God would be perfectly just in sending me to hell, and that to hell I must go, unless I were saved of mere grace, and as it were in spite of myself.”<sup>25</sup>

Fuller found the pardon and purification he was looking for in the good news of the death of Jesus Christ. Fuller’s whole life and ministry was marked by this experience of the deep conviction of his sinfulness leading him again and again to look to Jesus’s work in his place. He discovered acceptance and freedom that was centered completely on Jesus Christ. Fuller emphasized the rest of his life that “genuine faith is Christ-centered, not a curving inwards upon oneself to see if there was any desire to know Christ and embrace salvation.”<sup>26</sup>

After pastoring in Soham, Cambridgeshire, from 1775 to 1782, Fuller became the pastor of the Baptist church in Kettering, Northamptonshire, for thirty-three years. Along with his pastoral ministry, he helped form the Baptist Missionary Society, for which he served as secretary from 1792 until his death in 1815. This Society was the mission that sent William Carey and others to India and sparked a missionary movement that impacted all branches of the church. Fuller willingly and gladly “spent himself” for the cause of the gospel mission by traveling and diligently leading the mission. He promised to “hold the rope” at home while the missionaries sacrificed by taking the gospel to the other side of the world.

The initial years of Fuller’s ministry in Soham were tinged with remnants of the High Calvinism of his upbringing. Yet, through diligent study of Scripture and the influence of fellow pastors, Fuller came to a more biblical understanding of the gospel.

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<sup>25</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:246; quotations come from Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1845).

<sup>26</sup> E. F. Clipsham, “Andrew Fuller and Fullerism: A Study in Evangelical Calvinism,” *Baptist Quarterly* 20 (1963-1964): 106-7, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 25, 26.

He articulated his rejection of High Calvinism in his highly influential work *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*. Fuller described his understanding of the truth of the gospel as “strict Calvinism” or “the system of Calvin.” *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* influenced the missionary mindset of the church by inspiring the proclamation of the gospel to all peoples and all nations. His call to the whole church, leaders and members alike, was that together all of “the true churches of Jesus Christ” were to “travail in birth for the salvation of men. They are armies of the Lamb, the grand object of whose existence is to extend the Redeemer’s kingdom.”<sup>27</sup>

Fuller was a man who “persevered in the good way of the Lord.” By focusing on Christ and his cross-work for sinners, Fuller could “preserve a conscience void of offence before God and others.” Although he faced great suffering, and his responsibilities were often overwhelming, he persevered in faith. In his biography of Fuller, John Piper writes that

woven into all this work, making his perseverance all the more astonishing, was the extraordinary suffering, especially his losses. He lost eight children and his first wife. On July 10, 1792, he wrote, “My family afflictions have almost overwhelmed me, and what is yet before me I know not! For about a month past the affliction of my dear companion has been extremely heavy.”<sup>28</sup>

Yet, Fuller continued in faith, knowing the sweet consolation and peace found in the message of the gospel. He trusted in the One in whom he found acceptance, life, and an unchanging peace that could not be taken away from him. In his last letter to his dear friend John Ryland, Fuller wrote, “I am a poor, guilty creature; but Christ is an almighty Saviour.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Gladys M. Barret, *A Brief History of Fuller Church, Kettering* (St. Albans, UK: n.p., 1946?), 9, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> John Piper, *Andrew Fuller: Holy Faith, Worthy Gospel, World Mission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 24.

<sup>29</sup> Ryland, *The Indwelling and Righteousness of Christ*, 2-3, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 41.

## **The Focus on the Conscience in the Soul-Care Ministry of Keach, Gill, and Fuller**

This section considers the way these men understood the conscience and the application of the conscience in their soul-care practices. First, I outline how these men defined the conscience and its function in the human soul. Second, I demonstrate how they emphasized the importance of training the conscience by the truth of the Word of God. Third, I describe how they understood the difference between a good and an evil conscience. Fourth, I detail the way they encouraged people to obtain and maintain a good conscience. Fifth, I explain and illustrate their focus on the conscience in their preaching and counseling.

### **The Conscience and Its Place in the Human Soul**

Since maintaining a healthy conscience was a central element of their ministry, it is important to have a grasp of how they understood the conscience. Each of these men provided a definition of the conscience through their theological writings or sermons.

First, Keach, in his *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible*, defined the conscience as

a natural power, with which God hath endued the soul of man by creation; for his comfort, if he walk uprightly; or for his torment, if he walk in evil ways. . . . [It is] a reflection back on ourselves . . . . [The] conscience compares his ways and thoughts by some rule; and according as his ways agree or disagree with that rule, so answerably doth it bear witness with or against him.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1972), 659-60; Keach, *War with the Devil, or the Young Man's Conflict with the Powers of Darkness* (London: Forgotten Books, 2017), 5. In this work, Keach gives a definition of the conscience through the character "conscience" introducing himself:

Yea, thou shalt know my Office, Pow'r, and Place  
Of Residence; which Things may work out Peace.  
I am Vicegerent to a mighty King,  
Whose sovereign Sway o'er-ruleth ev'ry Thing.  
He keeps one Court above, and one below,  
O'er which I'm Deputy, as thou shalt know.  
To act and judge, according to my Light;  
Impartially I give each Man his Right.  
Those I condemn, who willful Rebels are,  
And justify th' obedient and sincere.  
I'm charg'd to keep a Watch continually,

Gill presented his most thorough definition of the conscience in his *Body of Natural Divinity*:

It is a power or faculty of the rational soul or man; by which it knows its own actions, and judges of them according to the light it has: some take it to be an habit of the mind; others an act of the practical judgment, flowing from the faculty of the understanding by the force of some certain habit. . . . [It is] a knowledge of the will of God, and of a man's actions, as being agreeable or disagreeable to it . . . . It is that by which a man is conscious to himself of his secret thoughts, as well as of his actions; it is the spirit of a man, which only knows the things of a man within him, and knows those things which only God and himself knows. From this knowledge arises a judgment which conscience forms of itself and actions, and accordingly approves or disapproves of them, and excuses or accuses them.<sup>31</sup>

Fuller gave a clear definition of the conscience in his *Dialogues and Letters Between Crispus and Gaius*: "Conscience is that branch of the intellectual faculty which takes cognizance of the good and evil of our own actions; but is itself distinct from both. It is simple knowledge, essential indeed to moral agency, being one of the principal things by which we are distinguished from brute creation."<sup>32</sup> In his preaching, Fuller

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O'er all Men's Actions, with a careful eye;  
And therefore thee I likewise must accuse  
Of many horrid Crimes, and sad Abuse  
Of Times and Talents, which to thee were lent;  
All which thou hast most shamefully misspent.  
Nay, Murder, Treason, and such Villainy  
Against the Crown and royal Dignity  
Of that great Prince, from whom thou hast thy breath,  
Thou hast committed, and incens'd his Wrath. . . .  
My Name is *Conscience*, which thou bear'st about:  
I am that secret Monitor within,  
Which in thy Breast beholds and checks thy Sin.  
Truth is my Rule; Men's Courses I compare  
According as the Minds enlighten'd are:  
And when they walk contrary to that Light,  
I then accuse them in their Maker's Sight:  
But when their Talents they discreetly use,  
I then their frail Infirmities excuse.  
But thou hast walk'd, without the least Controul,  
Against God's Law, and sinn'd against thy Soul:  
Lo! Thou art try'd, ast, and condemn'd by me,  
Involv'd in Guilt, black Shame, and Misery.

<sup>31</sup> John Gill, *Body of Natural Divinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 843.

<sup>32</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 304-5.

often referred to the conscience as he challenged people to consider their accountability before to God. In love, he warned his hearers in this way:

But if you be not accountable to Him that made you, how is it that sin, which is unknown to every creature but yourself, should nevertheless be accompanied with remorse? Is there not a tribunal erected within your own bosom that forebodes a judgment to come? If there were no hereafter, why that dread of death, and that fearful looking-for of judgment, in the hour of threatening affliction? O sinner! You shall not be able to plead ignorance at the bar of heaven: your own heart, depraved as it is, will bear witness against you.<sup>33</sup>

In another sermon, Fuller called people to consider that there is “something within you, in spite of all your efforts to stifle its remonstrances, tells you that you are accountable to him, and must give an account before him.”<sup>34</sup> Fuller often stressed the need for his hearers to understand the workings of their hearts (or consciences), arguing that this natural feeling of accountability pointed to the reality of their accountability to God.

From their definitions of the conscience, it is evident that there were three important emphases in their ministries: First, the conscience is a creational element in each person’s soul that leads to a self-awareness before God. Second, each person’s conscience governs based on a standard or law. Third, the voice of conscience can be placated through illegitimate and legitimate means.

**The conscience is a creational element in each soul that leads to self-awareness before God.** All three men viewed the conscience as a gift from God placed in the heart of every person. Unique to humans, the conscience points to the reality of accountability before the Creator. For Keach, Gill, and Fuller, the conscience was the “voice of God” or the “tribunal” within that directed a person to this important reality of the moral world. They taught that a good conscience both exposed moral failure that

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<sup>33</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 586.

<sup>34</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 563.

separated individuals from the holy God and directed individuals to the place of forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. God graciously placed this internal witness to reality in each person's heart as a way to lead them back into fellowship with himself. Each of these men understood the conscience as a gracious gift from the Creator.

An important emphasis in their understanding of the conscience is that the conscience does not just address the individual actions of a person but also considers the whole person in relation to God. The conscience is concerned with self-awareness before God; it addresses the standing of the total person before God. Keach referred to the conscience "comforting" or "tormenting" a person based on her "walk" before God.<sup>35</sup> Gill pointed to the conscience forming a knowledge leading to judgment of "itself (the person) and (their) actions" before God.<sup>36</sup> And Fuller directed his readers to this "very interesting subject (the nature of man as a subject of moral government). As we all feel ourselves accountable beings, and must all give account of ourselves another day, it becomes us to know ourselves, and the nature of those powers with which the great Creator invested us."<sup>37</sup> All three men understood the conscience primarily as a form of self-awareness of the whole person before God. The reflection of the conscience is intended to align with the reality of a person's situation. A feeling of peace in a person's conscience is intended to communicate the reality of peace with God. A conviction of sin (moral lack) in one's soul is to direct the person outward to look for a remedy for his soul.

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<sup>35</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 660.

<sup>36</sup> Gill, *Body of Natura Divinity*, 843.

<sup>37</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 298.

**The conscience governs based on a standard or law.** These men also taught that the conscience operates according to a certain standard or law. Keach wrote that the conscience compares a man's "ways and thoughts by some rule; and according as his ways agree or disagree with that rule, so answerably doth it bear witness with or against him."<sup>38</sup> The more accurate the rule, standard, or law, the more accurately does the conscience work in a person's soul. Gill referred to the conscience as "God's viceregent, [that] acts for and under him, and receives its authority and instructions from him, and is accountable to him, and owes obedience to him, and to no other."<sup>39</sup> Yet, he also understood that there are many different standards by which a conscience can be governed. The closer the standard is to Scripture, the more accurate will be the governing of the conscience. As Keach wrote, "If the understanding be enlightened with the truth, to wit, the Word of God, then conscience compares the ways of man by a perfect rule. But if the understanding be enlightened with natural or moral principles only, then conscience compares a man's ways according to those principles only, and so by an imperfect rule."<sup>40</sup> Gill delineated the standards given by God in the following way:

It [the conscience] is the will of God revealed, its knowledge and judgment; either revealed, by the law and light of nature, which was the rule to the Gentiles, who had not the written law, Rom. ii. 14-15. Or by the moral written, which contains that good, perfect, and acceptable will of God, concerning the things to be done or not done; or by the gospel, which instructs in the doctrines of grace, and enforces the duties of religion by them, and is a rule to walk by, Gal. vi. 16.<sup>41</sup>

Gill maintained that the conscience must be governed by the gospel. Both the natural and moral law of God are subsumed under this category of "gospel." All three men emphasized that the proper standard for the conscience is the whole teaching of

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<sup>38</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 660.

<sup>39</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 843.

<sup>40</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 663.

<sup>41</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 843.



Scripture, which is focused on Jesus Christ. By his obedience, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the law. Through his power and by his grace, Christians are called to a life of obedience to the law of God.<sup>42</sup>

An unbiblical rule will cause the conscience to either needlessly afflict or wrongly excuse a person in her self-awareness. In his writings, Fuller contended that one of the causes of spiritual decline in his day was “making the religion of others our standard, instead of the Word of God. The Word of God is the only safe rule we have to go by, either in judging what is real religion, or what exertions and services for God are incumbent upon us.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, these men focused on the proclamation of the Word of God because of the danger of the conscience being governed by a different, unbiblical law.

**The conscience can be placated through illegitimate and legitimate means.**

In one of his sermons, Fuller challenged his hearers to consider the danger of placating the conscience through illegitimate means:

The consciences of many people tell them, that if they take care of their families, pay every man his due, and attend public worship once or twice a week, this is all that can reasonably be expected at their hands. And I have heard this Scripture passage brought in proof in it, “What doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” But (to say nothing of the love of mercy towards our fellow creatures) to walk humbly with God is a very different thing from the above exercises.<sup>44</sup>

Along with the danger of an unscriptural law easily placating one’s conscience, Fuller cautioned of the danger of diversion lessening the accusing voice of conscience. Fuller warned sinners not to be “hurried on, by delusion, from sin to sin, from company to company, and from one course of evil to another, while the enemy of their souls is

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Nettles points to Gill’s sermon on *The Law Established by the Gospel* (1739); see Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:204.

<sup>43</sup> Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 99.

<sup>44</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

doing every thing in his power to secure his dominion of their souls.”<sup>45</sup> His concern was that constant activity distracted people from hearing and responding to the voice of their conscience.<sup>46</sup>

Sadly, the religious context of this time period also promoted many illegitimate means for quieting one’s conscience. These men boldly confronted the external, ritualistic focus encouraged by leaders in the established Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Fuller argued the following:

Some men, and even some preachers, may tell you that all this [quieted conscience] signifies nothing more than your being baptized, or, at most, living a sober, regular life; but it is at your peril to believe them against the solemn declarations of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

Others have derived hope from the performance of certain *superstitious rules*, or from the *bestowment of a portion of their wealth on some religious object*. Much of this kind of delusion has been practiced in popish countries. Men who have lived a life of injustice, or debauchery, or both, have hoped to balance accounts with the Almighty by performing a journey to the tomb of some departed saint, by building a church, or by endowing an hospital. It were well if this kind of self-deception were confined to popish countries; but, alas! It is natural to unrenewed minds, of all nations and religions, to substitute ceremony in the place of judgment, mercy, and the love of God; and to hope to escape the Divine displeasure by the works of their own hands.<sup>48</sup>

Keach, Gill, and Fuller all emphasized that although form, ritual, and external obedience may quiet a person’s conscience, these methods did not address the true guilt of the sinner. This illegitimate placating of conscience led people into a more dangerous position before God than when they were openly rejecting God’s law. Fuller warned,

A man’s conscience may be easy, and he may persuade himself that he is in the way of life, while, in fact, he is as far from it as the old Pharisees, against whom the heaviest woes of damnation were denounced. The case of such people seems to be worse, on some accounts, than that of the openly profane: those acting in opposition to their own consciences, as well as to God, a faithful warning sometimes take hold of their fears; but those, deluded by vain hope, consider all such warnings as

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<sup>45</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

<sup>46</sup> See sermon on Ps 4:4 in Fuller, *Complete Works*, 584.

<sup>47</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

<sup>48</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 564.

inapplicable to them. Both are steering the same course; but the one is impeded by wind and tide, while the other is aided by the current of a perverted conscience.<sup>49</sup>

The only legitimate method for appeasing the accusing voice of conscience is a focus on the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus stated that love is the ultimate standard of obedience: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). All people stand guilty before God because no one has perfectly met this standard. Therefore, only the obedience and sacrifice of another—one who stood in the place of sinners—can satisfy the accusing voice of conscience. Since these men believed in the experiential knowledge of the substitutionary death of Jesus as the only legitimate means of answering the accusing voice of the conscience, their ministries were marked by a sacrificial focus on preserving the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>50</sup>

Andrew Fuller preached,

Whether Christ laid down his life as a *substitute* for sinners was never a question with me. All my hope rests upon it; the sum of my preaching the gospel consists in it. If I know anything of myself I can say of Christ crucified for us, as was said of Jerusalem, “If I forget thee, let my right hand forget; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”<sup>51</sup>

Michael Haykin points to the centrality of the cross in Fuller’s ministry:

The cross is “the central point in which all the lines of evangelical truth meet and are united.” Just as the sun is absolutely vital for the maintenance of the solar system, so “the doctrine of the cross is to the system of the gospel; it is the life of it. . . .”

The Baptist pastor never tired of emphasizing, moreover, that inner peace and heart-purification from the stain of indwelling sin is to be found only in the experiential knowledge of Christ crucified. “The blood of Jesus,” Fuller observed in remarks on the incident of Christ washing his disciples’ feet, is “a fountain set open for sin and uncleanness.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

<sup>50</sup> See Benjamin Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification* (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007).

<sup>51</sup> Oliver, *History of Calvinistic Baptists*, 149.

<sup>52</sup> Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 36, 40.

As a result of experiencing the personal change of Jesus's work for them, these men preached and pointed to Christ, knowing that he was the only hope for the world.

In summary, Keach, Gill, and Fuller all viewed the conscience as a gift from God placed in each person's soul that is meant to lead to an accurate self-awareness before God. The conscience is always based on a standard or law. The closer the law is to Scripture, the more accurately will the conscience govern the soul. The voice of conscience can be appeased through illegitimate and legitimate means. The only proper means of quieting the accusing voice of conscience is the central message of holy Scripture—the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

### **The Importance of Training the Conscience**

In the opening pages of *A Body of Natural Divinity*, Gill established his absolute commitment to the authority of the Bible for all doctrine and life:

As what I shall say hereafter concerning God, his essence, perfections, persons, works, and worship, and every thing relative to him, will be taken out of the sacred scriptures, and proved by them; it will be necessary, before I proceed further, to secure the ground I go upon; and establish the divine authority of them; and shew that they are a perfect, plain, and sure rule to go by; and are the standard of faith and practice; and to be read constantly, studied diligently, and consulted with on all occasions.<sup>53</sup>

The Word of God is the only perfect and right rule of life for the conscience. These men argued that if the conscience is to work correctly, it must be trained by the rule of God's Word. Hence, they focused on the importance of reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture. Keach pointed to the necessity of training the conscience when he wrote:

If the understanding be enlightened with the truth, to wit, the Word of God, then conscience compares the way of man by a perfect rule. If the understanding be enlightened with natural or moral principles only, then conscience compares a man's ways according to those principles only, and so by an imperfect rule. . . . A

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<sup>53</sup> Gill, *Body of Natural Divinity*, 11.

good Witness, one that hath perfect knowledge of all things laid to a man's charge, if he can make it out that he is wronged, how is such a Witness to be valued!<sup>54</sup>

Like the Reformers and Puritans before them, these men directed people back to a focus on Scripture. They accentuated sitting under the preaching of the Word of God. For them, the intake of God's Word was vitally important to train the conscience to properly testify to a person's status before God.

Fuller stressed the importance of training the conscience as he addressed those who were deceived into a false contentment in their walk with God. If their consciences were not "instructed and formed" by the right standard, they were in a very dangerous position before God. Fuller preached,

Your heart and conscience may not be at such variance as to give you any considerable pain. If so, let me recommend a second question: *Is my conscience instructed and formed by the word of God?* Though you may be certain that you are in a wrong course if you live in the violation of conscience, yet you cannot always conclude that you are in a right one when you do not violate it, because conscience itself may err. Saul was conscientious in persecuting the followers of Christ; yet he was one of *the chief of sinners* for so doing. You may ask, What can a man do but follow that which he thinks to be right? True; but it becomes him to compare his thoughts with the word of God; for we are easily persuaded to think favourably of that conduct which suits our inclinations; and where this is the case, the error of the conscience, instead of excusing the evil conduct, becomes itself an evil. . . A man's conscience may be easy, and he may persuade himself that he is in the way to life, while, in fact, he is as far from it as the old Pharisees, against whom the heaviest woes of damnation were denounced. The case of such people seems to be worse, on some accounts, than that of the openly profane: these acting in opposition to their own consciences, as well as to God, a faithful warning sometimes takes hold of their fears; but those, deluded by vain hope, consider all such warnings as inapplicable to them. Both are steering the same course; but the one is impeded by wind and tide, while the other is aided by the current of a perverted conscience. Do not forget to inquire, *Is my conscience instructed and informed by the word of God?* Perhaps you have not been in the habit of reading that sacred book, or of having it read to you. The neglect of it may occasion your eternal overthrow.<sup>55</sup>

Knowing that the Word of God is the source of life and the foundation of human flourishing, these men gave themselves to the preaching and teaching of God's Word. They understood the necessity of living before God with a good conscience. Gill

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<sup>54</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 664.

<sup>55</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

wrote that “such a conscience is to be held and to be held fast; a good man should exercise himself to have it, and to exercise it, and himself in it, and be careful to do nothing contrary to it; but make use of all means to preserve it.”<sup>56</sup>

**The difference between a good and an evil conscience.** Keach, Gill, and Fuller carefully distinguished between a “natural good conscience” and an “evangelical good conscience.” Keach outlined the difference in his *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible*:

Here I might show how a natural good Conscience may be known from a Conscience evangelically and spiritually good; take two or three hints.

(1.) He whose Conscience is only naturally good, is usually a proud man; “Lord, I thank thee, I am not as other men,” &c., Luke xviii. 11. Such seek their own glory, they sacrifice to their own net, and burn incense to their own drag; all centres in self, the principle of their action is self. A saint, when his gifts are highest, his heart is lowest; when his Spirit is most raised, his heart is most humble.

(2.) A man that hath only a natural good Conscience, his great endeavor is to still the noise, and stop the mouth of it; but never looks to have the guilt removed, and filth washed away by Christ’s blood; he seeth no need of a Savior: “I was alive once without the law,” &c., Rom. Vii. 9. He is like a child that hath got a thorn in his flesh, who wipeth away the blood, but taketh no notice or thought how to get out the thorn. If bare performance of duties, whether natural or divine, will still or quiet the Conscience, the Conscience is but naturally good.<sup>57</sup>

A person with an “evangelical good conscience” understands the depth of sin in one’s heart and turns to the “evangel,” or “good news,” of Jesus to find restoration.

Keach identified twelve scriptural aspects to the “evangelical good conscience”:

That man hath a good conscience that . . .

1. Walks uprightly and faithfully to his light, according to what he knoweth. [This first point is true of both a “natural good conscience” and an “evangelical good conscience.”]
2. When Conscience compares a man’s ways by the perfect rule of God’s Word, by which he walks, and finds it agreeable thereto.

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<sup>56</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 843.

<sup>57</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 664.

3. An evangelical good Conscience findeth a man as careful of his duty towards God, as he is of his duty towards man; and as careful of his duty towards man, as of his duty towards God. (Acts xxiv. 16)
4. An evangelical good Conscience always stirs up to obedience and conformity to Gods word, from the sight of the excellency of it, and purity that is in it. (Psalm cxix. 140)
5. He hath a good Conscience, whose conviction and trouble for sin is universal, when it is deep, when they Spirit searcheth into the bottom. (John iv. 29, Acts ii. 37)
6. He hath an evangelical good Conscience, who is troubled for sin, not simply because of shame, or because of inward guilt, or fear of punishment, but because God is and hath been offended, his Spirit grieved, and his soul defiled, and made unlike God, his trouble ariseth from the sense of the heinous nature of sin.
7. When Conscience findeth that no conviction, either of sin or duty, is slighted by the soul, but tenderly nourished. (Psalm cxix. 80)
8. When a man will suffer any punishment or loss, before he will offer violence to his conscience, and sin against God.
9. When Conscience cannot find any sin hid, spared, borne with, or connived at in the soul, no sweet morsel under the tongue.
10. When Conscience finds a man the same in private that he is in public, and that he is not of a pharisaical Spirit, doth nothing to be seen of men, or for vain glory's sake.
11. When Conscience cannot find any duty or ordinance, which the soul is convinced of to be neglected, though he be exposed to reproach thereby. [For Keach, believer's baptism is applicable here.]
12. And lastly, when Conscience beareth testimony to a soul, that it loveth God and Jesus Christ above all things in this world, &c. (Phil. Iii. 8, 9, 10)<sup>58</sup>

Keach's explanation presents a thorough understanding of the scriptural teaching of a good conscience. A good conscience testifies to the whole person's status before God—addressing both internal loves and external actions. The opposite of an “evangelical good conscience” is what Scripture calls an “evil conscience.”

Gill organized the characteristics of an evil conscience into seven categories: First, an evil conscience is a blind or ignorant conscience. It is an untrained conscience

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<sup>58</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 667.

that neglects or misunderstands God's Word. Gill states that for some, "it comes to that pass, as to have lost the distinction between good and evil, and between darkness and light; and some do not care to come to the light, lest their deeds should be reproved." Second, an evil conscience is a "dull, heavy, stupid conscience." This person is "no more affected than a man that is asleep; and though in danger, as a man asleep in the midst of the sea, and on the top of the mast, yet careless, unconcerned, and secure." Third, an evil conscience is a "partial one." A person living with this type of conscience "overlooks greater sins, and is very severe on lesser ones." Fourth, an evil conscience is a "bribed one." Gill used the scriptural example of Herod executing John the Baptist, which was a response to the pressure of his wife and daughter in the presence of his court. Herod's conscience was bribed by the power and influence of his friends, causing him to proceed with this wicked act. Fifth, an evil conscience is "an impure one," which is the state of every individual without Christ. Paul points to the inherent impurity of unbelief in Titus 1:15. God's high standard of love cannot be fulfilled by those who have not come to faith in Jesus Christ. Sixth, an evil conscience is a "seared one, one cauterized or hardened." This is a conscience that has become "insensible of sin and danger, and past feeling any remorse for sin." Lastly, an evil conscience is a "desperate one, or one filled with despair." While the purpose of the conscience is supposed to lead to acceptance and consolation, an evil conscience leaves a person in a place of despair.<sup>59</sup>

Keach, Gill, and Fuller focused their ministry on obtaining and maintaining a good conscience before God, knowing that it was possible for people with an evil conscience to change. At the beginning of Gill's description of the evil conscience, he wrote that "guilt, terror, distress, and sorrow" will reign in a person's heart "unless the

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<sup>59</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 844-45.



heart is purged from it by the blood of Christ.”<sup>60</sup> These men focused on the death of Christ as the way to have a good conscience before God and man.

**Obtaining and maintaining a good conscience.** In Keach’s allegorical writing *The Travels of True Godliness*, the character “True Godliness” seeks to persuade “Apostate Soul” to consider the value of having a good conscience:

Do not think that I put too great a burden upon thee; for observe, it is not necessary to take greater pains about this inestimable jewel than men of the world take to get the perishing things of this life: nay, if men did but bestow half the labour about the good of their souls that they do about getting the world and providing for their bodies, what happy persons might they be!<sup>61</sup>

Throughout the writings and sermons of Keach, Gill, and Fuller, there are strong appeals for people to consider their ways, their position before God, and the only way for reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. These men experientially knew the peace of a good conscience before God found through faith in Jesus Christ, and they proclaimed and offered such peace through their preaching, teaching, and writing.

Below are examples from each man in their preaching or writing of calling people to come to God for cleansing of conscience and peace with God:

Keach in his *The Marrow of True Justification*: Therefore Sinners, though ‘tis your Duty to reform your Lives, and leave your abominable Sins, which often bring heavy Judgments upon you in this World, and expose you to eternal Wrath in the World to come; yet know that all that you can do, will fail in point of your Acceptation and Justification in God’s sight, or to save your Souls: Your present Work and Business is to believe in Jesus Christ, to look to him, who only can renew his sacred Image in your Souls, and make you New Creatures, which must be done, or you perish. O cry that he would help your Unbelief: Come, venture your Souls on Christ’s Righteousness; Christ is able to save you, though you are never so great Sinners. Come to him, throw yourselves at the Feet of Jesus.<sup>62</sup>

Gill in his sermon on Romans 3:31, *The Law Established by the Gospel*: Hence it [the righteousness of God] has that fulness, sufficiency, and virtue to justify all to whose account it is placed; which the righteousness of a mere creature could never

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<sup>60</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 844-45.

<sup>61</sup> Keach, *Travels of True Godliness*, 166-67.

<sup>62</sup> Keach, *The Marrow of True Justification*, 92.

do. The holy Spirit of God discovers this righteousness to a poor, sensible sinner, brings it near to him; sets it before him; works faith in him to lay hold upon it, and receive it, and pronounces him justified by it in the court of conscience.<sup>63</sup>

Fuller in a sermon on Psalm 4:4: But if your motives were ever so pure, and your good deeds ever so many, yet having broken the holy, just, and good law of God, you cannot be justified by any thing which you can do. If you commune with your heart to any good purpose, you will never think of being saved by the works of your own hands; but feel the necessity of a Savior, and of a great one. The doctrine of salvation by the death of Jesus will be glad tidings to your soul.<sup>64</sup>

In their teaching on this subject, these men emphasized the centrality of Scripture and the foundation of the cross-work of Jesus Christ. Keach wrote that the first and foundational step to obtaining and maintaining a good conscience was having a “heart sprinkled with the blood of Christ (Hebrews x. 22; Hebrews ix. 14).”<sup>65</sup>

In order to have a good conscience, the cross must completely overshadow a person’s self-awareness before God. From the foundation of the cross, Keach’s, Gill’s, and Fuller’s teaching and counsel focused on four main points: First, they counseled people to listen to and obey the voice of their conscience. Second, they noted the danger of false principles, standards, or laws that would lead the conscience to work improperly. Third, they emphasized the need for constant interaction with the Word of God through

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<sup>63</sup> John Gill, *Collections of Sermons and Tracts*, 1:201, quoted in Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:204.

<sup>64</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 587.

<sup>65</sup> Keach, *Types and Metaphors*, 665. Keach elaborates as follows:

How shall a man get and keep a good Conscience?

1. His heart must be sprinkled with the blood of Christ. Heb. 10:22; Heb. 9:14
2. He must take heed of all such things as offend his Conscience; Conscience is a very tender thing, the smallest thing will make it bleed.
3. He must take heed of evil and corrupt principles
4. Labor to sit under soul-searching ministry.
5. Take heed of vain glory, and all secret evil; Conscience pryeth into thy most inward thoughts; beware of speculative sin.
6. Labour to keep thy tongue.
7. Labour to bring thy heart into every duty, beware of hypocrisy.
8. Do not grieve or offend thy Conscience in any thing; though the matter may be in itself lawful, yet thou must not do it, if thou hast a doubt in thy spirit about it.

personal study and “soul-searching ministry.” Fourth, they stressed the importance of God’s standard of internal love and sincere obedience that avoids “every hypocrisy.”

A proper understanding of law and grace are essential throughout the whole process. In his *Strictures of Sandemanianism*, Fuller wrote,

To this I add, it is impossible, in the nature of things, to believe the gospel but as being made sensible of that which renders it necessary. The guilty and lost state of sinners goes before the revelation of the grace of the gospel; the latter, therefore, cannot be understood or believed, but as we are convinced of the former. There *is* no grace in the gospel, but upon the supposition of the holiness, justice, and goodness of the law. If God be not in the right, and we in the wrong; if we have not transgressed without cause, and be not fairly condemned; grace is no more grace, but a just exemption from undeserved punishment.<sup>66</sup>

Fuller argued that the law must first train the conscience to communicate the “guilty and lost state” of the sinner before he can grasp the grace of the gospel. However, if a conscience is properly guided by God’s Word, the Law of God and the grace of God will both be prominent in the sinner’s thoughts.

This careful explanation of maintaining a good conscience upholds the importance of law and grace in the Christian life. As Keach wrote, the Christian now is “not to work for Life, but from Life.”<sup>67</sup> Following the centrality of obedience in the Bible, these men taught the importance of living obedient lives before God, leading to peace of conscience for the Christian. Keach called sinners to “labour and strive to receive Jesus Christ” and believers to “labour after a *strong Faith* in Christ (obedience), for the measure of their peace will be according to the degree and measure of their faith.”<sup>68</sup>

Fuller described how the renewed missionary focus in his ministry led to greater peace of conscience. He wrote the following in a letter to John Ryland: “I have

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<sup>66</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 269.

<sup>67</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:179.

<sup>68</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:179.

found the more I do for Christ, the better it is with me. I never enjoyed so much of the pleasures of religion, as I have within the last two years, since we have engaged in the Mission business. Mr. Whitfield [sic] used to say, ‘the more a man does for God, the more he may.’<sup>69</sup> Fuller experienced the peace of conscience that resulted from following the missionary heart of God. He understood and experienced the relationship between gospel, law, obedience, and peace of conscience.

Gill’s counsel provides a summary of how all three of these men understood the way to maintain a good conscience before God. He wrote,

A good man should . . . make use of all means to preserve it, by frequently communing with his own heart, by taking heed to his ways, and by having respect to all the commandments of God: and especially should deal with the blood of Christ continually for the purifying of his heart by faith in it, and for cleansing him from all sin.<sup>70</sup>

### **Their Model of Preaching and Ministering to the Conscience**

Fuller bemoaned the lack of “preaching to the conscience” in his day due to the predominance of Hyper-Calvinistic theology and practice in the church. He spent his life fighting against the detrimental influence of this faulty understanding of Scripture. Motivated by his love for the truth and for lost souls, he sought to persuade the church in his day of the necessity of the free offer of the gospel to all people. He argued that a vital part of this “free offer of the gospel” in ministry was a preaching that focused on the conscience. Although Hyper-Calvinism is not a dominant factor in the twenty-first-century church, the same lack of “preaching to the conscience” is still an issue today. The therapeutic focus of the broader culture has infiltrated the evangelical church’s ministry, leading to an imbalanced focus on the love of God apart from the law of God. The historical examples of Keach, Gill, and Fuller and their focus on “preaching to the

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<sup>69</sup> Piper, *Andrew Fuller*, 16.

<sup>70</sup> Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 846.

conscience” provides a necessary correction to issues that plague the church in this generation.

In order to become more biblical in the care of souls, the church must engage with the arguments of Fuller and the men in his tradition:

Has this kind of preaching which leaves out the doctrines of man’s lost condition by nature, and salvation by grace only through the atonement of Christ, and substitutes, in their place, the doctrine of mercy without atonement, the simple humanity of Christ, the efficacy of repentance and obedience, &c. . . . has this kind of preaching, I say, ever been known to *lay much hold on the hearts and consciences of men*? The way in which that “wonderful change” was effected, in the lives and manners of people who attended the first preaching of the gospel, was by the word preached *laying hold on their hearts*. It was a distinguishing mark of primitive preaching, that it “commended itself to every man’s conscience.” People could not in general sit unconcerned under it. We are told of some who were “cut to the heart,” and took counsel to slay the preachers; and of others who were “pricked in the heart,” and said, “men and brethren, what shall we do?” But, in both cases, the *heart* was the mark at which the preacher aimed, and which his doctrine actually reached. Has the preaching of the Socinians any such effect as this? Do they so much as expect it should? Were any of their hearers, by any means, to feel pricked in their hearts, and come to them with the question, What shall we do? Would they not pity them as enthusiasts, and be ready to suspect that they had been among the Calvinists? If any counsel were given would it not be such as must tend to impede their repentance, rather than promote it; and, instead of directing them to Jesus Christ, as was the practice of the primitive preachers, would they not endeavour to lead them into another course?<sup>71</sup>

Preaching and counseling that focuses on the conscience will be characterized by emphasizing the following dimensions: a focus on sin and the breaking of God’s law, a focus on the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and a focus on a life of love and obedience while being dependent on the cross-work of Christ.

**Preaching to and counseling the conscience: a focus on sin and the law of God.** A faithful preacher will expose the reality of sin and moral failure in his hearer’s hearts through the standard of Scripture. While the path of love may appear to focus on the love of God, this preaching does not have the ultimate good of people in mind. The moral reality of each person’s standing before God must be a focus of any preaching

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<sup>71</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 55.

ministry. The only way to properly display the glory of the cross-work of Jesus is to set it against the backdrop of the breaking of God’s holy law. Tom Nettles explains how George Whitefield’s method of addressing the unconverted concerning the law of God conformed to the example of Keach, Gill, and Fuller. Whitefield counseled that

“law must be preached to self-righteous sinners.” Sinners who feel secure must “hear the thunderings of Mount Sinai, before we bring them to Mount Zion.” In fact, ministers “who never preach up the law, it is to be feared, are unskillful in delivering the glad tidings of the gospel. Ministers should be Boanerges, the whirlwind, the earthquake before the still small voice; we must first show people they are condemned, and then show them how they must be saved.”<sup>72</sup>

Fuller explained his purpose in preaching as follows: “If ever you hear to any purpose (advantage), it will make you forget the preacher, and think only of yourselves. You will be like a smitten deer, which, unable to keep pace with the herd, retires to the thicket to bleed alone. This is the effect that I long to see produced in you.”<sup>73</sup>

Having a “deep sense of his own depravity and a corresponding sense of his indebtedness to grace,”<sup>74</sup> Fuller did not aim at exposing sin from a position of self-righteousness. Nettles wrote that Fuller’s “personal experience of the depravity of his nature and the freeness of God’s grace so penetrated the form and method of his theology that his counsel to others always reflected those realities. . . . For Fuller, the doctrine of depravity was a fundamental principle in religion upon which ‘almost all other principles are founded.’”<sup>75</sup>

The example set forward by Keach, Gill, and Fuller is a faithful proclamation of the depravity of each heart that applies the perfect standard of God’s holiness to each

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<sup>72</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:237.

<sup>73</sup> Fuller, *Complete Works*, 585.

<sup>74</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:251.

<sup>75</sup> Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:253.

person who sat under their ministry. They understood this type of preaching as a necessary element of faithful pastoral ministry. For example, Gill wrote,

He [the preacher] knows that “if he does not warn and instruct both the righteous and the wicked, their blood will be required at his hand.” The minister must act as a watchman and “warn sinners of their evil ways, and of the danger they are in by them.” They should “shew them what an evil and bitter thing sin is, and that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against it; that the wages of sin is death eternal; and that destruction and misery are in all their ways, in which they will issue, if grace prevent not; and to convince them of the worth of their precious and immortal souls, and that the loss of them is irrecoverable, and that nothing can be given in exchange for them.”<sup>76</sup>

**Preaching to and counseling the conscience: a focus on the obedience and sacrifice of Jesus.** Keach, Gill, and Fuller were centered on the cross of Jesus Christ. They proclaimed the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Jesus Christ as the only hope for sinners. The goal of their preaching focused on leading sinners from a recognition of their sinful hearts to the sin-bearing work of Jesus Christ. Fuller argued that the reason so many parish churches in his day were so poorly attended was that “the generality of the clergy do not preach the doctrine of the cross. . . . There is nothing in their preaching that interests the hearts or reaches the consciences of the people.”<sup>77</sup>

Preaching and counseling to the conscience will focus on the cross-work of Jesus as the only way to be reconciled to God. The reason these men fought so aggressively against the false teaching of their times is that they knew that the truth of the gospel, of justification by faith alone, was essential for a life of true flourishing. Fuller emphasized that it is the work of Christ alone that saves lost sinners:

Thus it is that justification is ascribed to faith, because it is by faith that we receive Christ; and thus it is by *faith only*, and not by any other grace. Faith is peculiarly a *receiving grace* which none other is. Were we said to be justified by repentance, by love, or by any other grace, it would convey to us the idea of something good in us being the *consideration* on which the blessing was bestowed; but justification by faith conveys no such idea. On the contrary, it leads the mind directly to Christ, in

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<sup>76</sup> Gill, *A Collection of Sermons and Tracts*, 12, quoted in Nettles, *The Baptists*, 1:222.

<sup>77</sup> Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 38.

the same manner as saying of a person that he lives by *begging* leads to the idea of his living on *what he freely receives*.<sup>78</sup>

It was the “the darkness of human depravity [that] increased his [i.e., Fuller’s] sense of the power, purity and necessity of efficacious grace” found in the cross of Jesus Christ. A preaching to the conscience will focus on the cross of Christ as the only hope for sinners.

**Preaching to and counseling the conscience: a focus on a life of love dependent on the cross-work of Christ.** Keach, Gill, and Fuller exemplified the necessity of keeping the gospel-way before Christians all of their lives. A focus on the conscience will lead to a ministry that calls people to sincere, unhypocritical love as well as an outward obedience. The motivation for obedience in the Christian life is the free forgiveness found in Jesus Christ’s death. A ministry that focuses on the conscience will encourage people to listen to the voice of their conscience. This activity will lead to a life marked by repentance and faith—walking through the gospel of Jesus Christ again and again. This is what we considered in Fuller’s letter to his daughter at the beginning of the paper. The only way to “persevere in the ways of the Lord” is to “preserve a good conscience void of offence toward God and towards man.”<sup>79</sup>

Fuller summarizes the importance of keeping the cross of Jesus central throughout all of life:

Whether Christ laid down his life as a *substitute* for sinners was never a question with me. All my hope rests upon it; the sum of my preaching the gospel consists in it. If I know anything of myself I can say of Christ crucified for us, as was said of Jerusalem, “If I forget thee, let my right hand forget; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”<sup>80</sup>

For do away with the atoning work of Christ, and . . . the gospel is annihilated, or ceases to be that good news to lost sinners which it professes to be; practical

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<sup>78</sup> Piper, *Andrew Fuller*, 51.

<sup>79</sup> Ryland, *Life and Death of the Reverend Andrew Fuller*, 497-98, quoted in Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 137.

<sup>80</sup> Oliver, *History of Calvinistic Baptists*, 149.



religion is divested of its most powerful motives, the evangelical dispensation of its peculiar glory, and heaven itself of its most transporting joys.<sup>81</sup>

### **The Influence of Keach, Gill, and Fuller on Future Generations**

Keach, Gill, and Fuller impacted the future generations of the church in remarkable ways. Although they may not be well-known to much of the church today, some of the men they influenced have had an impact on the church that continues to this day.

#### **Charles Spurgeon**

Almost one hundred years after John Gill's ministry ended, the famous preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) became the pastor of the same church where Keach and Gill once pastored. Spurgeon looked to all three of these men as model pastors and theologians, speaking often of their influence upon his life and ministry. Spurgeon focused on preaching to the conscience in his ministry. He provided an excellent example of this in a point of application in a sermon he preached in 1858 on Hebrews 12:24:

Friend! Hast thou ever heard the blood of Christ in they conscience? I have, and I thank God I ever heard that sweet soft voice.

“Once a sinner near despair;  
Sought thy mercy seat by prayer.”

He prayed: he thought he was praying in vain. The tears gushed from his eyes; his heart was heavy within him; he sought, but he found no mercy. Again, again, and yet again, he besieged the throne of the heavenly grace and knocked at mercy's door. Oh! Who can tell the mill-stone that lay upon his beating heart, and the iron that did eat his soul. He was a prisoner in sore bondage; deep, as he thought, in the bondage of despair was he chained, to perish for ever.

That prisoner one day heard a voice, which said to him, “Away, away, to Calvary!” Yet he trembled at the voice, for he said, “Why should I go thither, for there my blackest sin was committed; there I murdered the Savior by my transgressions? Why should I go to see the murdered corpse of him who became my brother born for adversity?” But mercy beckoned, and she said, “Come, come away, sinner!” And the sinner followed. The chains were on his legs and on his hands, and he could scarcely creep along. Still the black vulture Destruction seemed hovering in the air.

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<sup>81</sup> Haykin, *Armies of the Lamb*, 38.

But he crept as best he could, till he came to the foot of the hill of Calvary. On the summit he saw a cross; blood was distilling from the hands, and from the feet, and from the side; and mercy touched his ears and said, "Listen!" and he heard that blood speak; and as it spoke the first thing it said was, "Love!" And the second thing it said was, "Mercy!" The third thing it said was, "Pardon." The next thing it said was, "Acceptance." The next thing it said was, "Adoption." The next thing it said was "Security." And the last thing it whispered was, "Heaven." And as the sinner heard that voice, he said within himself, "And does that blood speak to me?" And the Spirit said, "To thee—to thee it speaks." And he listened, and oh what music did it seem to his poor troubled heart, for in a moment all his doubts were gone. He had no sense of guilt. He knew that he was a vile, but he saw that his vileness was all washed away; he knew that he was guilty, but he saw his guilt atoned for, through the precious blood that was flowing there.

He had been full of dread before: he dreaded life, he dreaded death; but now he had no dread at all; a joyous confidence took possession of his heart. He looked to Christ, and he said, "I know that my Redeemer liveth;" he clasped the Saviour in his arms, and he began to sing: "Oh! Confident am I; for this best blood was shed for me." And then Despair fled and Destruction was driven clean away; and instead thereof came the bright white-winged angel of Assurance, and she dwelt in his bosom, saying evermore to him, "Thou art accepted in the Beloved: thou art chosen of God and precious: thou art his child now, and thou shalt be his favourite throughout eternity." "The blood of Christ speaketh better things than that of Able."

Dear Friend, when thou hearest the voice of conscience, stop and try to hear the voice of the blood too. Oh! What a precious thing it is to hear the voice of the blood of Christ. You who do not know that that means, do not know the very essence and joy of life; but you who understand that, can say, "the dropping of the blood is like the music of heaven upon earth." Poor sinner! I would ask thee to come and listen to that voice that distils upon thy ear and thy heart to-day. Thou art full of sin; the Saviour bids thee lift thine eyes to him. See, there, his blood is flowing from his head, his hands, his feet, and every drop that falls cries, "Father, O forgive them! Father, O forgive them." And each drop seems to also say as it falls, "It is finished: I have made an end of sin, I have brought in everlasting righteousness." Oh! Sweet language of the dropping blood of Christ.

Guilty, lost and helpless you must come to that blood, and to that blood alone, for your hopes; you come to the cross of Christ and to that blood too, I know, with a trembling and an aching heart. Some of you remember how you first came, cast down and full of despair; but that blood recovered you. And this one thing I know: if you have come to that blood once, you will come to it every day. Your life will be just this—"Looking to Jesus." And your whole conduct will be epitomized in this—"To whom coming as unto a living stone." Not to whom I have come, but to whom I am always coming. If thou hast ever come to the blood of Christ thou wilt feel thy need of coming to it every day. He that does not desire to wash in that fountain every day, has never washed in it at all. I feel it every day to be my joy and my privilege that there is still a fountain opened. . . . "Let this be our experience every day."<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *New Park Street Pulpit* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Press, 1964), 1:374-75.

## **Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones**

Charles Spurgeon had a profound impact on the ministry of another famous London preacher, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899-1981). Lloyd-Jones continued with the same focus that we have seen in Keach, Gill, and Fuller. Lloyd-Jones argued for the importance of preaching to the conscience in a sermon on John 8:

It is made perfectly clear in the pages of the New Testament that no man can be saved until, at some time or other, he has felt desperate about himself. . . . The way to obtain salvation is to seek it, and what makes one seek for it is that one realizes one's need of it. That is, in reality, the great theme of the New Testament.

There is something even worse than that about the situation as I see it, and that is that present-day preaching does not even annoy men, but leaves them precisely where they were, without a ruffle and without the slightest disturbance. . . . The church is regarded as a sort of dispensary where drugs and soothing mixtures are distributed and in which everyone should be eased and comforted. And the one theme of the church must be "the love of God." Anyone who happens to break these rules and who produces a disturbing effect upon members of his congregation is regarded as an objectionable person.

If ever anyone knew the love of God, if ever "the love of God" was preached and understood by anyone, that one was Jesus Christ. Yet what was the effect he produced upon His congregations? Did all go home for the service smiling and happy, and feeling very self-satisfied and complacent? Was his perfect ministry one in which no one was offended and at which no one took umbrage? Do his services suggest the type so popular today – the building with "the dim religious light" where nice hymns are sung, nice prayers are offered, and a fine and cultured "short" address is delivered? Look to the pages of the New Testament and see the answer.<sup>83</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The focus on the conscience in Keach, Gill, and Fuller flowed from a biblical concern for the truth of God and the salvation of mankind. These men guided the English Baptist tradition to a focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ that ministered to multitudes of people. They did not cower from preaching the whole gospel as they faced persecution from the established church and pressure from the surrounding culture. The church of the twenty-first century has much to learn from their focus on the truth of Scripture being the greatest means of caring for God's people.

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<sup>83</sup> Iain Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years 1899-1939* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Press, 1982), 207.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ESSENTIAL MORALITY OF IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF THE CONSCIENCE IN IDENTITY FORMATION

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Every individual possesses a conscience that testifies to both the moral framework of this world along with the way an individual relates to the moral framework and understands him- or herself.

Considering the dearth of attention given to the conscience and the blatant antagonism to a moral framework in much of modern soul-care, effective counseling will acknowledge and correct the therapeutic ethos that dominates people's thinking and living. Pointing to the presence of the conscience, the counselor will emphasize the reality of morality, moral agency, and the only path to acceptance, forgiveness, and wholeness through the cross of Jesus Christ. Proper identity formation, morality, and human flourishing will thrive or deteriorate according to the success or failure of a correct understanding of the personal conscience.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I survey the present context of the ethical landscape in light of the predominant understanding of identity formation. The second chapter locates and defines the conscience in the human heart and in natural human experience. Moreover, because influential psychological schools of thought have overshadowed and patently mis-defined the conscience, this chapter explores the teachings of Scripture on the conscience, deriving a definition and understanding from this authority. The clear teaching of Scripture is that the conscience is an essential element of the human person, an internal testimony of God and his law, a means of

understanding one's identity, and a primary source of love. A healthy conscience plays a primary role in producing an outward focus and love in the human heart that leads to true human flourishing.

The third chapter considers the therapeutic overshadowing of the conscience in modern soul-care. The therapeutic ethos focuses on the priority of self, authenticity, disorder instead of sin, and victimization instead of moral agency, and it promotes "positive self-regard" at all costs. It is important to note how this therapeutic ethos has even permeated Christian soul-care practices. This chapter attempts to show the weaknesses and ineffectiveness of the therapeutic approaches to soul-care and counseling that dominate current practice.

The fourth chapter outlines the practice of addressing the conscience in soul-care and counseling. This outline includes the following foci: (1) counseling individuals toward an awareness of the working of their conscience; (2) counseling individuals toward an attentiveness to the voice of their conscience; (3) counseling individuals toward a correct informing and training of their conscience; (4) counseling individuals toward a proper appeasement of the guilt of their conscience; and (5) counseling individuals toward the role of conscience in identity formation.

The dissertation concludes with a summary of the role of the conscience in identity formation and soul-care.



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