

--Stress on the social conditioning of conscience

--Unique emphasis on the autonomy of conscience

Literature: Jewett, Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings. Leiden: Brill, 1971

Summary printed below from The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Supplement Volume. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976, pp. 173-174:

***CONSCIENCE. 1. In the Corinthian letters.** The earliest references to conscience in the NT are in connection with a controversy in the Corinthian church. A Gnostic faction held that the conscience of the weak should be strengthened in such a manner as to free them to eat meat which had been sacrificed to pagan idols (I Cor. 8). Their opponents held that one should refrain from eating such meat out of regard for the conscience of those Gentile Christians who were still bothered by the idea that eating it would mean communion with demonic forces (I Cor. 10:23 ff.). For these people "conscience" meant the uncontrollable, painful

knowledge that a deed was wrong. The Gnostics, however, seem to have identified conscience with the spirit-self which must be forcibly educated for one to be saved. These radicals had embarked on a campaign of ridicule and enticement, forcing those caught by the conscience lag to violate their conscience until they were free.

Paul's discussion of these issues results in a new doctrine of autonomy. Even if the "weak" are theologically wrong in fearing the idols and restricting the goodness of meat, they should be encouraged to avoid pangs of conscience. Their "weakness" consisted not in a lack of will power, but in a lagging assimilation of the knowledge (I Cor. 8:1, 7) that the idols were powerless (I Cor. 8:4-6). To act against conscience, even though it be misguided because of prior conditioning (I Cor. 8:7), was to risk the loss of integrity and the destruction of conscience, the guardian of that integrity (I Cor. 8:7, 11, 12). To educate the conscience requires a gradual, indirect approach of exercising freedom while avoiding pangs (I Cor. 10:23-29). This may require temporary abnegation of freedom on the part of the "strong" to encourage the "weak" to avoid anything that would cause pangs of conscience. Paul's concern in I Cor. 10:29b-30 is that freedom not be defamed by provoking others to violate conscience and is a repudiation of the Gnostic campaign. This does not imply a permanent disavowal of freedom, because his own strategy was to free the "weak" to eat meat "to the glory of God" (I Cor. 10:31).

This doctrine provides the possibility for a community to live in mutual respect and integrity with differing conscience structures. Its premises are the recognition of the spontaneously negative function of conscience and the grounding of its authority in personal integrity rather than in divine agencies; only then can it retain autonomy even when wrong, while continuing to grow as moral perspective enlarges.

In later Corinthian correspondence "conscience" is used in an increasingly Gnostic fashion, as an agency of knowledge and judgment (II Cor. 4:2; 5:11). Paul probably wanted to facilitate debate and win the congregation back from the lures of the traveling missionaries (II Cor. 11:4-15). In II Cor. 1:12 Paul reverts to the more typical Hellenistic-Jewish usage (cf. I Cor. 4:4). Here conscience is an independent witness to Paul's integrity, although its erring, finite quality contrasts with eschatological certitude.