

M.Th. Thesis Background Essay

1st. Aug. 1990

## **“Conscience” in I Corinthians 8-10**

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**LITERATURE:** C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* BLACK'S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, (A. & C. Black, London, 1968); C. K. Barrett, “Things Sacrificed to Idols” in *New Testament Studies* Vol XI 1964-65, pp. 138-153; G.C. Bingham, “The Principle and Power of Conscience” in *Living Faith Studies*, Vol. IV pp. 196-216 (New Creation Publications Inc., Blackwood, 1981); J. C. Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul’s Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity” in *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 31, 1985 pp. 113-124; R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, (SCM Press, Lond. 1952); J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, CALVIN’S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, Vol. 9, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960); H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* HERMENEIA SERIES (Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1975); J. M. Espy, “Paul’s Robust Conscience Re-examined” in *New Testament Studies* Vol. 31 1985 pp. 161-188; J. S. Glen, *Pastoral Problems in First Corinthians*, (Epworth Press, Lond., 1965); F. W. Grosheide *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* THE NEW INTERNATIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE NEW TESTAMENT (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1953); R. A. Horsley, “Consciousness and Freedom among the Corinthians: I Corinthians 8-10” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1978 pp. 574-89; R. Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1971); J. C. Hurd, *The Origins of I Corinthians*, (Seabury Press, New York, 1965); C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, (Cambridge, University Press, 1967); C. Maurer συνοιδα, συνειδησις in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VII, (Eermans, Grand Rapids, 1971); J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, THE MOFFATT NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY, (Hodder and Stoughton, Lond., 1938); L. L. Morris, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, TYNDALE NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, (IVP Leicester, 1958); C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*. SCM STUDIES IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGY MONOGRAPH SERIES NO. 15 (SCM Press, Lond., 1955); A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, INTERNATIONAL CRITICAL COMMENTARY SERIES, (T. & T. Clark, Edin. 1911); A. P. Stanley, *The Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, (John Murray, Lond., 1858, 2nd. Edn.)

## **Introduction**

Paul’s discussion on conscience in I Corinthians is found within a larger section dealing with the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. In I Cor. 8-10 he shows the matter is not simply one of a “right” thing versus a “wrong” thing, and therefore it naturally follows that it is not a matter of one party in the church versus another party—the libertines versus the legalists. Rather it is a matter of conscience and love, and in this both parties need instruction.

On a purely statistical analysis, the use of συνειδησις in I Corinthians should give us an important, if not crucial, understanding of Paul’s use of the term. In the relatively short compass of these chapters he uses the term eight times (I Cor. 8:7 ; 8:10; 8:12;

10:25, 27; 10:28, 29).<sup>1</sup> This leaves only six other references to the word in the rest of the Pauline corpus (i.e. Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; II Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11), or, if we include the Pastorals (I Tim. 1:5; 1:19; 3:9; 4:2; II Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:15) there are only 12 other references altogether. In other words, out of twenty uses of the term, almost half of them appear in these two chapters. Of course it may be argued that numerical occurrence may not be the most telling factor. As we will later see, the other uses of the term have their own important contexts and contribution to make. However, we can be sure that for the Corinthians, the matter of conscience was of some importance.

The approach in this paper is first to give a summary of the flow of Paul’s argument, and then to more closely examine the texts in which *συνειδησις* appears.

### **1. Overview of Paul’s Argument.**

I Cor. 8:1-6 introduces the second question asked by the Corinthians themselves (cf. I Cor. 7:1), to which Paul is now responding. The presupposition upon which Paul works is set out in 8:1 “knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies”. His fundamental assertion is that love is always the edifying thing (cf. I Cor. 13), and this sets the scene for the rest of his argument. Indeed, he says, if anyone is boasting in his knowledge (*γνῶσις* being one of the key words in the Corinthian situation) he does not know as he ought to know (8:2). On the contrary, true knowledge is found in love, and this not of ourselves to God, but of God to us. He is the one who knows us, and in being known by Him, we are loved (8:3). True knowledge is a love thing—being loved by God is the coterminous with being known by Him—and by implication this is therefore the way of life for God’s people.

From this basis Paul now begins to establish his case with regard to idol worship. His argument is creational and ontological. There is “no such thing as an idol”, is his first point, and “there is no God but one”, is its corollary (8:4). This does not deny the existence of idols as physical entities, but denies the divinity of idolatrous powers, as adhered to by their devotees. Indeed, there may be “so called gods in heaven or on earth” and there may be “many gods and many lords” as the world understands things to be (8:5), yet “for us” i.e. the community of Christ, the Son of the Father, “there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord,

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<sup>1</sup> The A.V. has the term twice in I Cor. 8:7, but the R.S.V., NASB, NIV and others reflect the best reading of the text.

Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him” (8:6). The Father is one from whom all things come and the one for whom we exist (cf. Rom. 11:36; I Cor 11: 12; Col. 1:16; Heb. 2:10). The one Lord, Jesus Christ, is the One through whom all things have come into being (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16). The points thus made are important. The matter of creation settles all arguments. That these things are so precludes the idols from any ontological power. That they may have a form of power Paul does not dispute (I Cor. 10:19f.), but they have no independent power or authority, and God the Father is preeminent over all.

“However, not all men have this knowledge” (8:7). This is a simple statement of fact. Not all are as aware as they should be of these things. Those who do not have the knowledge of God’s Creatorly sovereignty, and who are “accustomed to the idol until now”, “eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol” and as a result, “their conscience, being weak, is defiled” (8:7). These are they who have been steeped in the fear and superstition of idol worship, and till the point of Paul’s writing were still accustomed to thinking in such a way. The “as if it were” is an interesting phrase. It seems to indicate that they ate all manner of foods with caution, just in case it happened to be sacrificed to an idol. The maxim behind the action seems to be the ancient equivalent to our statement “better safe than sorry”! The important thing to note is that, whatever the action is, the conscience is defiled in the eating. Why, then, simply not abstain from eating and thus not defile the conscience?

The answer is found in the next verses. The implication of 8:8-9, which almost certainly preserves part of the Corinthian’s own language, is that (a) some asserted the eating of certain foods will commend one to God and (b) the eating of foods seems to be linked with the matter of liberty. Here we see something of the argument of the strong party. In the libertinism that they adopted, to eat food sacrificed to idols seemed to be something of a “test”. Perhaps the eating proved the status of the person in the pursuit of *gnosis*. Moreover, the issue is not even one of simply eating meat sacrificed to idols in an accidental manner. The libertine party actually had taken to dining in the temple of idols (8:10). When such action is seen by the other, weaker brethren, he is “strengthened” to go against his conscience and eat things sacrificed to idols, a thing that he would never have done.

The results of such an action are not light, for Paul says that by so doing, “he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whom Christ died”. This ruination is laid at the feet of the ones whose “knowledge” has caused it (8:11), and this is further reinforced by Paul’s strong words in 8:12, “And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their

conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.” The sin is against Christ, because the church is the body of Christ (cf. 12:12ff.). For his own part, Paul’s position is stated in 8:13, “if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble”. Here is the practical outworking of the *carmen Christi*.

The specific discussion on conscience is laid aside for the moment as Paul takes up the issue of freedom in I Cor. 9. The libertine party could conceivably seize on Paul’s statements to calumniate him as a legalist, and Paul knew the error of this, and the danger of acquiescing to such an accusation. He is free, as an apostle of Christ (9:1-2) and defends his freedom by arguing (a) that he is free to preach the gospel with no charge (9:3-18) (b) He has made himself a slave to all, even though he is free from all (9:19-23) (c) such action is for the imperishable wreath of righteousness (9:24-27). The true use of freedom, as evidenced in Paul’s own life, is thus for service—and such service, for the sake of the gospel and in the matter of conscience, so as to be able to say “to the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak”.

The point of all this argument is then drawn out. In the OT example of Moses and the Israelites, the people gave way to idolatry, even though they had been baptized in to Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and they all ate the same spiritual food, which was Christ. (10:1-4). Nonetheless God was not pleased with them all, as evidenced by the fact that they were laid low in the wilderness (10:5)—the very opposite of being puffed up! They were thus those who craved after evil things (10:6). Some gave way to idolatry (10:7), others to immorality (10:8), others to testing of the Lord (10:9) and grumbling (10:10). All of these things were written for an example (10:11). In the light of this example, “let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall” (10:12) Libertines beware that you are not taking the same course of action as the people in the OT. In this context, there is great temptation, and there is a way of escape also (10:13), and so the implication is to use it!

In view of the danger, one should not be boldly eating in idol shrines, but rather the readers, who are indeed, “beloved” should “flee from idolatry”. (10:14). With more than a touch of irony, Paul says, “I speak as to wise men, you judge what I say”(10:15).

By way of analogy to the Lord’s supper Paul is now makes a most serious point. The understanding of 10:16-17 Paul takes as a “given”. The cup and the bread are a sharing in the body and blood of Christ, and though there are many, all partake of the one. This is also seen in Israel, says Paul (10:18) in that all Israel shares in the one altar (e.g. on the day of atonement the one altar atones for all the people).

Now we return to the main argument. “Is an idol anything, or is that which is sacrificed to it of any worth?” (10:19). The answer is “no”, as we have seen before (10:20a cf. 8:1ff.), but the other side of the coin is this: “the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons”. (10:20b). What does Paul mean? Though idols have no essential being (I Cor. 8:4-6; 10:19 cf. Pss. 115:4-7; 135:15-17; Jer. 2:13) to worship idols is to have fellowship with demons (cf. I Cor. 10:20; Deut. 32:15-18; Ps. 106:37; Gal. 4:8). Wherever, therefore, there is wrong worship, there will be all the marks of the destroyer. One cannot share in both the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons (10:21) without the danger of provoking God to jealousy (10:22a). Those who did so in Israel of Old knew the consequences of such an action, and Paul in 10:1ff. had made sure that his readers did also. Clearly “we are not stronger than He” (10: 22b), so be warned!

While, therefore, “all things are lawful, not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify”. (10:22) It may be lawful to eat in an idol’s temple, but of what profit is it? What edification takes place as a result? Love, we have seen, is always the edifying thing. Simply put, “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbour”. (10:23). Here indeed is the mark of spiritual maturity, and of true knowledge.

With regard to conscience, one should buy and eat anything from the market place, without asking questions (10:24). Moreover, to do this is to honour God as creator (10:26). In like manner, when invited to an unbeliever’s house, eat anything that is set before you, says Paul, again without question (10:27). But if you should go to a place, and there be specifically informed that the meat has been sacrificed to idols, Paul’s instruction is to refrain from eating “for the sake of the one who informed you and for conscience’s sake” (10:28). Here the situation is quite different. While the invitation to eat has probably come from an unbeliever, the information about the food has come from a believer, and one of weak conscience. This is made more clear in 10:29, where Paul emphasizes that such an action should be taken for the sake of the other person’s conscience. Whatever may be the specific meaning of v.29b-30, Paul comes to the point that the important element is thankfulness (cf. Rom. 1:21) and this is linked in the next verse to glory. In sum, all must be done to the glory of God (10:31), and this can only be done through love, as 10:32-33 and 11:1 makes clear.

While a number of scholars (e.g. Weiss, Schmithals, Héring, Jewett et. al.) argue for a composite approach to the passage, such is not necessary. The supposed literary breaks between 8:13 and 9:1; 9:23 and 9:24; 9:27 and 10:1, and the assumed

contradictions of standpoint between 8:1-13 and 10:23-11:1 do not necessarily hold. Says Brunt, “and since the passage can be seen as a unified argument it is best to assume literary integrity.”<sup>2</sup>

## II. I Cor. 8:7-13

8:7 However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed<sup>i</sup> to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.

i) συννηθεια in Ⱶ\* A B P Ψ 33 81 181 etc. is to be preferred over συνειδησει in Ⱶ<sup>c</sup> D G 88 104 326 etc.

The “some” may be a minority, but they must be considered. That they have been in the habit of idol worship (τη θυννηθεια) would have been no different to the general (Gentile) populous of the church (cf. 12:2), but the point Paul is making here is that they are still tainted with the superstitious mindset of such worship. As idol worshipers they would have had no qualms about eating food that had been sacrificed to the idols<sup>3</sup>, and indeed such would have been a highly desirable practice. The eating was part of the religious ritual, and thus food itself would have had a religious meaning.<sup>4</sup> But now, as believers, they do have qualms about eating food from the μακελλον *per se* because of its traditional association with idol worship. That which was once desirable as an act of obeisance is now a thing of pollution, at least in their own minds. They are not able to eat εκ πιστεως (Rom. 14:23). Not everything in the μακελλον had been offered to idols before it was retailed, but the how is one to know? The weaker brethren thus eat food as if it had been so sacrificed, and as a result η συνειδησις αυτων ασθηνης ουσα μολυνεται.

What does this statement mean? The conscience of the weak believer is defiled, not in that food of itself can defile a person (Mk. 7:18f.; Lk. 11:41), but because the person has engaged in an action which the conscience does not allow. There is a consciousness of guilt, of wrong doing and thus of defilement. The reason that the conscience is ασθηνης is due to a deficient understanding of the liberty that comes in and through Christ. Paul himself knows such liberty, as is made plain in the chapters that follow, but for any person who does not share in the knowledge of the true liberty of the gospel, the conscience must still be headed. “An uninstructed conscience may condemn what is not

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Brunt, “Rejected, Ignored, or Misunderstood? The Fate of Paul’s Approach to the Problem of Food Offered to Idols in Early Christianity” in *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 31, 1985 pp. 122, n.1

<sup>3</sup> See C. K. Barrett, “Things Sacrificed to Idols” in *New Testament Studies* Vol. XI (1964-65) pp. 138-153 for the situation in the μακελλον.

<sup>4</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (A. & C. Black, London, 1968) p. 194.

wrong, or allow what is; but even in such cases it ought to be obeyed.”<sup>5</sup> Conscience stands over against the *νοῦς*, passing judgement upon it.<sup>6</sup>

By analogy with verse 12, however, it may be that Paul is saying something more even than the conscience of the weak brother causes him to feel a sense of defilement. It may be that Paul is pointing to a truth about conscience itself i.e. that the *συνειδησις* itself is defiled if one goes against it. If this is the case, conscience is even more clearly seen to be an identity over against the *νοῦς* of a person. This does not help us to understand the origin of conscience, but it does enable us to see something of its parameters.

8:8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neith the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat.

i) This order is found in p<sup>46</sup> B A\* while ⚭ D G etc. reverse the order.

While this statement may be a thesis propounded by the strong Corinthians themselves, it need not necessarily be so. Whether it is a positive statement from Paul’s own pen, or an aphorism popular among the strong at Corinth, the substance remains the same. The food is neutral. The future tense of 8a probably has the day of judgement in view, and on this day one will stand before God by grace, not by works. Paul “repudiates the *direct* demonstration of freedom. No work, not even freedom practiced as a work, makes us acceptable before God.”<sup>7</sup>

8:9 But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

Though the food itself is of no importance, one way or the other, in the matter of Christian life (cf. Rom. 14:17), the conduct associated with the food is of the utmost importance. The weak are weak in conscience. The concern is for him not to have a *προσκομμα* placed in the way of the weak brother (cf. Rom. 14:13, 20). *προσκομμα*

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<sup>5</sup> A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (T. & T. Clark, Edin. 1911) p. 169.

cf. Calvin, J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, CALVIN’S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, Vol. 9, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960) p. 176f. “Since the goodness of actions springs from fear of God and integrity of conscience, so, on the other hand, it does not matter how good an action may appear to be, if there is something wrong with the mental attitude behind it, then the action is vitiated. For anyone who boldly sets out on something that is against his conscience, is showing a certain contempt for God....In a word, as men’s hearts are purified by faith, so nothing is pure in God’s sight apart from faith.”

cf. Bultmann, “Insofar as the conscience’s knowledge applies to *that which is demanded of man*, the decisive thing is that conscience knows that there *is* such a thing *at all*; for it is possible for it to err in regard to the *content* of that demand....the demand perceived by conscience has its foundation in a sphere transcendent to man; to acknowledge *that sphere* is in the end the decisive thing, though man may err in what he believes he hears as its demand.” R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* Vol. I, (SCM 1952) p. 218.

<sup>6</sup> cf. Jewett, Paul “insists on the distinction between the conscience and the person himself....Paul wishes to insist that the conscience is an autonomous phenomenon which cannot be treated as merely identical with the person as the Gnostics supposed.” R. Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1971) p. 428.

<sup>7</sup> H. Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* (Fortress Press, Phil. 1975) p. 148.

appears only in this passage and in Romans, though it is not rare in the LXX. “It is that against which the man with weak sight stumbles; it is no obstacle to the man who sees his way; but the weak sighted must be considered.”<sup>8</sup>

8:10-11 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died.

To eat in an idol shrine was not necessarily idolatrous *per se*, for there could be visits to temple restaurants of a purely social kind.<sup>9</sup> The eater is not affected by such behaviour, but the problem is that such behaviour has its affect on the weaker brother. It may even be that such behaviour is designed to have an affect on the weaker brother—ostensibly to demonstrate the benefits of liberty. With strong irony Paul uses *οικοδομηθησεται* (cf. 8:1b) to describe the false “building up” (strengthening) of the conscience of the weak brother.

But should not the weak be strengthened? Is not the understanding of the faith they have deficient? There can be no doubt that it is, but the point is not at issue here. Rather, in seeing the boldness of the conscience of the strong the weak one will be wrongly persuaded to ignore the claims of his conscience and to eat meat, against his own better judgement. He is thus strengthened falsely to eat food he would not otherwise have done. His conscience will be strengthened in an artificial way to engage in a course of action not normally appropriate to him.

What is the end point of this? That brother is “ruined”—the exact opposite of *οικοδομη*. How so? He has been pushed into going against his conscience, which, as we have seen, is not strong in faith. Being not strong in faith, it is still subject to superstitions, and has not seen the freedom of grace and the wonder of the Lordship of Christ. Not having these things in its foundational structure, it cannot cope with the transgression of its own (self-imposed) law not to eat meat. In not being able to cope with this the brother is ruined. In terms of Rom. 14:23, the action of eating does not flow from faith, and therefore, for the weak man, it is sin. Christ has died for this brother (cf. Rom. 14:15), weak though he is (cf. Rom. 5:6!). He cannot therefore be used as a tool for the building up of the liberty of the strong. If he is of such worth to Christ, should not his life be placed before that of the strong believer? The motivation

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<sup>8</sup> A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, (T. & T. Clark, Edin. 1911) p. 171.

<sup>9</sup> See Conzelmann, *Ibid.*, p. 148, n. 32. Although it must be noted that invitations to such feasts were given in the name of the god whose table it was.

for respecting another’s conscience is not some philosophical supposition as to its nature, Stoic or otherwise, but because of the fact and revelation of Christ. “It must be respected not because it places upon man a claim whose authority rests in the transcendent realm, but instead because of God’s revelation of himself in weakness and his election of weak persons. Since God has elected those with a weak conscience, Paul calls for love and self-abnegation on the part of the strong as the appropriate response to divine election.”<sup>10</sup>

8:12 And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak<sup>i</sup> you sin against Christ.

i) ασθενουσαν in ∟ A B D G K P Ψ 33 81 88 104 etc. , *omit* in p<sup>46</sup> Clement

The brother is in view because he is in Christ, and Christ is in him. The church is nothing less than the body of Christ (12:12, 27) and to damage it is to affect Him ( cf. Acts 9:4). The wounding of the conscience is described in the strongest terms. τυπτω is not used anywhere else in the NT in a metaphorical sense.<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere the word is found in places such as Matt. 27:30; Mk. 15:19; Lk. 6:29; 18:13; 23:48; Acts 23:2f. etc. The weak should be built up, not beaten down. The rehabilitation of conscience from weakness to strength will not be achieved with force. That the conscience is described as being “wounded” indicates that it is in some way disabled by the action, not simply that it “wounds” the person who eats.

8:13 Therefore if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble.

The κρεας that is in view here is meat that has been sacrificed to an idol. Here is true freedom, to refrain from eating for the sake of another’s freedom. “When freedom remains true to itself, then it finds no need to demonstrate itself to those outside. It is a totally different matter when abstinence is proclaimed as a law—which is the case in Col. and the Pastorals.”<sup>12</sup> Paul’s statement here is spelled out further in 10:25ff. “If the apostle knows of definite cases in which the eating of food will lead to others being encouraged to violate the dictates of conscience, then certainly he will never eat meat so long as there is a danger of this (10:28, 29). But if he knows of no such danger, he will use his Christian freedom and eat without scruple (10:25-27).”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> R. Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1971) p. 425.

<sup>11</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *op. cit.* p. 173.

<sup>12</sup> Conzelmann, *op. cit.* p. 150 n. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *op. cit.* p. 173. See also Calvin’s lively comments *op. cit.* p. 180f.

### III. I Cor. 10:23-11:1

10:23-24 All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good but that of his neighbour.

What must govern all actions in the body is true *οικοδομη*. Says Conzelmann, “*οικοδομειν* first and foremost is the upbuilding of the community, not the edification of the individual.”<sup>14</sup> According to Phil. 2:1-11, the true way of love is to seek the good of the other members of the body, but this not without reference to oneself. “Look out not merely for your own interests, but *also* for the interests of others”. Paul is not unconscious of himself, but rather he is conscious of himself in the context of the other.

10:25-26 Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience’ sake; for THE EARTH IS THE LORD’S AND ALL IT CONTAINS.

It is well known that much meat sold in the *μακελλον* would have passed through the slaughter houses associated with various idol shrines, though the extent of such practice is difficult to determine with any accuracy. What would be certain is that for one of sensitive conscience there would have been enough doubt raised, irrespective of the actual place of slaughter, to cause them some consternation.

How are we best to understand *δια την συνειδησις*? Jewett argues that the thrice repeated phrase is one used by the Corinthians themselves and which Paul has taken up.<sup>15</sup> If this is so, and it does seem most likely, then it would have been one of the phrases used by the weak party. To them Paul’s advice is that one should be free to buy any meat, without even giving conscience the opportunity to exercise dominion in the matter. One should proceed with freedom.<sup>16</sup> Thus Barrett translates the verse “Eat everything sold in the market, and make no inquiries based on conscientious scruples”.

The reason for the freedom is expressed as a quotation from Ps. 24:1. The thought is similar to that found in I Tim. 4:3-6; 6:17c; Acts 14:17; Rom. 14:14, 20 and harks back the to words of Genesis 1 that all things in the creation are “good”. Jesus own words seal the matter (Mk. 7:14-23). The one buying the goods from the *μακελλον*

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<sup>14</sup> op. cit. p. 176.

<sup>15</sup> op. cit. p. 427. Also see J. C. Hurd, *The Origins of I Corinthians*, (Seabury Press, New York, 1965) pp. 240-270. There, is however, the use of the same phrase in Rom. 13:5, and this not in a polemical situation. The relationship between this phrase and the Corinthian correspondence depends in part on problems of dating, but such issues will be taken up in a later paper.

<sup>16</sup> Barrett, op. cit., p. 240 draws attention to Paul’s complete break with Judaism in this regard, where “conscience demanded of the devout Jew the most searching inquiry before he might eat.” See also the comments of von Soden in Conzelmann, op. cit, p. 177 n. 15.

should not be the arbiter of what is acceptable and what is not, for the Lord has given all things richly to enjoy. Says Calvin “...everything that the sons of God use is clean, since they take it from the hand of God and no other source.”<sup>17</sup>

10:27 If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience’ sake.

Here we have the same formulation as in verse 26. The freedom to go to an unbeliever’s house is emphasized by the second clause, but this freedom should not be compromised by giving place to conscience wrongly. Again there is not need for “conscientious scruples”. As one would buy any meat in the market, so one should eat anything without fear.

10:28-30 But if anyone should say to you, “This is meat sacrificed to idols” do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you and for conscience sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man*’s; for why is my freedom judged by another’s conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?

i) This is by far the better attested reading, the insertion of του γαρ κυριου η γη και το πληρωμα αυτης in H<sup>c</sup> K L Ψ 104 326 etc., being unsupported reduplication.

These verses set out a hypothetical case that is subsumed under 10:27.<sup>18</sup> There is an informative change of Paul’s vocabulary here. Up until this point Paul has been using ειδωλοθυτον for “food sacrificed to idols”, but here he uses ιεροθυτον. This latter term has no pejorative sense about it, as the former term has. The former term was used by Jews and Christians, the latter indicates that the person informing the believer is one who still holds the idols in high regard.<sup>19</sup> The informant must be one who is troubled in his conscience about eating of idol meat. Moffatt describes him as “some puritanic fellow-guest who had been asking nervous questions about where this piece of meat or that was bought”.<sup>20</sup> We have the same formulation δια την συνειδησις, though the object is not one’s own συνειδησις, but the other’s. The very fact that a response is looked for indicates that the informant is a weak conscience person. Says Barrett,

It is not easy to see how a non-Christian’s conscience could enter into the matter, and it is therefore best to suppose that we have to do with a second Christian guest, whose weak conscience, though it permitted him to attend the meal, has led him to make inquiries (cf.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, CALVIN’S NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARIES, Vol. 9, (Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1960) p. 222

<sup>18</sup> Conzelmann, op. cit. p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> See Barrett, op. cit. p. 241. Also see Robertson and Plummer op. cit. p. 222.

<sup>20</sup> J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, THE MOFFATT NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY, (Hodder and Stoughton, Lond., 1938) p. 144.

verses 25, 27) of his host in the kitchen, and who, in using the most courteous word available, now passes on the fruit of his researches to his stronger Christian brother.<sup>21</sup>

What are we to make of 29b-30, however? There are three views that have been proposed.<sup>22</sup> (i) It is an objection raised (rhetorically) by the voice of the person of strong conscience; (ii) it is a warning to the weak not to take advantage of the strong man's renunciation of his freedom; or (iii) it is Paul's explanation of his advice in 10:28—one should set aside his freedom lest it come under judgement or denunciation at the hand of the weak. The problem with (i) is that one would expect such an objection to be introduced by *αλλὰ* or *δε*, but not *γὰρ*, and the presence of the *γὰρ* is likewise the stumbling block to (ii). Thus (iii) must stand. “Paul considers such judgement by an alien conscience to be so abhorrent that it must be avoided, for only under this assumption could 29b provide the motivation for the advice not to eat food which was known to be sacrificial.”<sup>23</sup> Barrett agrees that Paul is simply reinforcing the point he has just made. He thus suggests the meaning as follows (after Bultmann)

Not because one's own conscience requires abstention, but for the sake of the other man's, the weak man's conscience, in order that he may not be caused to act against his conscience. If I were to suppose that I must abstain on account of my own conscience, then I should have submitted myself to the judgement of another, and given up my freedom; in the abstract I remain quite free to eat what I can enjoy with thanksgiving (that is, with a good conscience); but neither do I give up my freedom if I abstain out of regard for the conscience of another.

10:31-11:1 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offence either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Here is true Christian liberty. Paul gives himself as an example of a free conscience, but who seeks the interests of others (cf. Phil. 4:8f/ I Cor. 4:16; Phil. 3:17; I Thess. 1:6; // I Thess. 2:14; Phil. 2:1ff.; Rom. 15:1-3; Eph. 5:1). “The imitation of Christ takes its bearings not on the person of the historical Jesus, not on his way of life, but—in the sense of Phil. 2:6ff.—on his saving work.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> op. cit. p. 242.

<sup>22</sup> After the summary of Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, (E. J. Brill, Leiden 1971) p. 429.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 430.

<sup>24</sup> Conzelmann, op. cit. p. 180.

#### ***IV. Summary and Observations.***

The following points summarize the position which has been set forward in the verses we have examined.

- i) The Corinthian church had written to Paul asking advice on the matter of meat sacrificed to idols (among other things). He did not give a right/wrong answer that was in support of either party in the church, but related his answer in terms of two things: love and conscience.
- ii) That Christ brings liberty, and this to a person’s conscience, is not to be doubted. Paul knew the liberty of which the libertine party boasted, but that liberty was never anything other than for love and of love. That is, even though a person’s conscience should be robust and free, the fact is that not all are, and one must seek the other’s good.
- iii) Paul gives a high place to conscience, even if the operations of conscience are deficient at any one point. To force the person of weak conscience to go against his conscience is to leave him without any means of restitution for the wounds of his conscience.<sup>25</sup> Such a high place is guaranteed, not because of the philosophical premises underlying Paul’s use of the term, but because of the reality of the revelation of God’s redemptive love in Christ, who died for the person of weak conscience.
- iv) In short, the mark of maturity in the matter of liberty is to be free enough to refrain from something for the sake of the other. This means, by implication, that the mark of a mature conscience is other centred, not self centred. That is, the maturity of true liberty in grace, releases one from an introspective view to an “outrospective” view. Even the libertine party, which boasted of its freedom, did so over against the weak party. In other words, the very demonstration of freedom that was so overt, was an introspective one in that the end point was not edification of another, but the justification of one’s own position over and against another. The truly enlivened and justified conscience is corporately aligned.

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<sup>25</sup> Why this is so is not discussed by Paul here. We must look further afield for the answer, particularly to Paul’s understanding of Law and grace. If the conscience of the weak believer is law attuned rather than grace attuned, to go against his law, even if it is a false law, leaves him with a damaged conscience which is not within his frame of reference to heal. We have here a fruitful line of enquiry for other papers.

## V. *The Significance of our Discussion*

There are two important questions that now emerge. What is the provenance of the term *συνειδησις* in I Cor. 8-10, and what meaning(s) should we assign to it, at least as Paul uses it?

There can be no doubt that the term was one used amongst the Corinthians themselves, and it may be cogently argued that Paul took the term into his theological vocabulary from the Corinthian conflict.<sup>26</sup> We have already noted the frequency of the use of *συνειδησις* in these chapters. This fact takes on even more importance when we see that in Rom. 14, where Paul is dealing with a very similar problem, he does not use the term at all! Says Pierce, paraphrasing Paul, “‘This *conscience*’, he says, ‘that you keep throwing in my face—I grant you it has its uses. It’s no good, however, telling me your conscience is clear. Mine is clear too but that is not enough—yet I am not hereby justified (I Cor. 4:4).’”<sup>27</sup> This is not to say that the word was not part of Paul’s vocabulary before hand. Indeed, Pierce’s study sets the matter beyond doubt—not simply as it a popular philosophical category, but every Greek reading Jew would know the term from places such as Wis. 17:10; Job. 27:6; Sir. 42:18 and III Mac. 2:8.<sup>28</sup> But the term in Corinthians seems to be one that Paul is forced to take up in the heat of the conflict, and which he then subjects to his own kerygmatic alchemy. What background the term it may have had in the thinking of the Corinthians is not easy to determine. What is of interest to us is what we can glean from Paul’s understanding, and to see if there is in his advice any implicit change in meaning.

What can we discern as to the meaning of *συνειδησις* from these chapters? In I Cor. 8:7, Paul talks of the conscience being “defiled”, or “polluted”. Gooch<sup>29</sup> argues that the word must be taken in a subjective sense. In other words, the conscience, as lawgiver, is not polluted or tainted, but “If we speak of the ‘polluted conscience’ of the weak, it will be in the sense that they have come to *feel themselves polluted.*” (his italics) and that

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<sup>26</sup> R. Jewett, op. cit. p. 436, “When one considers that Paul never used the word ‘conscience’ in the earlier epistles, and that two thirds of the appearances in the Pauline epistles are found in Letter B where the Corinthians’ letter is being discussed, the conclusion which suggest itself it that Paul has taken over the category from the Corinthians.” Also see C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*. (SCM Press, Lond., 1955) p. 64f. This is contra Moffatt’s assertion, “He introduces the Stoic term conscience into the Christian vocabulary of religion, as the faculty of moral judgement which recognizes the responsibility towards a personal God for one’s actions.” J. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, THE MOFFATT NEW TESTAMENT COMMENTARY, (Hodder and Stoughton, Lond., 1938) p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> C. A. Pierce, op. cit. p. 65

<sup>28</sup> Jewett, op. cit., p. 437.

<sup>29</sup> P. W. Gooch, “‘Conscience’ in I Corinthians 8 and 10” in *New Test. Stud.* vol. 33, 1988 pp. 244-254.

συνειδησις has only the minimal sense of “consciousness of the self”.<sup>30</sup> This, he argues, is also the meaning that should be taken for I Cor. 8:12, for it is not the objective lawgiver that is wounded or damaged, but that the weak believer is wounded by his conscience, which is itself already defective.<sup>31</sup> That it is defective is known by Paul’s description of it as ασθενής. Paul nowhere disagrees with those at Corinth who are strong in conscience, at least as far as their strength of conscience is concerned. As in the issue of Romans 14 he sides with the strong, but urges preference for the weak out of love (see here Rom. 15:1-3)

Of I Cor. 8:10, where Paul says that the weak may be emboldened in his conscience to eat things sacrificed to idols by the example of the others, the matter is less straight forward. Surely given Paul’s freedom of conscience and his implicit teaching that such freedom is not only permissible, but in fact correct, the issue of a person being thus strengthened should be seen as being commendable. Gooch suggests that in the οικοδομηθησεται of 8:10 we see a deliberate echo of οικοδομει in 8:1. In other words the weak person is may be caused to regard himself as being truly edified, when in fact he is not.<sup>32</sup> Thus “Paul indicates the irony of the weak man who will be acting as though he had been built up in Christian liberty, when in fact his conscience is false.”<sup>33</sup> What Gooch means by his conscience being “false” is not really clear. The conclusion he arrives at is to rephrase these verses to suggest the following meanings:<sup>34</sup>

v. 7. “...and since they are weak they come to feel themselves polluted.”

v. 10 “...will not this man, since he is weak, (falsely) regard himself as strengthened to eat idol food?”

v. 12 “In thus sinning against the brothers and wounding their self-estimation because they are weak...”

When we come to chapter 10, Gooch argues that we should maintain the meaning of “moral conscience” for συνειδησις.<sup>35</sup> Later, however, he changes this to the understanding of “bad feelings”.<sup>36</sup> The bad feelings, in this case, are those evoked in the weaker brother. Thus, Gooch suggests, that in his paper he has given a clearer indication of what Paul means by using the term συνειδησις in I Cor. 8 and 10, and that

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 249. This is the position also taken by Richard Horsley in “Consciousness and Freedom among the Corinthians: I Corinthians 8-10” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 1978 pp. 574-89.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid p. 249

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 247

this “has removed from his discussion the shifted sense of moral conscience attributed to his text by C. S. Lewis and a host of readers. In the process of gaining this understanding we have been unable to formulate a single meaning for *συνειδησις* which will make intelligible all of Paul’s uses in both chapters.”<sup>37</sup> In short, he says, Paul’s meaning “runs most smoothly when we read *συνειδησις* in its minimal and negative subjective sense.”<sup>38</sup>

This all begs the question, though, from where to the “bad feelings come? If the weak brother is indeed weak, in what sense is he so? If we reply that he is weak in his understanding of the faith, then how is this weakness manifest? It is obvious that he cannot enjoy the liberty that his brethren do, and that Paul enjoins. Why can he not do this? He cannot because of some faculty which causes bad feelings in him if he were to do so. In other words, to rephrase Paul’s terms so that the effect produced in the psyche of the person is the same as that which produces the affect solves nothing. On the contrary, if he were strong in the faith, then his bad feelings would not trouble him. Why? Because his conscience would have been re-educated to liberty and away from law.

All of this indicates that Paul’s use and understanding of conscience is beyond that which was commonly associated with the word. Maurer concludes,

...Paul takes *συνειδησις* with a comprehensive breadth and variety not found in any of his predecessors. For him it is no longer just the popular bad conscience or the Hellenistic-Jewish *ελεγχος*. It has now become the central self-consciousness of knowing and acting man. With few exceptions it had never been anything like this before in literature. Combining the Greek view of man as a thinking being with the Hebrew tradition which stresses the primacy of the Word, Paul raises the whole problem of act, being, and knowledge in anthropology—a step of momentous significance for the centuries that followed. Yet he did not present any uniform doctrine of *συνειδησις*.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 251f.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid p. 252.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> C. Maurer, “*συννοια, συνειδησις*” in TDNT, Vol. VII (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971) p. 917. See also C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words*, (Cambridge, University Press, 1967) Chapter 8. Lewis sees the New Testament writers’, and especially Paul’s, use of “conscience” as being the effective cause for “the great semantic shift” in the history of the word. “In its new sense *conscience* is the inner lawgiver: a man’s judgement of good and evil. It speaks in the imperative, commanding and forbidding. But, as so often, the new sense does not replace the old. The old lives on and the new is added to it, so that *conscience* now has more than one meaning.” p. 194.

A. P. Stanley saw something of this when he said, “The idea of ‘knowledge’ under various expressions, *οιδα, ειδενα, &c.*, runs throughout this passage (viii. 1, 2, 4, 7, 10, 12), and thus the compound *συνειδησις* might be used as occupying a middle position between our words ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience’, somewhat in the sense in which we speak of ‘conscious guilt or innocence’.” A. P. Stanley, *The Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, (John Murray, Lond., 1858, 2nd. Edn.) p. 139.

All of this opens up good possibilities for future enquiry. Gooch has recognized the problems of definition, as has Maurer and others, but one feels that Gooch’s study put too little meaning to the word. One thing that has not been developed in the literature is the “other person centredness” of conscience that we have noted above. Conzelmann touches on it when he says, “Paul’s concept of conscience must be distinguished from modern subjectivist conceptions. Paul does not ask whether our conscience is free: he presupposes that it *is* free, but for this very reason open towards our neighbour and bound by him.”<sup>40</sup> He also quotes Schlatter “the man who has knowledge must not turn his conviction into a law that is valid for all”.<sup>41</sup> It must be seen how, and if, this understanding is developed elsewhere in the New Testament.

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<sup>40</sup> op. cit. p. 178.

<sup>41</sup> H. Conzelmann, op. cit. p. 149 n. 36