

Membership Matters: Session 9

Conscience and Sin

"So I always take pains to have a clear conscience toward both God and man." – The Apostle Paul, Acts 24:16

"Conscience is either the greatest friend or the greatest enemy in the world." – Richard Sibbes, 1577-1635

The Purpose of Conscience:

- *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. 15 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 16 on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. (Rom 2:14-16)*
- The conscience takes the knowledge of God's Law (universal) and evaluates our life, our actions (particular) in light of it. The judgment of the conscience always involves those two aspects of the universal and particular.

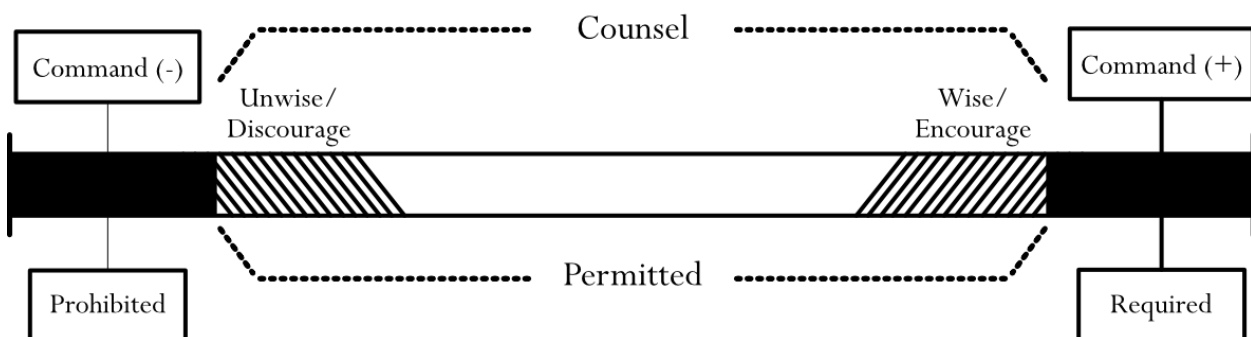
What Do We Do When We Disagree Over Sin?

- **Is the sin against you?**
 - *Pray and Forgive*
 - *And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. (Mark 11:25)*
 - *Aim for reconciliation*
 - *We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak... May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. (Rom 15:1, 6-7)*
- **Whether the sin is against you or not:**
 - *Ask yourself: "Is this sin serious enough to address? How confident am I that this is sinful?"*
 - If not, choose to overlook and forebear
 - *Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense. (Prv 19:11)*
 - *Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

(Col 3:12-13)

- If so, then address (*does this continue to bother you?*)
 - *If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone.* (Matt 18:15ff)
 - *Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."* (Luke 17:3-4)
- *Note:* How should I address them?
 - *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.* (Gal 6:1-2)
 - *What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?* (1 Cor 4:21)
- *Key Point:* "Is this person aware that their action was sinful? Do they believe it is sinful?"
 - *Prepare yourselves ahead of time:*
 - What is your Biblical backing?
 - Have I prayed over this?
 - Am I motivated by love?
 - One outcome: *they agree that their action was sinful*
 - But what do we do if they disagree that what they were doing was wrong?

Conscience Spectrum



(Source: Bobby Jamieson, "Your Conscience on a Spectrum (and a Flowchart)" article from *The Gospel Coalition*, April 20, 2023)

- Examples of common issues Christians may disagree on:
 - Smoking cigarettes
 - Drinking alcohol

- How to define profanity
- Watching R-rated movies
- What kind of vacations you take
- Social media use
- Reading Harry Potter
- How to define modesty
- Moms working outside of the home
- School choice
- Playing video games
- Listening to secular music
- Working on Sunday
- Doing yoga
- Who you vote for
- Driving over the speed limit
- How many children a couple should have

Is the disagreement fundamentally theological? If so, use theological triage to identify where it belongs—if it is an issue not contained in our Statement of Faith, this is something we can maintain happy fellowship over. (e.g., Sabbath, spiritual gifts, millennium, etc)

If it isn't essentially theological, but ethical, then...

- Step One: identify the universal and particular
 - Gather all Bible verses on the issue, and make sure you have your facts straight on the particular.
- Step Two: Seek wisdom and ask yourself questions
 - Ask others for insight and consider whether there aren't cultural/personal factors influencing the situation.
- Step Three: Work to find agreement on the universal before moving to particular
 - Give the benefit of the doubt, do not judge, but ask honest questions: *how do you apply this verse?*
- Step Four: Work to locate and contain the disagreement **if at all possible**
 - "We agree on the universal, but it just looks like we disagree on the particular"
 - You can disagree on the application, while agreeing on the rule
 - But there are limits.

"Christian freedom is not "I always do what I want." Nor is it "I always do whatever the other person wants." It is "I do what brings glory to God. I do what brings others under the influence of the gospel. I do what leads to peace in the church." – Andy Naselli and J.D. Crowley, Conscience