
PAUL AND WESLEY ON GRACE, CONSCIENCE, AND THE LAW

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Introduction

One of the greatest contributions of John Wesley to the theological development of the Church is his optimistic view of the power of God's grace to transform completely the fallen human race. A significant feature of Wesley's doctrine of grace is the beginning of human experience of this grace in what is termed "prevenient grace." The term "prevenient," or "preventing" as Wesley used, is not found in Scripture. This being the case, what support from Scripture is there for the Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace? Wesley was an avid reader of the Bible and a knowledgeable interpreter of Scripture, and his sermons and letters are full of scriptural references. What did he see in the Scripture that led him to speak of "preventing grace"? Two significant biblical concepts substantially contribute to a fuller understanding of and appreciation for what Wesley was attempting to relate when he was speaking of "preventing grace": law and conscience. The greatest interpreter of law and conscience is Paul the Apostle, particularly in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. Exploring what Paul says about law and conscience can help us better understand grace from a Wesleyan perspective. This understanding can then have profound influence upon how we view our world and our relationship with God, and how we formulate our doctrine of holiness.

I. The Wesleyan Doctrine of Prevenient Grace

A. The Problem of Sin

In order for us to grasp the depth of grace, we must first see the hopeless condition in which humanity finds itself. Paul could have said it no better when he wrote, “For all have sinned and are fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23).¹ Wesley traces the condition of sin back to Adam and Eve’s unbelief in the commandment of God, leading to pride, with the result of idolatry.² Idolatry can be defined fundamentally as the usurpation of God’s glory. As Paul says in Romans 1:25 about the wicked, “Some exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the created instead of the Creator.” The first act of sin led to the condition of sin which has been inherited by every person since. As a result of the Fall, mankind is lost in pride leading to destruction. Wesley states,

And thus man was created looking to God, as his chief end; but, falling into sin, he fell off from God, and turned into himself. Now this infers a total apostasy and universal corruption in man; for where the last end is changed, there can be no real goodness. And this is the case of all men in their natural state: they seek not God, but themselves. Hence though many fair shreds of morality are among them, yet “there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” For though some of them “run well,” they are still off the way; they never aim at the right mark. Whithersoever they move, they cannot move beyond the circle of self. They seek themselves, they act for themselves; their natural, civil, and religious actions, from

¹All translations are the author’s own unless otherwise stated. In this verse, the first verb is aorist, suggesting a past act, but the second verb is present, suggesting the resulting condition of the act of sin.

²John Wesley, *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (Thomas Jackson, ed., London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 1:9.

whatever spring they come, so all run into, and meet, in this dead sea.³

As a result of this decision of self-assertion, humanity lapsed into a state of depravity and corruption. With the consequences of humanity's decision, most often symbolized "in Adam," Wesley says that "everyone descended from him [Adam] comes into the world spiritually dead, dead to God, wholly dead in sin, entirely void of the life of God, void of the image of God of all that righteousness and holiness wherein Adam was created."⁴ Because of this condition, in our natural state we are unable to choose salvation from impending eternal damnation, the ultimate result of our corrupted state. Harald Lindstrom adds, "From the point of view of salvation natural man has no resources of his own whatsoever. He is sinful through and through, has no knowledge of God and no power to turn to Him of his own free will."⁵ The power of idolatry and self-love blinds us.

God in His divine *agape* has not left us in this state of condemnation but has provided the way out. Jesus told Nicodemus, "For God so loved the world that He gave the only Son, in order that the one who believes in Him might not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The heights of divine love reach down to the depths of human depravity. This is grace!

B. The Beginning of Salvation

Salvation, for Wesley, begins with God's "preventing grace, including the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first transient emotion of having sinned against him. All these imply some tendency towards life, some degree of salvation; the beginning of deliverance from a blind, unfelling heart, quite insensible of God and the

³Wesley, *Works*, 9:456.

⁴Wesley, *Works*, 6:68.

⁵Harald Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Wilmore, KT: Francis Asbury, reprinted in 1980), 45.

things of God.”⁶ Preventive grace has two effects upon the human condition: it enables us to know some revelation of divine things and provides the ability to discern between moral good and evil.⁷ The human race lost the ability to choose between good and evil at the fall of Adam and Eve. As a result, humanity has no choice but to do evil. Original sin makes it impossible to do good. But, Wesley maintains, “there is a measure of freewill supernaturally restored to every man, together with that supernatural light which ‘enlightens every man that cometh into the world.’”⁸ Without this “supernatural light” we would never be able to respond to God because we would be blinded and bound by the grip of sin. Lindstrom notes, “The idea of preventive grace is in Wesley logically bound up with the Arminian view of election. Although natural man is devoid of free will, all men have been endowed by supernatural intervention with a measure of free will and some power of discernment. . . .”⁹ Preventive grace is necessary for us to be awakened to our condition of sin and have the ability to choose in freedom to respond to the offer of God’s gift of salvation. “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In His power, God reaches down to us while we are yet sinners and enables us to respond to Him.

Does that make preventive grace irresistible? John Fletcher answers for the early Methodists,

We believe that these benefits were, at first as gratuitously and irresistibly bestowed upon us as . . . the divine image and favor were at first bestowed upon our first parents. . . . I say irresistibly

⁶Wesley, *Works*, 6:509.

⁷See Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace* (Nashville, Tenn.: Kingswood Books, 1994), 87-88.

⁸Wesley, *Works*, 10:230.

⁹Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 45; see also J. Kenneth Grider, *A Wesleyan-Holiness Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1994), 245.

because God does not leave to our option whether we shall receive a talent of redeeming grace.¹⁰

If God were to leave the choice to us, the choice would already have been made because of our inclination to sin—the choice of self-centered, prideful destruction and ultimate damnation. God in His wisdom and love does not leave us without some measure of His image. Richard Taylor says, “The impairment of moral ability in the Fall is sufficiently restored to make the exercise of free agency once again possible.”¹¹ Randy Maddox points out that prevenient grace can be silenced and shut out but cannot be completely driven from our lives, otherwise we would have no hope of later restoration.¹²

C. The Source of Salvation

The Apostle Paul maintains in Ephesians 2:8-9 that we are saved by grace. Wesley joins with the Protestant Reformers by emphasizing that God alone is the source of salvation. Wesley’s doctrine of original sin necessitates humanity’s total dependence upon God for salvation because mankind without grace is totally corrupt and under the power of sin’s grip. Robert B. Chiles states, “God’s saving act in Christ is in no sense dependent upon man. What it bestows man cannot otherwise provide. Nor can he earn it. Grace is God’s gift freely given. . . . However, to define free grace simply as fixing all merit in Christ does not sufficiently indicate its distinctiveness.”¹³ Long has been the debate as to what part we play in our salvation.¹⁴ Without the work of prevenient grace we would never be able to do enough to merit salvation. We

¹⁰John Fletcher, *The Works of the Rev. John Fletcher* (New York and Cincinnati: Hunt & Eaton, Cranston & Stowe), 1891, 3:442.

¹¹Richard S. Taylor, *Exploring Christian Holiness*, vol. 3 (Kansas City, Mo: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1985), 79.

¹²Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 88.

¹³Robert B. Chiles, *Theological Transition in American Methodism: 1790-1935* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 148.

¹⁴See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 91-92.

cannot doubt that humanity does participate in the salvation process, but at the beginning, starting with prevenient grace, the power and choice lie completely with God. Wesley writes,

We allow, it is the work of God alone to justify, to sanctify, and to glorify; which three comprehend the whole of salvation. Yet we cannot allow, that man can only resist, and not in any wise “work together with God”; or that God is so the whole worker of our salvation, as to exclude man’s working at all. This I dare not say; for I cannot prove it by Scripture; nay, it is flatly contrary thereto; for the Scripture is express, that (having received power from God) we are to “work out our own salvation.” And that (after the work of God is begun in our souls) we are “workers together with Him.”¹⁵

He also writes, “Therefore, inasmuch as God works in you, you are now able to work out your own salvation.”¹⁶ And in another place, he says, “First, God works, therefore you CAN work; Secondly, God works, therefore you MUST work.”¹⁷ Without divine intervention, there is no hope for our sinful race which has turned in upon itself in idolatry. Thus, for Wesley prevenient grace is at the very dawn of our salvation. It is the enabling factor in our response to God. Williams adds, “What it means is that God directly intervenes in the lives of men seeking to start them on the road to salvation.”¹⁸ Prevenient grace *gives* us the choice; as Wesley states, one “has in himself the casting vote.”¹⁹

D. The Universality of Prevenient Grace

Another distinct tenant of Wesley’s doctrine is the universality of prevenient grace. Wesley comes close to Calvinism with his understand-

¹⁵Wesley, *Works*, 10:230-231.

¹⁶Wesley, *Works*, 6:512.

¹⁷Wesley, *Works*, 6:511.

¹⁸Collins Williams, *John Wesley’s Theology Today* (New York: Abingdon, 1960), 42.

¹⁹Wesley, *Works*, 6:281.

ing of total depravity, but he breaks with Calvinism with his doctrine of universal, prevenient grace. Since nothing we do in and of ourselves can merit salvation, and since it is God's intention that all be saved through Jesus Christ's work on the cross, grace to some degree must be universally given. Grace must be free and available to all, not just to the elect. God desires that all should be saved and come to repentance (2 Pet 3:9). Wesley states,

The grace or love of God, whence cometh our salvation, is FREE IN ALL, and FREE FOR ALL. It is free IN ALL to whom it is given. It does not depend on any power or merit in man; no, not in any degree, neither in whole, nor in part. It does not in anywise depend either on the good works or righteousness of the receiver; not on anything he has done, or anything he is. It does not depend on his endeavors. It does not depend on his good tempers or good desires, or good purposes and intentions; for all these flow from the free grace of God; they are the streams only, not the fountain. They are the fruits of free grace, and not the root. They are not the cause, but the effects of it.²⁰

E. The Ultimate Purpose of Prevenient Grace

Moreover, the ultimate goal of prevenient grace is to lead to justification in Christ. Prevenient grace is the beginning stage of humanity's reception of God's grace, but God's grace must be seen as one whole; it should not be separated into different types of grace. Grace is grace, and all grace comes as a result of God's work in Christ, although we experience different aspects of this grace throughout the salvation process. In its simplest form grace is God's reaching to humanity in love in the person of Jesus Christ. Prevenient grace, then, is the initial step of God's plan of salvation in Christ. Wesley says,

Before justification; in which state we may be said to be unable to do any thing acceptable to God; because then we can do nothing

²⁰Wesley, *Works*, 7:373-374.

but come to Christ; which ought not to be considered as doing any thing, but as supplicating (or waiting) to receive a power of doing for the time to come. For the preventing grace of God, which is common to all, is sufficient to bring us to Christ, though it is not sufficient to carry us any further till we are justified.²¹

The last phrase presents a question. Why can we not be justified by prevenient grace if it is grace, as defined above? Prevenient grace only makes it possible for us to *respond* to God; it leads us to the point of decision. It brings one to the realization of one's need for salvation by an ultimate, creative power. God in this grace brings us to the point of helplessness wherein the need for a savior becomes evident. It counteracts the effects of original sin which says that we need no God (Rom 1:18-31). Saving faith, however, demands that we respond back to God's initiatory love through faith *in Jesus Christ* and His power to save. Prevenient grace saves us from the total helplessness of our sinful, "natural" condition. It saves us from the condemnation of Adam. Saving grace, as the name implies, saves us from the consequences of sin itself. Wesley classifies saving grace into justifying and sanctifying grace. He says,

Salvation begins with . . . preventing grace. . . . Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance; which brings a larger measure of self-knowledge, and a farther deliverance from the heart of stone. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation; whereby "through grace," we "are saved by faith"; consisting of those grand branches, justification and sanctification. By justification we are saved from the guilt of sin, and restored to the favour of God; by sanctification we are saved from the power and root of sin, and restored to the image of God.²²

²¹Wesley, *Works*, 8:373.

²²Wesley, *Works*, 6:509.

II. The Place of the Conscience

A. Conscience Defined

Wesley, as a student of Paul, built his understanding of prevenient grace upon significant statements or inferences from the Apostle's writings. One significant topic of influence upon Wesley was Paul's concept of the "conscience." The Greek word translated "conscience" is *συνείδησις*, which occurs fifteen times in Romans and the Corinthian Correspondance (and of those, eight times in chapters 8 and 10 of 1 Corinthians),²³ and six times in the Pastorals.²⁴ The etymology of *συνείδησις* helps unpack this rather nebulous word. The word is made of two parts: *συν* meaning "with" and *oijdon* meaning "to know." Hence, it has the idea of knowing something in agreement with another person or thing. Christian Maurer comments, "It is man aware of himself in perception and acknowledgment, in willing and acting."²⁵ Conscience can develop as a person becomes more aware of self and various issues, leading to the development of regulations or scruples.²⁶ The conscience serves as the guide in moral conduct (Rom 2:15).²⁷ A closer examination of these ideas will be helpful before returning to Wesley.

²³Rom 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25; 27, 28, 29 (twice); 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2; 5:11.

²⁴1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim 1:3; Tit. 1:15.

²⁵Christian Maurer, "Σύννοια," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964-74), 8:914.

²⁶For further discussion, see C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1955); Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, AGJU 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 402-46; Maurer, "Σύννοια," TDNT, 8: 898-919.

²⁷Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon, 1968), 229.

B. Cognition and Conscience in Paul's Epistles

Although it can be found in Hellenistic moral teaching, the word “conscience” does not occur in the Gospels, suggesting that Paul introduced it to the Christian context by using a word from the Greek speaking world. The conscience functions as a judge for moral conduct. Paul can write to the Corinthians that his conscience testifies that his conduct in the world and in his relations to the Corinthians has been “in the purity [ἀπλότητι] and sincerity that are from God” (2 Cor 1:12).²⁸ Later, he confidently calls God as his witness of his efforts to develop relationship with the Corinthians (1:23). Later in the same letter, Paul again defends his motives and ministry by demonstrating or commending himself “before every person’s conscience in the presence of God” (4:2). Paul tries to convince the conscience of the Corinthians that his motives have been to persuade people about the gospel (5:2). In the context of 2 Corinthians, these are significant appeals for judgment from God and from the Corinthians that should vindicate Paul and his companions from any wrong doing in their relationship with this troubled church. This vindication happens because their consciences can judge Paul to be free from any type of malice or improper motive.

The conscience must rely upon some external norm as its basis for judgment. Law serves as this norm or standard and the conscience functions as the judge, guiding a person to act according to the revealed law or in disregard to it. The conscience can also be called as a witness to confirm that the behavior of a person is in agreement with the norm (Rom 9:1). A person’s conscience is only as developed as the person’s understanding of the norm, standard or law. The conscience can speak no louder than what the person will allow. The witness of a person’s

²⁸Some reliable manuscripts give the word ἀγιότητι, “holiness.” The editors of the Greek New Testament³ opt for ἀπλοϋθητι (“simplicity”) because of the context. This word has the connotation of speaking with sincerity, uprightness, and frankness (see Eph 6:5; Col 3:22; Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* [Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 85-86). It is interesting to consider the similarities in meaning between these two words.

conscience is valid for only that person, not for others (1 Cor 10:28-29). It is important to note that the conscience is not the norm because it can be misled, ill-informed, or underdeveloped. For Paul, God's law is the ultimate and final norm for the conscience (1 Cor 4:4).

Thus, one's conscience is limited to one's knowledge of the law, but it can be developed. An important passage for this idea is Paul's discussion about the weak brother in 1 Corinthians 8-10, where the conscience serves as a major component in the argument. In this section, Paul is dealing with food that has been offered to idols and how eating this food can cause harm to those with weak or undeveloped consciences. Paul realizes that the problem and solution with eating idol food rest with knowledge. Like he does with the term σοφία ("wisdom") in chapter 2, Paul will add his own definition to γνῶσις ("knowledge") in 8:1-11:1. He has already proven that the Corinthians' wisdom is insufficient, and in this section he shows that their knowledge is also incomplete. This so-called knowledge (8:1) is the basis for the strong Corinthians' ethical freedom (ἐξουσία; "freedom" or "authority"). The problem with this freedom is that it violates the conscience of the weaker brother or sister who has perhaps recently come from a polytheistic environment. Therefore, Paul offers a different alternative in keeping with his paradigm of the cross (1:18-2:16). There was nothing essentially wrong with the knowledge that the strong had, that idols were only man-made objects and that there is only one God and one Lord. Their consciences had come to this awareness, so they adjusted their conduct in conformity to this new knowledge. The problem, however, was that some in the church had not yet come to this knowledge; they still attached the food sacrificed to idols with idol worship. The weak needed to grow up in their knowledge of idols, but the strong also had to grow up. The knowledge of the strong needed to conform to the higher law of love, and that love would then serve as the norm for their conscience. The assumption is that the conscience of both groups could be developed.

Moreover, one's conscience can be harmed. In the situation at Corinth, the conscience of the weak brother was being damaged by the strong believers' use of a norm different than God's norm revealed on

the cross, namely love (8:7). The strong were overlooking the spiritual needs of the weak, and by their behavior, the strong were causing the weak to question their relationship with Jesus. By harming the conscience of the weak brother, the strong were in danger of causing the weak brother to fall back into a life of sin because the weak brother would no longer be following the norm of God's revealed law, in particular, the law of love exemplified on the cross (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-31; 13:1-13), but would be following the old norm of the world where idols were given more authority than they should have been given. The harming of the weak brother's conscience had serious consequences since this brother's relationship with Christ could be destroyed. The problem with the weak is that they lacked knowledge, thereby giving them a weak conscience. In ch. 8, Paul is telling the strong, those with more developed consciences, not to let their awareness of the falsehood of idols cause the weaker brother problems with his conscience (vv. 7, 11). In ch. 10, Paul tells the weaker brother to "grow up," hence, to develop in knowledge about idols, leading to a more developed conscience (see 10:28).

The ethic Paul is expounding in this section is relative to the situation. He operates on principle in this passage. The most basic and essential norm for the development of the conscience in believers is the law of Christ, the law of love. In the context of 1 Corinthians, it is significant that Paul starts his letter with the paradigm of the cross. The famous love chapter, chapter 13, is a commentary on the way of the cross. The law of the cross, which is the law of self-giving love, is the answer to the problems in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 10:31-11:1; Rom 14:15-21). Knowledge for Paul consists of being known by God in a relationship of love (8:1-2). For Paul, this relationship is best summed up in his concept of communion "in Christ" and "with Christ." Paul grounds the ethics of believers in love, and not knowledge, by redefining what knowledge is. Adelbert Denaux comments, "Knowledge in itself is not a bad thing. But when knowledge about God is not informed by love

for God, it leads to pride (φουσιῶν).²⁹ Love and pride cannot exist at the same time in the lives of believers. Thus, the norm for the conscience is love, which is quite consistent with Jesus' statement in Matthew 22:37-40 about the two greatest commandments, loving God and loving the neighbor.

A revealing passage in this regard is 1 Timothy 1:5: "And the goal of the proclamation is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." In this context, Paul is dealing with false doctrines which had infiltrated the Ephesian church. His answer to this threat is to correct the false teaching. What is so critical about the threat of false doctrine is that it leads people's conscience astray by providing a norm different than the gospel. Paul gives the norm in this verse as love. Love is primary and serves as the goal (τέλος) of his message. Three things contribute to love. First, love comes from a pure heart. In the New Testament, a pure heart is the work of God by faith (Acts 15:8-9). Second, love comes from a good conscience. A good conscience results from following God's revealed will or law (2 Cor 1:12; 1 Tim 1:18-20). When can a conscience be considered good? When it testifies that a person has not violated the law of love. We have already noted the serious consequences of violating the conscience by violating the law of love (cf. 1 Cor 8:11, 13; Rom 14:23). Third, love comes from a sincere faith. It is noteworthy that the conscience is paired up in this short list with faith. There is a spiritual aspect to the conscience which will be explored in the following section. The conscience can help a person grow in love when it is coupled with faith in and openness to the Guide, the Holy Spirit. The responsibility lies with each person to develop one's conscience by becoming more aware of the norm and through careful and consistent abiding by this norm. God provides supernatural assistance in this task, a matter that needs careful consideration.

²⁹Adelbert Denaux, "Theology and Christology in 1 Cor 8,4-6: A Contextual-Redactional Reading," in *The Corinthian Correspondence*, ed. Reimund Bieringer (Leuven: University Press, 1996), 598.

C. The Work of the Holy Spirit through the Conscience

A person is not left alone to develop the conscience. Paul says in Romans 9:1, "I tell you the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience witnesses to me in the Holy Spirit." Two important but ambiguous prepositional phrases are used in this verse: "in Christ" and "in the Holy Spirit." Many translators of the Greek New Testament know the challenge of interpreting the preposition ἐν followed by the dative. Sometimes this word can be instrumental, "by the aid of the Holy Spirit," and sometimes as locative, "in the presence of the Holy Spirit." Both possibilities offer an interesting interpretation of what Paul is saying in this verse. Paul's purpose in this verse is to display his sincerity. To prove his sincerity, he calls upon two key witnesses and his relationship with these witnesses. First, he speaks the truth "in Christ." This important Pauline phrase shows Paul's awareness of his intimate fellowship with Christ expressed profoundly in Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me." All of Paul's life was governed by his relationship with the risen Christ. In addition, this relationship is made effective in the life of believers through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Paul has spent eight chapters of his letter to the Romans describing the profound relationship one can have with God in Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Paul's second witness is the Holy Spirit who verifies both his sincerity and his relationship with Christ (see Rom 8:16). Significant with this second witness is the aspect of *inner* witness. For Paul, the Spirit can work completely only within those who have experienced transformed lives (12:1-2), those who are "in Christ" (8:1-11). The first part of 9:1 provides the basis for the second part of the verse. Paul does not identify the conscience with the Holy Spirit but as the *instrument* of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit reminds us of certain truths, especially those in reference to Christ (John 14:26; 16:14-15). If the Holy Spirit told Paul's conscience that he was lacking the sincerity that a person "in Christ" should have, then Paul's sincerity in this letter could be questioned. Paul could call on no greater witness than the Holy Spirit. This witness is not, however, merely subjective but is based on the prior standard of relationship (the indicative mood) which can be objectified

by lifestyle (the imperative mood).³⁰ By what means does the Holy Spirit communicate with our conscience? By grace, since all communication from the gracious God is, in some aspect, grace.

Prevenient grace holds a second function besides simply being the first step taken by God in initiating our salvation. For Wesley there is a relationship between conscience and prevenient grace. Lindstrom states, "Prevenient grace confers some discernment on everyone although natural man as such lacks all knowledge."³¹ Wesley uses Romans 1:19ff in support of his connection of conscience and prevenient grace. He maintains that no one is without some type of discernment. Lindstrom adds, "Yet he does not regard such discernment as something emanating from natural man's own resources, a consequence of the survival after the Fall of a certain residue of the *imago Dei*, but instead as deriving from prevenient grace."³²

There is in everyone a sense of right and wrong. Wesley comes close to Immanuel Kant's moral argument for the existence of God, which posits that each person has a sense of ought within called the categorical imperative. This imperative enlightens a person to that which is right and wrong.³³ Wesley offers a premise logically prior to Kant's and attributes all possibilities of discernment to God's work through prevenient grace. Conscience, for Wesley, is "that faculty whereby we are at once conscious of our own thoughts, words, and actions; and of their merit or demerit, of their being good or bad; and,

³⁰The indicative mood in Greek is generally used to indicate a statement of fact, and the imperative mood is used for a command or exhortation. Paul bases his ethics upon his theology. Furnish states that Paul's "ethic" is never formulated by Paul himself, but "it is still present in the dynamic of the indicative and imperative which lies at the center of his thought" (*Theology and Ethics in Paul*, 211; see also 224-27; cf. William D. Dennison, "Indicative and Imperative: The Basic Structure of Pauline Ethics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 14 [1979]: 55-78).

³¹Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 46.

³²Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 46.

³³Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 6th ed., trans. by T. K. Abbott (London: Longmans, Greek & Co, 1907).

consequently, deserving either praise or censure.”³⁴ Conscience has a three-fold office. First, it is a witness to what we have done. Second, it is a judge, passing sentence on the good or evil we have done. Third, it executes the sentence, “by occasioning a degree of complacency in him that does well, and a degree of uneasiness in him that does evil.”³⁵ In our natural condition we are spiritually and morally dead. Our “natural conscience,” strictly speaking, does not exist in reality but only in theory. It is that conscience that would result (if a conscience could result at all) if God had not intervened and given a degree of restoration. Wesley states,

For allowing that all the souls of men are dead in sin by nature, this excuses none, seeing there is no man that is in a state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the Spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: It is more properly termed, preventing grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. . . . So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use the grace he hath.³⁶

As a form of grace, conscience is the work of God. Wesley states,

No; it is not nature, but the Son of God, that is “the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world.” So that we may say to every human creature, “He,” not nature, “hath showed thee, O man, what is good.” And it is his Spirit who giveth thee an inward check, who causeth thee to feel uneasy, when thou walkest in any instance contrary to the light which he hath given thee.³⁷

³⁴Wesley, *Works*, 7:187.

³⁵Wesley, *Works*, 7:188.

³⁶Wesley, *Works*, 6:512.

³⁷Wesley, *Works*, 7:188.

One might ask the question, why does everyone not do good, but instead have a bad conscience? The answer lies in the nature of sin and the “natural” condition. In our sinfulness we choose not to obey our conscience. This begins at an early age during which the conscience develops enough to convict of wrong doing and one becomes accountable for one’s sin. Since sin is not taken into account where there is no law (Rom 5:13), and since the law functions as the norm for the conscience, the conscience is thus linked with accountability. H. Ray Dunning makes this distinction: “We may say that formally conscience is the work of the Spirit (prevenient grace), but that materially it is the result of background, experience, and education.”³⁸ The conscience can be developed, and the Holy Spirit uses the resources (general revelation of God’s law written on the heart) of the person to convict that person of sin. A number of things contribute to the development of the conscience, including family, culture, and various environmental influences. Since the world is in a fallen state, it is not difficult to surmise that the external influences upon the conscience only contribute to the fallen state of the individual. Simply stated, sin mars our conscience. A person can suppress the light that God shines on the conscience. Wesley says,

If we take this in its utmost extent, it will include all that is wrought in the soul by what is frequently termed natural conscience, but more properly, preventing grace;—all the drawings of the Father; the desires after God, which, if we yield to them, increase more and more;—all that light wherewith the Son of God “enlighteneth every one that cometh into the world”; showing every man “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with his God”;—all the convictions which his Spirit, from time to time, works in every child of man; although, it is true, the generality of men stifle them as soon as possible, and after a while forget, or at least deny, that they ever had them at all.³⁹

³⁸H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1988), 433.

³⁹Wesley, *Works*, 6:44.

By stifling the positive leading of our conscience we make room for more sin. Conviction and then repentance result when the conscience is heeded.

The answer lies in God and His grace. Wesley says, “In order to [have] the very existence of a good conscience, as well as to the continuance of it, the continued influence of the Spirit of God is absolutely needful.”⁴⁰ Lindstrom adds, “Although everyone by nature is dead in sin, no one is in a purely natural state. No one is quite without God’s grace, unless he has stifled it.”⁴¹ By stifling our conscience we make void the power of prevenient grace. We are never totally out of the reach of God, but God has left the choice up to us to choose life or death.

D. Two Options

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit works through our conscience in both a positive way and a negative way. Positively, the Holy Spirit affirms to us that we are living the way God wants us to live. Jeremiah prophesied about a day when God would put His law on our minds and write it on our hearts (Jer 31:33). God does this through the Holy Spirit. Although Paul does not use the term “conscience” in Romans 8:16, the conscience may be involved in the Spirit’s testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. Joy is the result of a conscience clear before God. God has given each person in the world an awareness of His laws. Paul writes in Romans 2:14-15, “For when the Gentiles, who do not have the things of the law, do by nature the things of the law, although they do not have the law, they are a law to themselves, since they show the works the law written on their hearts, their consciences witnessing and their thoughts accusing and also defending.” Negatively, the Holy Spirit convicts us when we do wrong and when we disobey God’s standard of law. Jesus said that He would send the Holy Spirit who would convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8).

⁴⁰Wesley, *Works*, 7:190.

⁴¹Lindstrom, *Wesley and Sanctification*, 48.

The Holy Spirit's work with the conscience presents two options: developing the mind of Christ or hardening the heart. If a person heeds the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that person can have "the mind of Christ." Paul speaks about having the mind of Christ in 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Paul wrote to this troubled church that thought the Holy Spirit was a means to an end. They viewed themselves as "spiritual" (πνευμακικός) when in fact they were "worldly" (σαρκικός; 3:1-3). If something were not done with this church, the church would self-destruct under the weight of its own self-exaltedness. To solve this problem, Paul turns to the self-giving cross of Christ (1:18-31). The world seeks power and wisdom, but those in Christ seek the mind of Christ. When God revealed His wisdom, He chose to do it on the cross. Divine wisdom can be known by those who are in fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

To know the mind of Christ one must experience and receive the mind of Christ through the gift or mediation of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:12). Paul writes in 2:10 that God has revealed His wisdom by means of the Spirit. This revelation is not simply cognitive (2:16) but also experiential. The Spirit serves as the eschatological power to make the ethic demanded by the cross possible in the lives of believers. The Spirit, as divine agent, is universally available to all who are in Christ (the πνευμακικός). The Spirit is God's primary means of disclosing the message of the cross.

What got in the way of the Corinthians experiencing the full power of the cross was their worldly (σαρκικός) attitudes and behaviors. They could not understand because they had hindered the Spirit from speaking to them; they were acting like the "unspiritual" (ψυκικός) person who cannot understand the cross because of unbelief that voids the ability of the Spirit to speak, and not the "spiritual" (πνευμακικός) person who can grow in understanding and appropriation of the cross.

Some of the Corinthians were not relying on the mind of Christ but on their own minds. Because of this, Paul has to address them as infants

and remind them of the basic elements of their faith in Christ.⁴² They could not understand the deeper things of the divine mystery of the cross because of their human (σαρκικός) mind-set. In other words, because they were relying on their own human abilities, they could not appropriate the implications of the cross-event in their community. Paul realizes that their minds must be transformed by the divine power in Christ.

Thus, for the Corinthians and for all believers, to have the mind of Christ necessitates openness to the leadership of the Holy Spirit who will conform us to the model of the self-giving love exemplified on the cross. To know the mind of Christ is to know the very thought of God. It is by no accident that in this same letter Paul gives the famous chapter on love, chapter 13. This *encomium* to love can be interpreted as a commentary upon the mind of Christ. It would be impossible to live a life of love without the indwelling present of the Holy Spirit who guides, convicts, and empowers those willing to submit to the divine prerogative.

The Corinthians were in danger of the other option: quenching the Spirit or hardening of the heart. Paul writes to the Ephesians that they should not grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30) by participating in the activities Paul writes about in the context (4:25-29). The way they could make the Spirit rejoice would be by getting rid of those activities and by becoming imitators of God by living a life of love (5:1-2), all because they have become new people in the likeness of the righteous and holy God (4:23-24). When a person does not heed the conviction of the Spirit, the result is an insensitivity or a hardening of the heart. The Spirit speaks to our conscience, telling us the way we should live in conformity to the norm of the law of Christ. The sinful will, however, rejects this direction.

Having freedom of choice necessitates having a conscience. Thomas Oden writes, “Conscience is the capacity to judge oneself,

⁴²The abrupt κἀγὼ ἀδελφοί of 3:1 is significant as a transition from the “mind of Christ” to the fleshly status of the Corinthians.

present in all human beings, regardless of how acculturated.”⁴³ The corollary to this is that if one’s conscience is not developed or has become “hardened,” then one’s freedom to choose has also been hampered. Thus, by quenching the work of the Holy Spirit with one’s conscience, one makes it more difficult to choose God’s gift of grace.

When we refuse to heed the conviction and direction of the Holy Spirit long enough, we become insensitive and end up being bound in slavery to sin. We replace the law of Christ with the law of self, flesh, the world, or any other thing (Rom 1:18-32). Jesus warned that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven (Matt 12:31-32). This sin is unforgivable because the Spirit is the one who gives life, and if one cuts out the Life-giver, there is no possibility of life (John 3:6; 6:63). Thomas à Kempis (1380-1471) says of the calloused soul:

Levity of heart and neglect of our faults make us insensible to the proper sorrows of the soul, and we often engage in empty laughter when we should rightly weep. There is no real liberty and true joy, save in the fear of God with a quiet conscience. Happy is he who can set aside every hindering distraction, and recall himself to the single purpose of contrition. Happy is he who adjures whatever may stain or burden his conscience.⁴⁴

The option should be rather clear to those who wish to be in fellowship with God: heed the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads us into developing the mind of Christ through growth in understanding the law of Christ. The Christian must become sensitive to both the gentle guidance and conviction of the Spirit.

Thus, the Holy Spirit works through the conscience to bring a person to the realization of a light shining within, showing the proper direction to go. As witness to Christ, the Holy Spirit quickens the conscience as an act of grace with the ultimate goal of the person

⁴³Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Scriptural Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

⁴⁴Thomas à Kempis, “On Contrition of Heart,” *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. By Leo Sherley-Price (New York: Penguin Books, 1952), 53.

following the revealed light unto salvation. This may lead to the person having a sense of guilt or shame, perhaps a sense of desire or spiritual hunger, maybe a realization of some power outside of the self, but always with the goal of bringing a person to the point of decision: “Will I or will I not follow that quiet voice saying to me, ‘This is the way to go, follow it’ (Ps 32:8)?” God has provided a clear way to go—through His law which serves as the standard for the conscience.

III. Paul’s Use of the Law

God uses both prevenient grace and the conscience to bring the fallen human race to the acknowledgment of sin and the realization of a creator. The ultimate purpose of both is to lead to faith in the Savior Christ Jesus. As a person comes to faith in Christ and prevenient grace becomes justifying grace, the Holy Spirit continues to work, guiding, cleansing, and transforming through this same grace now experienced with sanctifying power. The standard which the Holy Spirit uses as the guide in this saving process is the law. The law serves as the tool of grace, from the prevenient to the sanctifying experience of it. The greatest interpreter of the place of the law in the salvation process is Paul the Apostle. For Paul, the law has an indispensable function in the transformation of the sinner to the saint.

The law was important to Paul both before his Damascus road experience (Acts 9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:9-23) and after. Paul the Pharisee was deeply committed to the Hebrew scriptures (Phil 3:5-6), and Paul the Apostle was rooted in Torah and never completely broke from it. A radical transformation took place in his life when he encountered the risen Jesus of Nazareth in a vision on the road to Damascus. So extreme was the change that he could later write that he counted his rich heritage as loss compared to knowing Jesus Christ as Lord (Phil. 3:7-8). F. F. Bruce comments, “He had found a new way of righteousness, based on faith in Christ. Allegiance to a person had displaced devotion to a code—which was, indeed, not merely a code but more a way of

life.”⁴⁵ This experience totally changed his understanding of the law. Jesus Christ became the answer to Paul.

A. Law Defined

Paul uses the key word νόμος, “law,” 119 times in his writings, 107 of those in Romans and Galatians. The Greek word νόμος first meant “what is proper” in reference to any norm, custom, usage, or tradition in the political, cosmic, natural, or moral realm. In the religious realm, it referred to the will of a deity.⁴⁶ In the Septuagint translation, νόμος is used over 200 times for the Hebrew word תּוֹרָה (*torah*). *Torah* meant more than just “law” for the ancient Israelites. It ranged in meaning from “teaching” to the entire revealed will of God.⁴⁷ The Torah, as a collective body of literature (consisting of the Pentateuch and later including the entire Old Testament), was closely related to the idea of covenant. God gave the law as a requirement by which Israel could live up to her part of the covenantal agreement.

Paul uses νόμος in similar ways as it is used in the Septuagint and as תּוֹרָה (*torah*) is used in the Hebrew scriptures. There is no real consensus on how Paul uses this word in his letters, perhaps because he uses it with such variety. C. E. B. Cranfield identifies five uses of νόμος by Paul: (1) as OT law (especially the Pentateuch), (2) as the OT as a whole, (3) as a principle, (4) as “compulsion,” “restraint,” or “necessity,” and (5) as the commandment of Christ.⁴⁸ At its most basic, common level, the word “law” suggests some norm that governs the way things ought or ought not to be done. As with all words, the final interpretation rests with the specific context of usage. In the following discussion,

⁴⁵F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 189.

⁴⁶H. Kleinknecht, “Νόμος” *TDNT*, 4:1023-24.

⁴⁷W. D. Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 3.

⁴⁸C. E. B. Cranfield, “St. Paul and the Law,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (1964): 44.

“the law” refers to commands from God. “Law” without an article refers to law as principle.

B. Paul’s Uses of the Law

1. Reveals the Will of God

For Paul the law is a vital instrument in the process of salvation. Because Paul is a faithful Jew devoted to the Hebrew scriptures, he understands the law as the revealed will of God. Paul did not deny his heritage of Torah. Parry comments, “Law was for him the expression of the will of God in application to the conduct of man, as revealed to Moses and embodied in the written law and its authorized interpretations.”⁴⁹ As Paul progresses in his reasoning in Romans 7, he asks the rhetorical question (v. 7), “Is the law sin?”⁵⁰ He possibly feared that some of his readers may have concluded from what he had said in 5:20 and 6:14 that the law is negative or unimportant.⁵¹ To this question he answers with the strong negative, *μη γένοιτο*, “Never,” “Let it not be,” “Certainly not!” In Galatians 3:21, Paul asks another rhetorical question, “Is the law then against the promises of God?” He answers this question with the same strong, emphatic *μη γένοιτο*. The law is neither sinful nor against the promises of God.

Furthermore, the law was given to impart life (Rom 7:10). Paul calls the law “holy, righteous, and good” (Rom 7:12).⁵² Since the law comes from God, it is like God. As Wesley writes, “The law of God . . . is a copy of the eternal mind, a transcript of the divine nature: Yea, it is the fairest offspring of the everlasting Father, the brightest efflux of

⁴⁹R. St John Parry, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Cambridge: University Press, 1921), 211.

⁵⁰From the context, Paul is using νόμος to refer to God’s commandments in general and in particular as seen in the Mosaic law.

⁵¹Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 278.

⁵²Verse 12 begins with ὥστε μὲν, “so then,” contrasting the statement that the law is holy, righteous, and good with that which comes before, namely, sin (7:11).

His essential wisdom, the visible beauty of the Most High.”⁵³ William Greathouse comments, “Since the law comes from God, who created us, it sets forth the only conditions under which life can be truly fulfilled. It is thus an index to the very structure of reality.”⁵⁴ The law has our well-being in mind, not our harm.⁵⁵ Because the law comes from God and is a reflection of God, Paul can say that it is spiritual (7:14). Paul delights in God’s law in his innermost being (7:22) and serves it as a transformed person (7:25).

2. Defines Sin

The law also has a negative side to it since it defines sin as sin (Rom. 7:7; 5:20). In Romans 4:15 and 5:13, Paul argues that where there is no law there is no transgression. The word for transgression, παράβασις, has the idea of committing a sin by overstepping or violating a law of God.⁵⁶ A boundary must be fixed in order for one to step over it. Greathouse adds, “A sinful tendency may indeed be present in the absence of law, but it takes a specific commandment to crystallize that tendency into a positive transgression or breach of law. . . .”⁵⁷ Paul argues that the tendency to sin has been around since Adam, but when God gave the Mosaic law, the tendency to sin found a foothold (5:13). “Sin manifests itself in commandments to be transgressed.”⁵⁸ This is not to say that sin had no effect until the time of

⁵³Wesley, *Works*, 5:438-439.

⁵⁴William Greathouse, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1968), 152.

⁵⁵Morris, *Romans*, 283. See also Psalms 19:7-13.

⁵⁶J. Schneider, “Παράβασις,” *TDNT*, 5:739-740.

⁵⁷Greathouse, *Romans*, 104.

⁵⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 123.

Moses. Sin has always produced death (5:12), but since Moses, it has had a catalyst.⁵⁹ Brice Martin comments,

The real purpose in the giving of the law is thus a negative one as opposed to the positive purpose of the original commandment which was given to Adam. It is given not to bring life (Gal 3:21) but to make sin exceedingly sinful, to show man that he cannot save himself by means of the law, and to show man his need for a savior.⁶⁰

Paul asks in Galatians 3:19, “Why then the law?” He answers, “Because of transgressions.” E. P. Sanders points out that τῶ τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν can mean “on account of transgressions,” “to produce transgressions,” or “to deal with transgressions.”⁶¹ He goes on to argue that the law as a custodian (3:24) acts more like an enslaver than a protector. True, according to Romans, the law does provide fertile ground for sin and does become enslaved by the power of sin. In Galatians 3:23ff, however, Paul seems to paint a different picture of the law. Paul claims that the law keeps us under restraint until faith is revealed. The law acts as a pedagogue (παιδαγωγός, 3:24) until we put our faith in Christ in order that we may be justified by faith.⁶² But once

⁵⁹The question remains Rom 5:14, why did people die before Moses if the law had not yet been given? The answer may lie in the context of Rom 1-3 where Paul demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles have died because of breaking the law. For the Jews, the law is the Torah (2:12). For Gentiles, the law is written on the conscience (2:14-15). Before Moses, the only law people really had was written on the conscience, and since no one could keep this law, everyone sinned, and therefore everyone died.

⁶⁰Brice L. Martin, *Christ and the Law in Paul* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989), 38.

⁶¹E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 66.

⁶²A pedagogue was a household slave whose responsibility was to prevent a child from making moral and economic mistakes. The pedagogue accompanied a child from ages six to sixteen away from home, often carrying the child's book boxes to school. The safety of the child depended upon this person who, as a consequence, would protect the child from moral and physical dangers. The

faith in God is allowed to reign in Christ (just as faith reigned with Abraham, 3:14), the law no longer acts like a pedagogue.

The law has not only given sin a foothold, it has even gone so far as to make sin increase. The reason for this was so that grace may increase even more and have the ultimate victory. Romans 5:20 begins, “But law came in” (νόμος δὲ παρεισῆλθεν). Παρεισῆλθεν carries with it the idea of sneaking in; the law does not have a primary place in the divine plan,⁶³ but only secondary in creating the needed situation in which grace can work. The commandment is neutral (7:8), but sin, as personified in 7:8ff, needs some agent with which to work, a role the law fulfills. “Apart from the law sin is dead.” The tendency to sin (sinful nature) is still present although the law has not yet given an occasion for the act of sin. The law allows sin as a power to bring spiritual death (7:9, 11).

3. Leads to Christ

The law shows that the net result of sin is death (Rom. 3:23), and in this capacity, it shows the need for Jesus Christ. In Galatians 3:22, Paul argues that sin must be shown to be sin so that we can put our faith in Christ. We must be shown that we cannot earn our salvation by obedience to the law in order that we can recognize that justification is by faith in Christ alone (Gal 2:16).⁶⁴ Ernest Kevan says, “It is the sharp

pedagogue was responsible for the child’s behavioral development, and sometimes even the actual behavior of the child. See David J. Lull, “‘The Law was our Pedagogue’: A Study in Galatians 3:19-25,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 105 (1986): 483-93. Like a pedagogue, the law protects, but life under a pedagogue is no better than being a slave. When Jesus Christ came, however, the slavery and alienation were destroyed. One is now able to say, “Abba, Father” with intimacy and trust (4:4-7).

⁶³Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Lexicon*, 624.

⁶⁴E. P. Sanders comments, “Paul’s logic seems to run like this: in Christ God has acted to save the world; therefore the world is in need of salvation; but God also gave the law; if Christ is given for salvation, it must follow that the law could not have been; is the law then against the purpose of God which has been revealed in Christ? No, it has the function of consigning everyone to sin *so that* everyone

needle of the law that makes way for the scarlet thread of the gospel.”⁶⁵ Commenting on Romans 10:4, Wesley says, “It is the very design of the law, to bring men to believe in Christ for justification and salvation. He alone gives that pardon and life which the law shows the want of, but cannot give.”⁶⁶ In Romans 5:21, the ἵνα (“in order that”) suggests that the law came to increase sin *so that* grace may reign.⁶⁷ Discussing his second use of the law, Wesley says it well:

It is the spirit of love which, by this painful means, tears away our confidence in the flesh, which leaves us no broken reed whereon to trust, and so constrains the sinner, stripped of all, to cry out in the bitterness of his soul, or groan in the depth of his heart, “I give up every plea beside,—Lord, I am damn’d; but thou hast died.”⁶⁸

Leon Morris’ words are also noteworthy:

. . . God’s way has always been the way of grace, and we misunderstand the law if we see it as the way of earning salvation. It is rather God’s way of showing us our shortcomings so that we turn to Christ for our salvation. This does not mean an abolishing of the law; on the contrary, faith establishes the law (3:31). It is only

could be saved by God’s grace in Christ” (*Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977], 475).

⁶⁵Ernest Frederick Kevan, *The Evangelical Doctrine of Law* (London: Tyndale Press, 1956), 11.

⁶⁶John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d.), 561.

⁶⁷James D. G. Dunn states, “. . . if the agency of Adam’s trespass gave free reign to sin and death, it is precisely the force which continues to come through the one man who defeated sin and death, which sustains the believer against their claims upon him and which will prove finally triumphant” (*Romans 1-8*, WBC [Dallas: Word Books, 1988], 300).

⁶⁸Wesley, *Works*, 5:443.

when we experience the love of God in Christ, that love which we see so vividly on the cross, that we come to see the place of the law and find that love is the fulfillment of the law (13:8, 10).⁶⁹

God provides the law (revealed specifically in the Old Testament for the Jews and revealed generally through the conscience for the Gentiles) as a form of prevenient grace that leads to Christ. God's laws have always been a form of grace whereby God's will for holiness in relationship is revealed, yet consequently also revealing the inadequacy of humanity in its own power to secure this relationship outside of reliance upon God's mercy.

C. The Law in Adam

There is a problem with the law, however, because it falls prey to the power of sin. The law in the sphere of sin (see the locative τῆ ἀμαρτίας, Rom 6:1ff) only serves to enhance the power of sin. Paul devotes much effort in Romans 1-3 in showing that the law itself can never heal the broken relationship between God and humanity which began in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. He concludes these important chapters by saying, "Therefore, from works of the law no flesh will be justified before Him" (Rom 3:20).

When the law is bound in the sphere of sin, the result is guilt, condemnation, enslavement, and eventual death. This is universally true for those under Mosaic law or Adamic law. Sin in terms of the latter is characterized by the usurpation of the divine will by the human will, and sin in terms of the former by a transgression of the written code. We were created to look to God as our chief end, but instead we turn to ourselves or other created things. Wesley adds, "Now this infers a total apostasy and universal corruption in man; for where the last end is changed, there can be no real goodness. And this is the case of all men in their natural state: they seek not God, but themselves."⁷⁰

⁶⁹Morris, *Romans*, 145.

⁷⁰Wesley, *Works*, 9:456.

Paul further develops this idea of being under a curse in his letter to the Romans. He demonstrates that both Jew and Gentile are guilty of breaking the law of God. In Rom. 1:18-32 Paul insists that when people are allowed to do as they wish by gratifying their sinful desires, described as “godlessness and wickedness,”⁷¹ they become so hopelessly trapped and lost in their own passions that God gives them up to do as they please (1:24, 26, 28). In 2:9, all who do evil, both Jew and Gentile, will have trouble and distress. On the one hand, Paul argues that the Gentiles are guilty because they have a law unto themselves (2:14-15); they are morally responsible because of their natural reason.⁷² In 1:19-32, Paul demonstrates that “the Gentile without benefit of *special* revelation is guilty of a responsible act of rebellion against the Creator in view of God’s *general* revelation in nature.”⁷³ The Jews, on the other hand, are also guilty because they have not lived up to God’s revealed laws (2:17-19). Both Jew and Gentile are on the same level of guilt under the law (3:9). No one can boast in being justified by the law because the law calls all to accountability to God. This accountability spells condemnation (3:19-20) because all have sinned, both Jew and Gentile alike (3:23).

Sin and law work hand in hand; the law provides the opportunity for self-assertion against God (and His law), and this sin, as characterized in Adam, increases under the law (5:20). As long as sin is allowed to reign, it holds the law under its power. Paul urges the Romans to consider themselves dead in regards to the sphere and control of sin (ὁμεῖς λογίσεσθε ἑαυτοὺς νεκροὺς τῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, 6:11). It is sin that enslaves (6:16). Paul also urges them to die to the law (7:4). Paul will not equate law with sin (7:7). The commandment brings death because it allows sin to reign (7:9-10, 13). The person who is set on fulfilling the

⁷¹Greek, ἀσέβειαν and ἀδικίαν. ἀδικίαν is one who violates a divine law and who does not do δικαιοσύνη, righteousness and justice. The antithetical root of aisevbeian is σέβομαι, which means worshiping God in reverence. These people neither worship God nor follow God’s laws.

⁷²Greathouse, *Romans*, 67.

⁷³Greathouse, *Romans*, 66.

desires of the flesh (σάρξ) is unable to submit to God's law (8:7). Law in the sphere of sin condemns and enslaves because it is unable to do anything to overcome the power of sin.

Moreover, sin controls law and causes the law to be misunderstood and misused. This is especially seen in Galatians with the phrase, "works of law" (ἔργα νόμου). Paul's basic position can be summarized in 2:16: no one can be justified by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ. The problem for Paul is not moral obedience to the law but using this obedience as the religious means for justification. Paul would agree wholeheartedly with the Psalmist who says, "Blessed is the one . . . whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night" (Ps 1:1-2). Sanders states that Paul uses νόμος in two contexts: "one in discussing how one gets 'in' (not by works of law), the other in discussing how one who is 'in' behaves (he keeps the law)."⁷⁴ There is nothing wrong with circumcision itself (see Gal 6:15) but only when it is used as the requirement for membership.⁷⁵ "Works of law" for Paul, then, are different than godly obedience.⁷⁶ Paul's answer to those who would try to gain righteousness through "works of law" might be, "We are so bound by what is antagonistic to God that we are unable to do His will" (see Gal. 5:17). So-called "legalism" results from not realizing that Christ is the innermost meaning and goal of the law.⁷⁷ Paul radically rejects using the law in a legalistic way.

The law works with the conscience to stop any one from boasting in self-righteousness and causes all to recognize that salvation comes by God alone through grace (Rom 3:19-20). If humanity could have obeyed God's will (revealed by the law of the conscience or Torah), it would have avoided the curse of the law which is guilt, condemnation, and separation from God. The sequence of clauses in Romans 3:23-24

⁷⁴Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and Palestinian Judaism*, 10.

⁷⁵Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and Palestinian Judaism*, 20.

⁷⁶Klyne Sondgrass, "Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32(1988): 96.

⁷⁷Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 114.

shows that it is because of sin that we have fallen from God's image and, thus, why we need restoration. Paul knew that complete obedience to the law is impossible. Both Jews (2:17-29) and Gentiles (2:12-16) have been a failure at it (1:18-32). In Romans 7:14-24, Paul describes his own inability to meet the demands of the law.⁷⁸ He recognized that being under the power of sin and set against God makes it impossible to fulfill the law of God. Parry adds, "The law, in fact, was essentially an external standard, embodying declarations, apprehensible by man, of what was right; but not an internal power providing or imparting the ability to do what was right."⁷⁹

In short, law in the sphere of sin puts us under the wrath of God resulting in condemnation. The law is unable to justify because justification has always been through faith in God and not in one's own ability (see Paul's discussion about Abraham in Rom 4). Finally, though seemingly possible, complete obedience to the law is proven by history and experience to be impossible. Therefore, something radical must happen to the law and sin for humanity to be restored to a relationship with God.

D. The Law in Christ

Paul argues that Jesus Christ is the solution to the problem of the law's enslavement to sin. So much so is Christ the solution that He transforms the law from the sphere of sin into the sphere of grace, the actual intent of the law. In Romans 10:4 Paul writes, "For Christ is the τέλος of the law in regard to righteousness for all who believe." There are two important considerations when approaching this verse. First, it is important to examine the context since Paul uses the connective γάρ ("for"), linking this verse to the previous verses. He has argued that Israel has not been justified by its obedience to the law because they

⁷⁸The use of the first person has created great debate as to whether Paul is using a historical present tense describing his past experience (autobiographical), or whether he is speaking of his present experience as a Christian. There is more evidence for the first view, but the discussion is beyond this paper and the present argument.

⁷⁹Parry, *Romans*, 211.

lacked faith (9:31-32). Paul wants to change that (10:1) by enlightening their zeal (10:2) concerning the true meaning of righteousness from God (10:3). Paul is against zeal which separates Jews and Gentiles and which puts works over faith. This zeal leads to Israel's feeling of exclusiveness, that only they can find justification because the law has been given to them exclusively.⁸⁰ Paul then says that Christ is the τέλος of the law. In 10:5-13 Paul stresses the universality of salvation through faith in Jesus as Lord whom God has raised from the dead (10:9-10), for both Jew and Greek (10:12).

The second issue is how to understand τέλος in 10:4. Τέλος could be understood as “goal”⁸¹ or as “terminus.”⁸² Τέλος carries the idea of completion of a task, the fulfillment of that for which something was intended. In a sense Christ completes the law, which beforehand had acted only as a pedagogue until He arrived. Christ met the obligation of the law because He had no sin, something which no one else can claim. The goal of the law was to reveal the will of God, but it was unable to do this completely because of the power of sin. Christ was able to reveal God's will and went beyond the scope of the law by providing the avenue for faith in God. Yet, the law has been terminated so that salvation may freely come (Gal. 3:13, 24; 4:4-5).⁸³ In the context, it is evident that Christ breaks down all barriers between Jew and Gentile, especially the dividing wall of the law (see Gal. 3:28; Eph 2:11-18).

⁸⁰James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 530.

⁸¹C. E. B. Cranfield, “St. Paul and the Law,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17(1964): 42-68.

⁸²R. B. Hamerton-Kelly states, “. . . giving up the boundary markers is tantamount to giving up the Jewish way of life and that cannot be interpreted in any other way than as an abandonment of the whole law” (“Sacred Violence and ‘Works of Law.’ ‘Is Christ then an Agent of Sin?’ [Galatians 2:17],” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 [1990]: 62).

⁸³Scholars can be found on both sides of the debate. For a brief description of both sides cf. Martin, *Christ and the Law in Paul*, 130ff, and Douglas Moo, “Paul and the Law in the Last Ten Years,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 302-7.

Christ is the qualified “terminus” of the law. In its contractual aspect, Jewish nomism has come to its full completion and terminus in Christ.⁸⁴

This raises the question: is the law still valid for believers? Martin argues that the enslaving, condemning, and death-dealing effects have ended, but not the law as an expression of God’s will.⁸⁵ Being under grace does not give the believer freedom to sin. In Romans 6:15 Paul asks, “Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?” He answers, μή γένοιτο, “Never,” “By no means.” Rather, the law was originally meant as a guide for those who are in a covenant of grace. Law (Exod 20) came *after* relationship (Exod 19). The law was given for instruction so that we might find hope in God (Rom. 15:4). Paul is not willing to do away with the obligation of believers to those around them. Paul insists that the law can now be fulfilled by the transformed person who is able to love the neighbor as oneself (Gal 5:14). In the sphere of Christ, love for others is the thrust of the law, whereas in the sphere of sin, works of law for righteousness is the goal.

In this respect, Paul suppresses the cultic aspects of the law and uplifts the moral aspects. He speaks against rituals that separate Jews and Gentiles, such as circumcision (Gal 2:3; 5:2; 6:15; Rom 2:25-29; 4:9-12), food laws (Gal 2:11ff; Rom 14-15), and observing certain days (Gal 4:10; Rom 14:5ff). All barriers—race, social standing, and gender—have been broken down in Christ and all people can be children of Abraham through faith (Gal 3:28-29). Those appropriations of the law which keep others from coming to God through faith are a distortion of the promise made to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Rom 4:11-12). Paul is not willing to depart from the entire law. He is very devoted to those parts of the law which fulfill “the law of Christ” (Gal 6:2). In Romans 13:8-10, Paul lists several commandments of the decalogue which are summed up in the great command, “Love

⁸⁴Richard N. Longenecker, *Paul Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 128.

⁸⁵Martin, *Christ and the Law in Paul*, 144.

your neighbor as yourself.”⁸⁶ In Romans 12:9-21 Paul gives specific, practical, and moral examples of how one ought to live as a transformed person. Likewise, in Galatians 5:22-23 he lists the “fruit of the Spirit.” These and similar lists are moral to the core. Commenting on Romans 2:25, Schreiner says, “Clearly, he [Paul] means that Jews who are circumcised but fail to observe the *moral norms* of the law are condemned (2:25-29). Gentiles, on the other hand, who do not possess the ritual law, but who obey the moral law are justified.”⁸⁷ Paul wants no stumbling block put in the path of anyone seeking Christ (Rom 14:13). He radically breaks from the Pharisees of his day and says that nothing is unclean in itself, but only if it keeps someone from Christ (14:14-15).

Paul says this because he himself had experienced transformation. This same transforming power that changed Paul can change all who put their faith in Christ, and as a direct result of this, the law will be transformed from the realm of sin into the realm of Christ. A key passage for understanding this transformation is Paul’s testimony in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; I myself no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” Paul put to death trying to be justified by his own efforts (2:15-19). Likewise, those who want to belong to Christ must do the same (5:24). This is a dominant theme in Romans 6 where Paul urges believers not to let sin reign (6:12)⁸⁸ or to be under its slavery, but rather to be in the realm of righteousness (6:18) which leads to sanctification and eternal life (6:22).

Significant to this transformation is the Holy Spirit whom Paul mentions 20 times in chapter eight of Romans. The law of the Spirit sets one free from the law of sin and death (8:2). Law controlled by sin

⁸⁶Thomas R. Schreiner says, “The commandments cited here refer to matters which would be acknowledged universally as norms. It is not the case that Paul thinks these demands are normative only because they are loving; rather, there is a mutual and dialectical relationship between love and the demands cited here” (“The Abolition and Fulfillment of the Law in Paul,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 [1989]: 59).

⁸⁷Schreiner, “Abolition and Fulfillment,” 65.

⁸⁸Μὴ οὖν βασιλεύτω ἡ ἁμαρτία, present imperative.

and death leads to condemnation, but law in the sphere of the Holy Spirit provides freedom from condemnation. The law weakened by the power of sin falls prey to sin; it is unable to free a person from sin's grip (8:3a). To remedy this God sent His incarnate Son and who showed that sin could be conquered (8:3b). The power of sin is death (6:23), but Christ conquered death and, thus, the power of sin by His resurrection from the dead. This same power can be made effective in believers through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

The results of this transformation are freedom from the curse of the law (Gal 3:13, 24) and freedom from spiritual impotency from which the law cannot rescue (Gal 3:21).⁸⁹ It is the same law at work but it is changed from the sphere of sin, death, and condemnation to the sphere of the Spirit who witnesses to Christ. By finding freedom from sin one finds freedom from the law as the perceived means of salvation rather than as the intended guide to the sanctified.⁹⁰ Paul is impassioned about the Galatians falling back into slavery under the law. He claims that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free (Gal 5:1a). The message of hope that Christ brings is one of freedom *from* works-righteousness and freedom *to* love. The sin problem has been solved once and for all by Christ's death and resurrection. The justified believer has been freed from the guilt and condemnation of sin, but Paul urges the believer not to let the power of sin reign any more because we have been raised with Christ (Rom 6:5-11). The Holy Spirit then makes this hope a reality (8:10-11) to those who do not let sin reign (8:13). And as believers are freed from the power of sin, they are freed and empowered to obey the law as it was intended—as a guide to loving one's neighbor as oneself (13:8-10).

The believer, then, is empowered to fulfill the "law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). The Spirit-empowered person produces actions in keeping with the

⁸⁹H. H. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 186.

⁹⁰Martin states, "They [Christians] obey the law not to get saved, or to stay saved, but because they have been saved" (*Christ and the Law in Paul*, 156).

law (Gal 5:14, 22-23).⁹¹ The law as a reflection of a gracious and loving God can become a tremendous tool for holy living when put in the sphere of Christ. The person who is “in Christ” uses the law as the sanctified tool of the conscience, showing the way how to be Christ-like (2 Cor 3:7-18).

E. The Law and the Conscience

Some initial connections can be drawn at this point between the law and the conscience. The revealed law (special revelation through the laws and commands of God through Scripture) serves as the highest guide for the conscience when the law is put under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The law can still be a valuable tool for the conscience even when a person is still bound by the power of sin. The problem, however, is that such a person becomes trapped by the law, and in this state, is unable to follow the gentle prodding of the Holy Spirit upon the conscience. This person is trapped like the “I” of Romans 7 who wants to do what is right, but ends up doing what is wrong. When a person is “in Christ” in intimate relationship with Him through the agency of the Holy Spirit, the law becomes the positive guide for the conscience that it was meant to be. The highest standard or norm for the conscience becomes being Christ-like, one of the essential definitions of holiness.

Theologically and biblically, these conclusions are rather straight forward. We need to dig further in the case of natural law (general revelation through nature and reason). A significant passage in this regard is Romans 2:12-15. In Romans 1-3, Paul is building a deliberative case that no one can be justified by obeying the law. In chapter 2, he demonstrates that both Jew and Gentile alike are guilty before God for breaking the law. Lest Gentiles think they are exempt from guilt since they do not have the Old Testament filled with the commandments of

⁹¹Commenting on Gal 5:14, Ridderbos says, “In this entire summary, Paul’s purpose is both to let the law come into its own proper validity in the life of believers; and to graft its fulfillment upon a different principle from that of human self-validation through works—namely, the salvation brought by Christ. . . . Thus in this Epistle the apostle can on the one hand proclaim freedom from the law, and on the other can require love as the fulfillment of the law” (*Galatians*, 201).

God, Paul shows that they are guilty of breaking the law of the conscience written on their hearts. Verse 12 raises the issue of whether those who have received the lesser light of the “natural” conscience (norms gathered from nature or reason) will be saved. According to the earlier discussion, this salvation would have to come through prevenient grace working through the conscience to convince a person of the need for salvation beyond oneself. According to verse 14, it seems that Paul knew of pagans who lived according to their conscience. But, as we have seen, both the law and our conscience can only take us so far—they cannot save us. God is a just judge and will justly judge those who do not have the written law but only the law of the conscience. Bruce comments, “That is to say, the Gentiles had not been given the Torah, or even the Ten Commandments, but they did have a sense of right and wrong: they had a built-in awareness of the essence of God’s law.”⁹² The law written on the conscience serves also to show the need for a savior. As Oden comments, “In conscience we experience not a natural liberty to do the good, but to hope for it. In this way Christ who is the end of the law is being inscribed ever anew on our hearts by the preliminary discernment of the difference between good and evil.”⁹³ The conscience helps confirm our guilt before God and thus the need for something or someone outside of ourselves to save us.

Paul essentially categorizes both Jews and Gentiles with the same problem: living in the sphere of sin. Nothing but divine power can save from the grip of sin. The revealed law and the law of the conscience function in the same way: to show our need for a savior. Without further divine revelation through the revealed law, one might mistake the conscience as something of human origin, whether that be cultural, genetic or personal. No doubt all of these and others areas directly influence the unwritten law of the conscience. But, as Wesley is quick to point out, all is of the grace of God.⁹⁴

⁹²Bruce, *Romans*, 53.

⁹³Oden, *Scriptural Christianity*, 252.

⁹⁴Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*, 525.

IV. The Relationship between Preventive Grace, Conscience, and Law

The following chart is an attempt to visualize a few of the similarities and differences between preventive grace, conscience, and the law as outlined above. Not all the concepts can be taken to their logical conclusions. Rather, the purpose is to lay out in a visual way some of the possible similarities and differences among the three. Conscience can be understood as a link between preventive grace and the law. It is the “playing field” of both, where both have a direct influence upon a person. This playing field is also the arena where the battle between sin and grace is fought. The conscience is not the will but the guide for the will and can profoundly influence the choices a person makes.

Preventive Grace	Conscience	Law
1. Universal	1. Universal	1. Universal
2. Points to Christ	2. Convicts of Christ	2. Points to Christ
3. God’s Work	3. God’s Gift	3. God’s Work
4. Enables Free Choice	4. Determines Choice	4. Obligates Choice
5. Beginning of Salvation	5. Neutral, but Assists	5. Aids in Salvation
6. Initial	6. Secondary	6. Secondary
7. Leads from Natural Condition	7. Leads to Natural Condition	7. Leads to Natural Condition
8. Monergistic	8. Synergistic	8. Synergistic
9. God does it	9. Demands Human Response	9. Demands Human Response
10. Freeing	10. Neutral	10. Binding
11. Grace	11. Recipient of Grace	11. A Means for Grace
12. Restores Moral Capability	12. Is Moral Capability	12. Determines Morals
13. Works through Law & Conscience	13. Works through Law	13. Works through Conscience
14. Indirect Revelation	14. Indirect Revelation	14. Direct Revelation
15. Advocate	15. Judge	15. Guide for Judgment

A. In Pursuit of Christ

Since no person is completely without prevenient grace working through the conscience, Christian evangelists can be assured of a starting point of divine light reflected in every person with whom they share the gospel. Wesley writes that everyone has been given some measure of prevenient grace: Christians, “Mahametans,” pagans, and the “vilest of savages.”⁹⁵ Elsewhere he writes, “It is certain they had not the written law; but had they no supernatural assistance? Is it not one God ‘who works in’ us and in them, ‘both to will and to do?’”⁹⁶ The heathen have no direct awareness of the gospel through the work of prevenient grace upon the conscience, but “some discernment of the difference between moral good and evil, with approbation of the one, and disapprobation of the other, by an inward monitor, excusing or accusing.”⁹⁷ Dunning points out that there is both a negative and positive effect of general revelation of God’s law through the work of prevenient grace upon the conscience. Negatively, the conscience declares all people guilty of breaking God’s law and therefore condemned (cf. Rom 1). Positively, the enlightened conscience allows the unbeliever the opportunity to respond in faith to the light, however small that light may be, towards salvation. Wesley refers to this type of faith as “the faith of a servant.”⁹⁸ Dunning comments, “The clear implication is that if, by conscience (general revelation), the unbeliever is led to a knowledge of the law and by such knowledge responds in obedience, he may be saved.”⁹⁹

Taken at face value, one might be led to criticize Wesley for being a universalist. This would be a valid criticism if it were not for his doctrines of prevenient grace and original sin. All grace has the same

⁹⁵Wesley, *Works*, 7:345, 374

⁹⁶Wesley, *Works*, 9:268.

⁹⁷Wesley, *Works*, 7:345.

⁹⁸Wesley, *Works* 7:195.

⁹⁹Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness*, 168.

subject and object—Jesus Christ. There is no contradiction with Wesley’s perspective and John 14:6 where Jesus says, “I am the way, truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” Salvation is still through Jesus. Prevenient grace is only the beginning. The law points the way. The conscience is the instrument of the Holy Spirit by which people come to recognize their sin and their need for God. General revelation and the conscience lead only to the law and not the Gospel. Paul realized this as well in Romans 1-3. He realized that because of the power of sin, no one can keep the law, whether that be a Jew with Torah or a Gentile with the law of the conscience. This is important in the context of missions. I will not offer a solution here to the theological problem of whether some who have never heard the Gospel can be saved. Based on this study, we can be assured that the power of God’s grace is at work in the lives of all people. God has provided some degree of light by which people can guide their consciences, whether that be through cultural heritage, personal reflection, or outside influence. Likewise, we can be assured of the fallen condition of all people and that all people need the Savior. Missiologically, the need for evangelism is clear, but also the optimism that God has gone before can be guaranteed.

God writes His laws on our hearts through the Holy Spirit’s work with our conscience. This law will be consistent with the new law of Christ because this law, as a form of prevenient grace and further revelation, will confront one with the need for decision, either of faith and acceptance of Christ, or denial and rejection of Him. Wiley comments, “There can be, therefore, no lack of harmony between the new law of Christ, and the old law of a fully redeemed and enlightened conscience.”¹⁰⁰ The process begun with prevenient grace finds fulfillment when a person responds to God by believing in Jesus Christ.

¹⁰⁰H. Orton Wiley, *Christian Theology*, vol.3 (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1943), 24.

B. In Pursuit of Holiness

There is no contradiction or antithesis between law and grace, for both have the ultimate goal of conforming us to the image of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, God quickens the conscience as it works with the law which serves as the standard for the conscience. The law validates the decisions made by the conscience. A person's conscience can develop as one learns more about the law of God. This is not only a human endeavor but a human response to the gracious work of the Holy Spirit. The conscience helps us conform to the will of God which, as Paul writes, is "our sanctification" (1 Thess 4:3). Holiness is first a gift of grace, but this gift necessitates the human response of obedience.

As part of a person, the conscience can experience the transforming grace of God in Christ. When God transforms our minds, the new standard of the conscience becomes Jesus Christ (Rom 12:2). We find that our old ways are not consistent with the standard of Jesus. The activities that we did are not what Jesus would have us do. Our conscience, then, is the guide in every step of the sanctifying process. The Holy Spirit leads us and convicts us, refining us like gold until we are pure and holy. When the Holy Spirit speaks to our conscience, we are confronted with a choice of obedience or disobedience. Obedience leads to growth into the image of Christ. Disobedience leads to sin of which the Holy Spirit will convict us. When conviction comes and our consciences have become aware of the standard of Christ, we must be careful not to grieve the Holy Spirit by not repenting and continuing in sin (Eph 4:22-24, 30). When faced with temptation, God will provide a way out (1 Cor 10:13). How does He do this? The Holy Spirit speaks to our conscience, and the first thing our conscience does is rouse the will. Will we or will we not listen to the Holy Spirit who will remind us of God's standard? Do we or do we not agree with God and choose His ways? We disobey the Holy Spirit by rejecting His leading in our lives. Disobedience results in a guilty conscience filled with fear and doubt. A conscience that heeds the law of Christ as revealed by the Holy Spirit (both objectively and subjectively) will conform more and more to the image of Christ. In theological terms, that person grows in holiness. Thus, the conscience is the critical link between the Holy Spirit and the

standard or law of Christ, with the goal of developing the new self, “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). P.T. Forsyth has said, “Unless there is within us that which is above us, we shall soon yield to that which is about us.”

C. In Pursuit of the Mind of Christ

Two tremendous events take place when a person enters into intimate relationship with Christ in the sanctifying experience “in Christ.” One is that the law is liberated from the bondage of sin and becomes the guide to holiness that it was meant to be. Likewise, the conscience can also be liberated from the propensity to fail in the pursuit of the holy standard of the law. A definitive phrase for both of these ideas is having “the mind of Christ.” The Holy Spirit not only teaches us subjectively as the quiet, inner voice about the law of Christ; He also empowers us objectively to live out the law of Christ. The problems in Corinth teach us that we cannot pursue the mind of Christ on our own power. Only the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor 2:11). Only the Spirit, working with and transforming our wills, can give the power and freedom to gain victory over the law of sin and death (Rom 8:2). The life filled with the presence of the Spirit can bear fruit consistent with the law of love (Gal 5:22-23). As a person becomes open and receptive to God’s grace through the Holy Spirit, a person’s conscience can likewise grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This all sounds so good and even theological! But what does it mean in simple concepts? For believers, there is only one choice to make: to follow the Spirit who will guide us and transform us into the image of Christ. The Spirit confirms or convicts that we are or are not living according to the standard of Christ. There are countless ways this happens, but most vividly through the preaching of the Word, fellowship with the saints, and participating in the means of grace. What value is there in hearing sermons Sunday after Sunday or of daily meditations upon the Bible? Precisely in the need to grow our consciences in their awareness of the standard of Christ. Grace does not stop when we

become believers. Prevenient grace becomes saving and sanctifying grace as grace liberates from the penalty (justification) and power (sanctification) of sin. When we are obedient to what we “hear” from God, we will naturally grow into the image of Christ. Of course, we will fail from time to time as we continue in this battle with the world around us, but when we fail, we have an Advocate with the Father. When we confess our sins, God will forgive us our sins against the law of Christ and cleans us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9; 2:2). The goal is not to sin (1 John 2:2). We can reach this goal more and more when we are obedient to the Spirit’s voice reminding our consciences of the mind of Christ.