

Article

“My Conscience is Clear” (1 Cor 4:4). The Potential Relevance of Paul’s Understanding of Conscience for Today’s Fundamental Moral Theology

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to examine the Pauline understanding of conscience, with the view of gaining an inspiration from it for the contemporary discussion on the foundations of the Christian ethics. The meaning Paul attaches to it depends on the context (mainly in Rom and 1 and 2 Cor), ranging from the personal to the communal one. Conscience holds the secrets of human hearts, evaluates concrete circumstances, and discerns right from wrong. It enjoys special relationship with the Holy Spirit, who gives it credibility. Paul’s teaching on conscience extends beyond the personal to the communal. One of the most important inspirations we can draw from him is the one concerning the proper relationship between various members of the ecclesia: those appointed to hold authority, and those supposed to submit to it. How should we balance the communal demands and personal freedom of every baptized member of the community? What is common and what is personal? Despite a multitude of cultural differences and real-life problems in the world of Saint Paul and our own, a careful lecture of his writings may stimulate our debates on the foundations of Christian ethics in a positive way and ensure that they do remain the theological ones.

Keywords: conscience; moral autonomy; Pauline letters; self-awareness; faith; freedom; ecclesiastical community

1. Introduction

The moral and theological analysis of the Pauline meaning of conscience has to confront two difficulties. The first is posed by the central place which conscience occupies in contemporary theological and moral reflection, which may lead to a premature conclusion that it must have been so back in Saint Paul’s times as well. We may project our contemporary understanding of conscience back into Paul’s writings and see in them something that is not there at all. The second difficulty lies in the fact that there is nothing like a cohesive and well-thought-out teaching on conscience in his epistles. Having said that, however, it would hardly be possible to brush Paul’s letters aside in a contemporary discussion on conscience.

Paul’s listeners were undoubtedly acquainted with the concept of conscience, present in the popular Stoic philosophy of the day. Paul himself probably borrowed it from there and introduced it into the Christian theological reflection (Bornkamm 1993, p. 142). Out of thirty places in the New Testament in which there appears the noun *syneidesis* (or the verb *synoida*), almost half are found in the genuine Pauline epistles (Lüdemann Gerd 1992a, col. 721–22). He would always use it to explain one or another aspect of moral behaviour, though giving it different meaning to convey different things. Joachim Gnülka traces the development of the Christian understanding of conscience to Paul’s writings (Gnülka 1999, p. 314).

In my paper, I shall venture to reconstruct Paul’s ideas of conscience. I shall support my endeavour with the relevant texts in his Epistle to the Romans and both Epistles to the Corinthians. After that I

shall pursue the question of whether his writings may be considered an inspiration to moral theology today, and—if so—to what extent.

2. Saint Paul on Conscience

Although the concept of conscience did not occupy the central place in Paul's anthropology, it made sufficiently frequent appearances to be acknowledged as a significant one. Though he borrowed it from the popular Hellenistic ethics, he remoulded it into an unmistakably Christian one. The terms *syneidesis/synoidea* have at least three distinct meanings to him.

2.1. Moral Self-Awareness

The first meaning was conveyed as moral self-awareness—the capacity to arrive at the moral judgement of the moral event. Gary T. Meadors formulates it as “a (...) capacity (...) to exercise self-critique.” (Meadors 1996, pp. 113–15). Paul's assertion: “I know nothing against myself.” (1 Cor 4:4) should be correctly rendered as: “My conscience is clear” (Lüdemann Gerd 1992b, col. 739–40).¹ Moral self-awareness means the knowledge of moral principles which one has accepted as his or her own. Such is the meaning of *syneidesis* in the Epistle to Romans 2:14–16 (Longenecker 2016, p. 278). Even though the contemporary exegetes stop short of seeing this passage as an early Christian exposition of the natural law, it is nevertheless rather arresting, in that Paul clearly draws a close parallel between conscience and such weighty anthropological notions as law (*nomos*), nature (*physis*), heart (*kardia*), and thought (*logismos*) (Wolter 2014, p. 216). Paul invokes the image of the tribunal, the courtroom, where man's inner thoughts now accuse him, now excuse him, while he struggles to arrive at a correct moral judgement. Paul seems to say that every human being experiences it as something reaching down to the deepest recesses of his heart, accessible to him alone (verse 16: *ta krypta ton anthropon*).

For Paul, the judgement of his conscience was a matter of primary importance. He held it aloft against his adversaries to refute their questioning the validity of his mission and his moral integrity as the apostle (2 Cor 1:12). Since everyone has conscience, Paul was able to appeal to the conscience of other members of the community (cf. 2 Cor 5:11), and even to “every man's conscience” (2 Cor 4:2) (Lohse 1989, p. 213; Gnülka 1997, p. 207).

Important as it is, though, conscience is not—according to Paul—the autonomic source of the moral judgement. It is not infallible. On the contrary, it needs direction and illumination. It is a witness rather than a judge.

2.2. Witness

This is the second element in Paul's understanding of conscience: conscience as the witness and its testimony as co-witnessing. On two occasions Paul invokes conscience as the co-witness (*summartyrein*), bearing witness *with* someone else (cf. Rom 2:15; 9:1). Ancient tradition viewed conscience as an experience of being split into the active subject and at the same time the scrutineer, the judge. The Greek word *syneidesis* has been rendered into Latin as *conscientia*, which can be translated as *knowing the same*. Eberhard Schockenhoff in his work *Wie gewiss ist das Gewissen?* claims that Paul did not see conscience only as the inner voice, but rather as the “personified and objective representative, standing above one and attesting the veracity of his deeds.” (Schockenhoff 2003, p. 91).

For the classical authors, conscience was a rather negative item. It was the prosecution witness, reminding one about his guilt. Saint Paul viewed the matter rather differently. Not infrequently, he took great pleasure in the favourable pronouncements of his conscience. He even boasted of it as the incorruptible judge, giving credence to his conduct (2 Cor 1:12). In his later writings,

¹ As in the Translation of the New International Version of the Bible. It is the only place where Paul uses the verb *synoidea*.

the expression “good conscience” (*syneidesis agathe*) became almost synonymous with the Christian moral self-awareness. (Schockenhoff 2003, p. 84).

Interestingly, Paul did not acknowledge conscience as the court of final instance, capable of delivering ultimate judgments upon man’s deeds. Convinced as he was of acting according to his conscience, he did not shower it with unwarranted and excessive praises. He knew perfectly well that there was such a thing as erroneous conscience, which sometimes may deliver a faulty judgement. Or it may keep silent about one’s misbehaviour. But the silence of one’s conscience on any given issue, or on something that one has or has not done, is not an acquittal. For the ultimate declaration of guilt or innocence, one must appeal to an altogether different court: “My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.” (1 Cor 4:4).

2.3. God’s Placeholder

The third aspect of conscience, according to St Paul, has to do with faith. Admittedly, nowhere in his writings did Paul identify conscience with the “voice of God”, unlike many earlier classical thinkers (for instance, Socrates’ *daimonion*), and subsequent Christian writers (like St Augustine). He did not however treat it as a mere natural phenomenon. He recognised a very close association of the conscience with the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 9:1). Only the connection of *syneidesis* with *pneuma hagion* provides conscience with ultimate credibility (Schockenhoff 2003, p. 83; Fitzmyer 1993, p. 543f). Conscience enables man to match his conduct with his principles. It also confronts him with the requirements of God’s law written on his heart (cf. Rom 2:15) (Wilckens 2008, pp. 133–35). For Paul, conscience is—in the words of Eberhard Schockenhoff—God’s placeholder (*Platzhalter Gottes*).

The knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ is a wonderful gift, indeed. It is the gift of freedom. Disagreement over eating of meat sacrificed to idols (1 Cor 8; 10) helped to crystallize the conviction that good and strong conscience, informed by faith, can aid man in ridding himself of his false images of God and his environment. It can also keep reminding him of his Christian obligations and arrest his decline from his high Christian standards. Christians should do what is good (for instance, in social matters) not out of fear or external pressure, but prompted by their moral judgement, informed by faith, and their sense of responsibility before God. Paul styled it as doing it “for conscience sake” (*dia ten syneidesin*—Rom 13:5) (Thrall 1967–1968, p. 124). Though absent from other New Testament writings, it apparently was a fixed phrase for Paul, who used it on several occasions as an expression of deeply felt moral responsibility before God.

After this necessarily brief exposition of the Pauline concept of conscience, I would like to venture a response to the following question:

3. What Does Paul Have to Say about Conscience to Us Today?

It seems not much, at the first glance at least. We know so much more about conscience than he did. After all, two thousand years have passed since his times, and people were thinking and writing about conscience a great deal. We know what importance many eminent thinkers (e.g., St Thomas Aquinas, John Henry Newman) accorded it. We know that some writers dismissed it as the pathogen and destroyer (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche and, in a certain sense, Sigmund Freud). We know that conscience may allow itself to be enslaved and induced to wage religious wars, or may be persecuted under totalitarian regimes.

Today we are surrounded by the ideas that, ever since the Enlightenment, have been pushing more and more towards the greater recognition of the autonomy of man, proclaiming that in seeking moral good and assessing the moral worth of man’s actions all one needs to do is to invoke the opinion of his private conscience. It has become a custom to justify anything in the light of one’s particular conscience, as the expression of his private and unapproachable moral responsibility, synonymous with his personal independence. Not infrequently, demands of respect for the judgements of individual conscience have reduced the latter to mere personal opinions and convictions, with no reference to objective moral values. In some cases, even if conscience is respected by society, it is rather as a

personal fancy than anything else. Some scholars charge the idea of conscience with too close an association with one or another particular worldview, and for this reason campaign for ruling it out from the ethical discourses altogether.

However, despite the distance of many centuries, we still have a great deal in common with Saint Paul and his audience. First of all, we have the same faith in Jesus Christ. We also have similar experiences of conscience, after all. I think that there are three particular elements of Paul's concept of conscience that may be quite useful to us.

The first element concerns the role of conscience in moral behaviour. Although the idea of conscience occupies an important position in Paul's anthropology, it is not a crucial one. His reflection on conscience stays quite firm within the biblical and Semitic linguistic apparatus (Gnilka 1997, p. 205). However, Paul also makes use of the Greek idea of *syneidesis* and redefines it in the light of "his" Gospel (Rom 2:16). The Apostle invokes his conscience in order to emphasise his sincere intentions and integrity. Unlike our contemporary appeals to conscience, which bring the ideas of autonomy and tolerance to the foreground, Paul does not expect his adversaries to manifest their tolerance, but an ability to recognise the truth and acknowledge it in their consciences (2 Cor 5:11) (Schnackenburg 1988, p. 52).² The individual is not secluded in the sanctuary of his conscience, but—as Paul would have it—meets there with a witness confronting him with the demands of the Torah, engraved on his heart. Thanks to the witness of his conscience, man can recognise the moral quality not only of his external acts, but of his inner, undisclosed motives and intentions. Paul would probably agree with our contemporary opinion that individual conscience is the most intimate and binding norm of behaviour. However, it would be impossible to harvest from his letters arguments for the idea of conscience as the highest authority on the moral value of human acts (Hahn and Karrer 1997, pp. 776–77). Paul admits that acting against clear judgement of conscience hurts man's moral integrity. However, he does not revere conscience as man's infallible seat of judgement. Rather, he regards it as an extremely sensitive faculty of the human spirit, which must be nourished and developed. He also knows that this faculty may be neglected and left to wither. In the light of the Pauline epistles it is clear that decisions of conscience must not be regarded as "self-sufficient, absolute and definitive" (cf. 1 Cor 4:4) (Schrage 1982, p. 185).

From there we come to the second element of Paul's concept of conscience. It is the link between conscience and faith. It would be difficult to elucidate Paul's reflection on conscience in our contemporary theological and moral categories and refer to it our idea of autonomy. It would be easier to designate it as the theonomic concept. Granted, the concept of the social heteronomy does not do justice to the Christian vision of conscience. But, one is tempted to ask: does the concept of the idealistic autonomy do? Acting according to one's good conscience and regarding it as the sole repository of what is good and right—does it do justice to the Christian vision of conscience? Can we support it with any evidence from Paul's letters? He often instructs his followers about what "ought to be done" (*ta kathekonta*—Rom 1:28), what "really matters" (*ta diaferonta*—Phil 1:10), what is "proper" (*prepon*—1 Cor 11:13). However, his instructions are not mere appeals to the universally accepted moral standards, or to private assessment. These moral standards become binding for Christians only if they pass the commandment of love (Gnilka 1999, p. 314). Additionally, it is not only about the word of the Gospel as the reference point for the ethical reflection.

For the Christian, the key element in this development is his faith in Christ and his active relationship with Him. Only as the man redeemed is he able to accept the requirements of the Torah to the full, just as Jesus explained them in His ultimate, messianic interpretations of God's commandments (cf. Mt 5:17–20).

² The plural form (*syneideseis*) in which Paul addresses his readers indicates a strongly held conviction about the universality of the idea of conscience.

In this context, it would be good to recollect two statements of St Paul, heretofore omitted, that are strictly connected with his reflection on conscience, even though they do not contain the word *syneidesis*. The first one is in Rom 14:23: “Everything that is not from a conviction is sin.”³ Though Paul used in this sentence the word “faith” (*pistis*), not “conviction”. The latter translation is acceptable and widely used in many modern editions, including the Polish one. The admonition agrees very well with our contemporary moral intuition. It has an interesting history, too, going back to the medieval times, when the word *faith*, represented as *conviction*, was in turn replaced by the word *conscience*, the whole ending up as the following maxim: “Everything that is against conscience is a sin”. However, the context in which Paul said it implies that he did not mean just about any strongly held conviction, but the conviction rooted in faith, cleansed by faith, and confirmed by faith. To reach such conviction, Paul encourages examining oneself (*dokimadzein*, or *peiradzein*) (Theobald 1992, p. 77–78).⁴ His second admonition, in Rom 12:2, warns against conforming to the pattern of this world (the verb *syschematidzein* means *conforming to the set pattern*). He exhorts his readers to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, so that they may be able to discern and accept God’s will.

The criterion of the living faith must be admitted as a significant companion to our contemporary concept of the autonomic conscience. Appeal to faith prevents the otherwise legitimate postulate of autonomy from degeneration into a narrow-minded freedom from every external instruction, and helps to understand it as a continuous task of moulding man’s conscience. In this way, Christians may resist the ever more popular styles of living that do not withstand the scrutiny of the Gospel.

It is time to point to the third important element in the Pauline concept of conscience—that is, the ecclesial and communal one. Paul appealed to conscience very frequently during one particular conflict within the community of believers, probably regarded by the interested parties as the conflict of conscience. It was about the disagreement over the propriety of consuming meat previously offered to pagan gods. Paul shares the opinion of the “strong” that because the gods in question are mere figments of imagination, Christians are bound by no restrictions (1 Cor 8:4–8) in this regard. However, the conviction of conscience should not govern their attitude towards the “weak”, according to whom eating meat that had been sacrificed to false gods constituted a very serious moral sin. Paul advises taking an altogether different route: love of neighbour, mutual understanding, and seeking what builds the community (Fitzmyer 2008, pp. 330–52; Thiselton 2000, p. 644). He quotes the well-known saying (which Corinthians were probably proud of): I have the right to do anything: (*panta exestin*). He agrees, but adds a qualification: “I have the right to do anything—but not everything is beneficial.” “I have the right to do anything—but not everything is constructive” (1 Cor 10:23). “I have the right to do anything—but I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). Paul directs our attention to the relationship between individual freedom of conscience and moral discernment—informed by faith—and the good of the community of believers.

In the contemporary reflection on conscience—especially in the face of the widespread ethical individualism—we should take into account the pronouncements of the Teaching Authority of the Church and her Tradition. It may be controversial, but it is important. Relationship between individual conscience and the Church and her Tradition is often regarded as nothing more than a relationship between the individual and the institution. Those who advocate this view argue that man may preserve his autonomy intact only if he breaks free of the institution and makes moral decisions all on his own, regarding the latter’s opinion merely as advice. The argument cannot be applied to the Christian morality without substantial corrections. Of course, Christians cannot surrender their individual moral responsibility to a community or institution. However, Christian faith, though deeply personal, is nobody’s private matter. The communal dimension of the faith is at the very core of

³ As in the Translation of the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

⁴ The practice of daily examination of one’s conduct was known to the popular Hellenistic ethics, as well as to Judaism, which was influenced by the former; the latter employed it as means of comparing one’s conduct with the requirements of the Torah.

Christianity. Apart from individual inspirations, enabling believers to recognise the challenges of the present (*kairos*—Rom 13:11), and awareness of their personal motivations, allowing them to preserve independence in their decision-making (cf. 1 Cor 10:29), we cannot ignore the communal effort of the Church to make her believers worthy of God and the Gospel (1 Thes 2:12; Phil 1:27). It implies not only communal moral judgement and discernment, but also the authoritative decisions about what is and what is not in accord with the moral rules of the Gospel, that is, *typos didachēs* (cf. Rom 6:17), the binding form of life in faith, strictly connected with the Good News about the liberating and transforming power of God.

Paul seemed to maintain a harmony between his moral independency and his obedience to the moral rules dictated by faith. He valued his own moral judgements and knew how to defend it, as in the confrontation with Peter in Antioch (see Gal 2:11–14). However, he was ready to subject his opinions to the judgement of other authorities (Gal 2:2), or invoke his own apostolic mandate to instruct believers and appeal to their conscience (1 Cor 7:25). He did not adhere to the then-accepted forms of letter writing, but would invoke his apostolic authority right in the very first greeting (Lohfink 2016, pp. 327–29). However, he could give up his legitimate right to rule and lay out his arguments in a friendly manner, even beg (cf. Philem 7–10). Had he lived today, his uncompromising stance on his apostolic authority would certainly have made him charged with paternalism and lack of respect for individual autonomy. He was apparently not familiar with the mutual dislike of the freedom of conscience and the voice of authority which is so commonplace today. He did not see any competition between the freedom of the Christian conscience, God’s will and His commandments, and apostolic authority. Can we judge that harmony as irrelevant to Christians today and reject it out of hand? Or, should we rather see it as a challenge to unilateralism and overemphasis, which has penetrated so deeply into the moral awareness of the Christians of the 21st century?

It seems that standing up to the globalization and dissemination of moral attitudes and standards is the greatest challenge for today’s Christians. It may become a source of valuable inspirations and a kind of *locus theologicus* for the Christian moral reflection. Paul teaches us that the fundamental environment for Christians to learn morality and discern good from evil is the community of believers, living out their faith (Schnackenburg 1988, p. 58). Leaving that environment can only widen the disparity between our Christian faith and life in accordance with the Gospel, and lead us so far astray that we end up bearing false witness in today’s world.

4. Conclusions

There is no doubt that many concrete moral admonitions in the Pauline letters are, to a certain extent, conditioned by their historical, psychological, and social circumstances. However, they are also free from some contemporary controversies which can tighten the perspective. A scrutiny of the meaning of conscience and of the ways to make a conscientious assessment in the Pauline letters can be an inspiration in the theological moral discussion about the foundation of a genuine Christian ethics. Despite the limits of the Pauline reflection, it has undoubtedly retained its greatest quality: the ability to put forward the main conditions and moral criteria to adhere to if one wants to claim that his or her moral judgement is indeed the Christian one. The contemporary moral theological reflection must not undoubtedly abstract from the living conditions and remain faithful to the today’s believers. However, at the same time it must be faithful to the Gospel and must try to translate their demands in the contemporary world. St. Paul shows the ways to cope with that task.

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