

THE CONSCIENCE ACCORDING TO PAUL

Samuel Benyamin Hakh, D. Th
Professor of New Testament
Jakarta Theological Seminary, Jakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

Each person's conscience serves to control all the actions and decisions that we take. As a controller, the conscience shows which actions and decisions are right and wrong, which should be accepted and which should be rejected. The apostle Paul argues that the conscience of a person can lead to the right path and enable that person to live a comfortable, peaceful and prosperous life. But conscience can be conquered by evil desires. Consequently, conscience can be blunt so it cannot distinguish between right and wrong, or good and evil. Interestingly, in due time conscience will testify before God concerning all of our actions. When the conscience is constantly renewed, with a clear conscience, people are able to accurately assess the actions they wish to do, good or bad, fair or unfair.

Key words: conscience, control, heart, Paul, witness

Introduction

The Apostle Paul, in advising the churches that he had founded, often uses the term "*suneidesis*" or "conscience" in his letters, a term that he adopted from the Greco-Roman world. Paul freely uses the term *suneidesis* in his admonitions to congregations. This term Paul bundles with other terms, thus identifying several types of conscience, including "weak conscience" (1 Cor. 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27-29), "corrupted conscience" (Tit. 1:15), "seared conscience" (1 Tim. 4:2). In addition, Paul also mentions "good conscience" (1 Tim. 1:5, 19); "clear conscience" (3:9; 2 Tim. 1:3).

With the many terms that Paul uses, we see that he acknowledges the many types of consciences that people have. The question arises as to what Paul means by the expression, "weak conscience". What does he mean by terms such as "seared conscience", and "corrupted" conscience? What does Paul consider to be the function of conscience for human life? These questions will be considered below.

THE DEFINITION OF THE CONSCIENCE¹

Before we answer the questions above, we need to first examine the history of the word "conscience" that Paul uses in his letters, in order to begin with a clear picture of the origin and use of the word. The word "conscience" is translated from the Greek term "*suneidesis*", which is formed of two syllables, namely: *sun* which means "together", and *εδεναι* which means "knowing". Thus, the word *suneidesis* means "knowing together".² In Latin, the Greek word *suneidesis* is translated *conscientia*. The word "*conscientia*" is formed by a combination of two syllables, namely, *con* and *scio*, which means knowing together, or knowing together with someone. The Indonesian dictionary translates *conscientia* as "one's inner voice or conscience". While in English the word is used to mean conscience, in that it points to the moral consciousness of a person, and the ability to make decisions and live according to moral principles that are generally accepted and enforced. In a person who has good moral and psychological balance, conscience serves as life's mentor or controller, to enable a person to assess and decide (*judicium conscientiae*) or choose actions in the light of one's commitment.

It needs to be emphasized that the conscience is not necessarily the voice of God. God

¹ Concept taken from a unpublished paper by this author, entitled, "Peranan *Nous* dan *Suneidesis* dalam Pengambilan Keputusan" (The Role of *Nous* and *Suneidesis* in Decision Making), 2012, pp. 6,7.

² Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids-Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984) p. 267

does not whisper to human beings, such that each person must seek the truth for him or herself. Humans must analyze whether their desires match moral norms and rules because God does not give consideration for humans. God has given humans the intellect and conscience to find their own way. Humans take into account many perspectives, and make the fairest decision.³ But here also lies the crucial point of making a decision, because the quality of the justice of the decision is determined by whether or not humans urgently desire to follow God as a result. If the decision is made by a pure conscience based on ethical and legal norms, then it will produce a fair decision. But if a decision is unduly influenced by desires with false motivations, whether from within or outside oneself, it will greatly affect the quality of the justice of the decision that will be seen in the resultant actions. In the latter case, ethical and legal norms will only appear as a formality and the conscience becomes a mere slogan.

After the conscience makes a decision,¹ whether the decision is fair or not, right or wrong, there is an inner urge to execute it. The guide of the implementation is the result of that decision⁴. In other words, conscience is a product of the human mind and heart are assessing the merits of our desires and move us to carry out the wishes that are considered good, and does not carry out the wishes are considered bad. The question arises, if the desire was so strong insistence that ignores conscience assessment and follow her wishes and commit unlawful acts that have been set.

Although the Bible is not widely developed theories of conscience, but the Bible implies that this ability is an integral part of the human personality and that violations of conscience caused major injuries in the innermost of the inner person.⁵ Since due to the concept of conscience taken by the authors of the New Testament from Greek-Roman society so below will be a review of the limited use in that environment.

***Suneidesis* in Greek and Roman Society⁶**

In Greco-Roman society, the word conscience focused on the capacity or power of a person, particularly when looking back to the occurrences in the past, to assess or evaluate whether those occurrences were the good and bad. In conducting this evaluation, the word *suneidesis* acquire its moral character. When someone re-evaluated his or her actions, they were

³ Yan van Paassen, *Suara Hati Kompas Kebenaran* (Jakarta: Penerbit Obor, 2002), pp. 3,4

⁴ Ibid., p. 2

⁵ Alan Richardson & John Borsden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1983) p. 119

⁶ See, Samuel B. Hakh, op.cit., p. 12,13

then affected personally by the assessment of whether past actions were good or bad. Good actions usually brought peace within oneself, while evil acts made the person feel very hurt, anxious and depressed.⁷

a. Greek world

The word conscience was first discovered in a text of Greek correspondence, namely the fragment by Democritus of Abdera in the mid-5th century BCE. In the fragment, the word *suneidesis* be used in connection with the moral, and in particular, in connection with an evil conscience. That word is popularly used to express or present an idea and simple proof of experience on a daily basis that represents true knowledge. From this perspective, all humans have a moral quality that can be applied to assess whether their actions are good or evil.⁸

From this description, it is evident that conscience operates when someone is doing an intellectual assessment or judgment in regards to a particular action, resulting in a conclusion as to whether the action was good or evil, whether the person was satisfied or not, and whether the act was unlawful or not. In answering these questions, the conscience give signals as to whether the conscience agrees with the intellect or not. In making a judgment, the conscience has intellectual and emotional aspects. The conscience can warn about whether an action should be done or not. People who have high moral commitment and the desire to live a comfortable and peaceful life will listen to their conscience and obey the existing moral laws because they fear punishment, both now and later.⁹

Roman Society

In Roman society, the word *conscientia* or conscience was used in the period before Christianity. Specifically in the writings of the Stoics, conscience was seen as an element that provides peace and joy, because the inner voice reminds humans of the good deeds they do. In contrast, evil actions are usually followed by suspicion, gossip and rumors, and accusations and judgments.

⁷ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids- Michigan: Zondervan, Publ., House, 1971) p. 348; see also C. C. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Limited, 59 George Street, 1998) pp. 159,160

⁸ Berard L. Marthaler (editor), "Conscience in the Bible", *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, second edition (Washington: DC: The Catholic University of America, 2003) p. 142

⁹ James Hastings, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. IV (New York: Charles Scribner's sons, 1951) p. 37

Seneca gave noteworthy advice to his friend Lucilius the Younger about the notion of good and evil conscience, and also the conscience that comes from the voice of God in human. He said: "You are doing an excellent and salutary if, as you write to me, you strive preserveringly to attain to that health of mind and outlook ... It is not matter of raising hands to heaven nor of beseeching some temple-keeper to give us access to the sanctuary as if in that way we would be more easily heard: God is near you, he is with you, he is within. Thus do I say, Lucilius: a sacred and august spirit resides within us and take stock of our good and evil actions and is the guardian or venger of our deeds. Just as he is treated by us so does he treat us" (letter 41.1).¹⁰

In other words, Roman society viewed conscience as a controller bestowed by the divine to every individual. Its function is to guide and control every person to live in accordance with nature and to determine their proper moral development.¹¹

c. *Suneidesis* according to the New Testament

In the English New Testament, the word *suneidesis* is translated by the term "conscience". This term characterizes an outlook that is not Jewish, because Jews find their moral standards in the will of God, which is revealed in the law and delivered by the prophets. Thus the moral measure of the actions of Jews is not a human ability, but is based on the will of God revealed through the law and the prophets. Conscience is a Greco-Roman idea, functioning as a controller and a witness especially in the case of popular morality and actions. Therefore, conscience can remind us about an action in the past, and sometimes expresses itself in a deep sense of guilt for a wrong action.¹² Because of its job as a controller and a witness, conscience also serves to remind us of good deeds and bad, wrong and right. But Paul uses it in connection with the testimony that is free to test and assess a person's actions.¹³

¹⁰ Berard L. Marthaler (editor), op. cit., p. 143

¹¹ Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publ., House, 1971) p. 349

¹² John Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (London: SCM Press, Philadelphia: Trinity Press, International, 1989) p. 88.

¹³ F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Revised Edition (Leicester, England, Inter-Varsity Press; Grand Rapids, Michigan William B. Eerdmans Pub., Co., 1985) p. 86

In the Gospels, the term is found only implicitly.¹⁴ However, it does not mean there is no notion resembling conscience in the Synoptic Gospels. The Gospels use a concept from the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition in general expressed by the term "heart" or "spirituality" (Matt. 15:18-20, Mk. 6:52).¹⁵ The term conscience is more widely used in the apostolic letters. It is used twenty times in Paul's letters,¹⁶ five times in Hebrews,¹⁷ three times in 1 Peter¹⁸ and twice in Acts.¹⁹ Paul and the other NT authors use the term conscience found in the Hellenistic culture of their time, both as a concept and as a popular technical term in Stoic writings.

The various kinds of conscience

a. Weak conscience

The ancient Middle East region had numerous temples in which sacrifices were made to the gods. Sacrificed animal flesh was burned until charred. Some was given to the priest, and the remaining was given to the person who offered the sacrifice. If the priest or the person who brought the sacrifice did not consume it entirely, then the sacrifice's meat was brought to the market for sale. In addition, many family members of those who had converted to Christianity were still pagan. When they held banquets together in the temple, the Christians were also invited by their family to attend the banquet. The question that arises is, can Christians eat meat offered to idols or gods?

Answering this question, the Christian position themselves in two groups. The first group has the opinion that meat or food in the banquet at the temple had been sacrificed to idols, and therefore when it was presented, they politely refused to eat it. Similarly, the meat sold in the markets, which had been offered to idols, was not bought. On the other hand, the second group argues against the refusal to eat meat offered to idols, and therefore food served at the meal should be eaten. The excuse for refusing to eat the food is not relevant to the Christian life. Thus Christians can buy meat offered to idols, to be processed and eaten with thanksgiving to God.²⁰

¹⁴ The Gospel of John 8:7, 9, does not mention the role of the conscience directly but implicitly via the change of conscience of the scribes and Pharisees in response to the words of Jesus reflected in paragraph 7, "Therefore make them go one by one left the woman without stoned".

¹⁵ Samuel B. Hakh, op. cit., p. 20

¹⁶ Rm 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Kor 8:7 (2x); 8:10; 8:12; 10:25; 10:27; 10:28; 10:29; 2 Kor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1:19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim. 1:3; Tit.1:15.

¹⁷ Heb. 9:9; 9:14; 10:2; 10:22; 13:18.

¹⁸ 1 Petr. 2:19; 3:16; 3:21.

¹⁹ Acts. 23:1; 24:16., see., Robert Young's, op. cit., p. 198; see also Walter A. Elwell, op. cit., p. 267

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 56,57.

This dispute was brought to the attention of Paul for his advice. This problem existed not only in Corinth but also in Rome. In response, Paul gave his theological reflection. According to Paul, "There is no idol in the world and there is no god other than the one God" (1 Cor. 8: 4). Because there is only one God, then the church members can ignore idols as nothing. Christians can accept the food as it comes from the one God. Christians do not need to worry or have doubts about consuming meat offered to idols. They can partake of the food with a strong conscience and with thanksgiving to God as the Creator and Provider of all things.

Nevertheless, Paul asserts that not everyone knows that there are no idols or that there is no other God but the one God, the Creator of all things. Because Christians come from pagan backgrounds, prior to becoming Christian they experienced idols and multiple gods as a reality. That experience continues to affect them. As for the Jews who converted to Christianity, there are no idols or gods other than the one God. Therefore, for them, the hesitation to eat food sacrificed to idols contradicts their basic faith in one God.

According to Paul, Christians who are hesitant to eat food offered to idols have a "weak conscience".²¹ Thus their conscience, Paul adds, remains bound to the idols because they believe that the idols exist and have an effect on the sacrificed food. When Christians strengthen their inner conscience, they reject any belief in the power of idols over the food and can eat it without hesitation. If they continue to refuse to eat the food, they commit a sin by acting against their conscience.²² Therefore, Paul asks that a strong Christian conscience not become a stumbling block for those whose conscience is weak (1 Cor. 8:9). Paul's point is that if the person who has knowledge or a strong conscience ate dinner in the idol's temple, it could empower people whose consciences are weak and enable them to eat the food offered to the idols, even though their consciences told them that it was wrong. If not led by people with strong consciences, people whose consciences are still weak will perish because of the false belief that idols can defile food offered in sacrifice to them (1 Cor. 8:11). What Paul meant by the phrase "will perish" is that the person whose conscience is weak is continuously accused by his or her conscience that a mistake has been made.

Paul then asserts that such knowledge makes people arrogant whereas love edifies them (1 Cor. 8:1), as it edifies a good relationship with God and fellow human beings. Love as Paul

²¹ The Greek word *ασθενες* in 1 Cor. 8:9 is translated: "weak", "sick".

²² Robert M. Salomon *The Conscience, Rediscovering the Inner Compass* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2010), p. 58

means it here is translated from the word "*agape*", the love of God that is unconditional and does not seek revenge. That was the type of love Paul emphasizes in this text. Paul asserts that people who think they have "knowledge" actually prove they have not yet acquired it. Along with this explanation, Paul criticized the Gnostic Christians in Corinth, a group who claimed to have the right knowledge. Meanwhile, according to Paul, the true knowledge to be acquired is the knowledge of God and the way to attain it is love (1 Cor. 8:3). If a person loves God, God imparts the right knowledge.²³

For the meat sold in the markets, according to Paul, there is no need to ask whether the meat sacrificed to idols or not. If they realize the meat has been offered to idols, the person eating the meat will suffer because he or she will be blamed by the conscience. The exception would be if someone explains that the meat has been offered to idols and should not be eaten because of the objections of conscience (1 Cor. 10:25-29).²⁴ For if someone already knows that the meat has been sacrificed to idols, then that person will suffer from being accused by his or her conscience.

It is clear that according to Paul, love (*agape*) is more important than knowledge. Love is not only meant to build fellowship with God, but also fellowship with others. Christians who are not worried about eating food sacrificed to idols must have a sensitivity to their freedom and actions that lead to other fellow Christians eat food not approved by their conscience. Their actions will be a stumbling block to other Christians. Because Christians take part and eat the food offered to idols in the pagan temple, they will encourage the weak neighbor to eat foods that according to his or her conscience are forbidden. With such actions, the conscience causes the weaker person to suffer feeling blamed of a sin.

Therefore, according to Paul, Christians who are mature and have a strong conscience needs to "sacrifice" their freedom for the sake of those with a weak conscience. In other words, there needs tolerance by Christians toward their weaker neighbors.²⁵ Such tolerance is always being done when the love (*agape*) is there.

The same issue is discussed by Paul in his letter to the Romans. In this letter, Paul insists that no food is unclean. All foods are clean (cf. Rom. 14:14, 20). So, Christians are free to eat any food, even meat offered to idols. But their actions should not be a stumbling block to others

²³ C.K. Barret, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, second edition (London: A&C Black, 1971) pp. 189,190

²⁴ William Lillie, *Studies in New Testament Ethics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963) p. 49

²⁵ Robert M. Solomon, op. cit., pp. 59,60

(Rom. 14:13). There are several reasons why Paul forbids Christians to eat meat offered to idols if they have been told where the meat is from. First, if someone thinks food is unclean, then for that person, it is a sin to eat it (Rom. 14:14). In other words, a person will be accused by his or her conscience whenever they ignore its reprimands. Second, if a person eats food offered to idols and offends someone else who considers that a sin, then that person has violated the basic principle of love for their neighbor. Third, the issue of what food to eat is not as important as the work of God in one's heart.²⁶ Therefore Paul exhorted: "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God..." (Rom. 14:20). "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). According to Paul, this attitude is more important than the freedom to eat food offered to idols. He exhorts his readers, "Well you do not eat meat or drink wine, or something that becomes a stumbling block to your brother" (Rom. 14:21). That is, the freedom of a strong Christian conscience will not lead someone else astray if he or she hesitates to eat food offered to idols. If the person eats it, then that person has sinned because of doing an act that violates the conscience.

In that connection, Paul warned about dangers of freedom itself. It can confuse Christians as to the meaning of their freedom, to the point that they assume it is acceptable if they take part in the worship of idols. Thus they can become trapped in syncretism. Paul states that freedom has its limitations, in that it cannot be used to cause anything negative for another person. Paul writes, "Everything is permissible, but not everything is useful" (1 Cor. 10: 23.24).

B. Broken Conscience

The conscience is not pre-determined and therefore can be affected by good influences but also by negative influences. The latter influences are mentioned by the author of the letter to Timothy, who says, "... at the later times, some will apostate and follow deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, by trickery liars whose consciences are seared" (1 Tim. 4:1-2). The brand of "liars" or "hypocrites" is given to people who have already lapsed. When confronted they say nice words but from behind they are full of trickery. Their faces resembles sheep but they are actually wolves. Such people have a "seared conscience". The conscience as understood here represents a guide to judge and ethically appraise whether something is good or evil, right or wrong. But in these cases, the conscience has been branded with a different stamp. The Greek

²⁶ Ibid, h. 61

word used for "branding" is *καυτηριαζω* (1 Tim 4:2) and means "burned with a hot iron". The point is that the conscience has been marked by a burning hot iron. To brand something is usually used as a sign of legal ownership. In this context it is used to indicate that the branded conscience serves the desires of demons.²⁷

If so, then, the liar's conscience has been labeled as belonging to the devil or demons. The liar's conscience has been damaged because it has been stamped with "a burning hot iron". Their conscience has died²⁸ or, as Solomon said, their conscience has been dulled.²⁹ Therefore, conscience no longer functions to differentiate between what is wrong and what is right. The circumstances of that blunted conscience is alluded to by the author of Ephesians that "their feelings have dulled so they surrendered to the passions and doing all sorts of uncleanness with greediness" (Eph. 4:19). The Greek term used for "blunt" is *πηλγηκτες* which can mean dull or dead. In other words, people whose consciences are dead no longer have sensitive perceptions to judge what is right and what is wrong, or which action is good or bad, which works to bring to life and which leads to death. Because people whose consciences are dead have been invaded by evil demons, whatever happens, they have no more remorse.

c. Unclean Conscience

In the letter to Titus, the author refers to "a blunt conscience" as "an unclean conscience". People who have such a conscience are accustomed to say that they know and worship God or worship Him but their actions prove that actually they reject God. They are vile, ungodly and unable to do anything good (Tit. 1:15, 16). The problem that arises when people whose consciences have been defiled and blunted influence others to follow in their footsteps and to practice lies and hypocrisy as though they were ordinary things.

Titus alludes to a person who has an unclean conscience as the "disobedient" or "rebellious" one living with a corrupted conscience. They talk in vain and think misleading thoughts. People with an unclean conscience are not only non-Christians. Christians can also have a such conscience, if they do not work to renew it. Christianity for them is just a name, but their conscience has been invaded by demons. This is a false Christianity. From the outside it

²⁷ J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistle, I Timothy, II Timothy, Titus* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1963) p. 94

²⁸ Daniel C. Arichea, Howard A. Hatton; *Surat-surat Paulus kepada Timotius dan kepada Titus* (Jakarta: Lembaga Alkitab Indonesia; Yayasan Karunia Bakti Budaya Indonesia, 1995) p. 84

²⁹ Robert C. Solomon, op. cit., pp. 66, 67.

looks Christian, but their consciences are used to serve the will of demons.

d. Pure Conscience

The New Testament authors are not simply talking about evil conscience, weak conscience and corrupt conscience, but also about pure conscience. Some designations used to refer to a pure conscience are: "good conscience (*suneidesewς aVgaqhVς*, 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 2 Tim. 1:3; Acts. 23:1; Acts, 24:16; 1 Pet. 3:16, 21; and "a clear conscience" (1 Tim. 3:9; Ibr. 13:18). This good conscience is claimed by Paul, who can look back and claim that he did nothing that caused him to injure his conscience. In other words, people who are able to face temptation yet live comfortably according to the precepts of their conscience can be said to have a good conscience.³⁰

People with such a conscience are not necessarily innocent. Conscience does not provide the final standard of judgment on human action. The final standard is given only through the judgment of God.³¹ Once again, the conscience is a impartial field that can be controlled by a good or an evil spirit. A good conscience requires maintenance by people of faith. Therefore, the apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to fight to "maintain a clear conscience" (1 Tim. 1:18-19) as he himself was (Acts 23:1). People who have a pure conscience will always be reminded of the good and the evil. If people see an opportunity to steal or harm then a good conscience will tell them that it is wrong because it violates defined laws and rules. Especially if people try to justify engagement in corruption or fraud, then their consciences will admonish them that the act is a sin. If someone knows by his or her conscience that the actions were evil but did them anyway, then he or she will be judged by their own conscience.

For this reason, Paul admonished Timothy to fight for a "good conscience" that in turn will drive one to do good deeds and warn against evil acts. People who maintain a good conscience have a wide and profound understanding about the meaning of life. A pure conscience allows someone to live in peace, comfort and serenity. On the other hand, people who are always ignoring the warnings of their consciences and committed theft, corruption, extortion or criminal actions, will live in anxiety and worry, although wallowing in wealth and luxury. In

³⁰ Ibid, p. 50.

³¹ William Lillie, op. cit., p. 53

this context, these words of wisdom are true: "Better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than a house full of sacrifice with strife" (cf. Proverbs 17:1).

Realizing the importance of a peaceful life, a calm heart, and a soul that seeks to minister in the church, Paul encouraged deacons not to speak with a forked tongue, not be a fan of wine and not be greedy, but keep the faith in a pure conscience (1 Tim 3 : 8.9). With this advice, Paul shows that to become a leader, one should not use a forked tongue or be greedy. On the contrary, they should have high integrity and a clear conscience that always guides them in carrying out their duties and responsibilities. Good conscience is like a soft pillow. People who follow its lead will sleep deeply,³² but people who live with an unclean conscience will feel like they are sleeping on thorns, always anxious, worried and restless.

For believers, a good conscience is assisted when controlled by the Holy Spirit to repair damaged consciences and constantly renew old ones, so they remain pure. In this way, a good conscience functions effectively and guides the faithful according to the Word of God. A conscience possessed by a believer who is not perfect and could be wrong in giving guidance needs to be guided by the Word of God as the main objective in the Christian life.³³

Starting from the description above, there are several points that need to be carefully noted. First, for Paul, conscience means an awareness of the true moral core of human life that is based on faith as a personal relationship with God, and that colors the entire view of reality, God, humanity, nature and all that happens in it (Rom. 14:1, 23; 13:5; cf. 1 Petr. 2:19). In this sense conscience is more than just as an assessment of one's actions. The conscience implies the entire attitude of the deeply religious person. All concepts about the world and human life are seen through the eyes of faith, and finally, through the eyes of God and through the perfect knowledge of God. Then it is true if we say that a good conscience is no more than what is in believers, ruling and conditioning their reactions to reality and events.

Second, in the attempt to acquire a new attitude in daily activities when becoming a believer, conscience becomes a spontaneous reaction within those who experience a new creation by grace and faith. Day-to-day events require a level of mature consideration to provide a corrective to all the aspects and alterations of human action. In other words, the conscience

³² Robert M. Solomon, *op. cit.* p. 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 54,55

need practical guidance from the wisdom of God in a believer's life. Furthermore, a good conscience requires wisdom and honesty from everyone.

Third, in the New Testament, especially in Paul's teaching, conscience is equated with faith, in terms of eating food offered to idols (Rom. 14:1,23). In other words, all that happens to us should be assessed in the light of faith and with reference to God and His laws. For God speaks to humans and became human in Christ with the intention of teaching people how to organize life in fellowship with God (cf. Rom. 13:5, 1 Cor. 14:4) for the liberation and salvation of humanity.³⁴

In the Book of Acts, Paul also speaks of the conscience (Acts. 23:1 and 24:16). The conscience that Paul refers to is the good or sacred conscience. A clear conscience is the result of a person's behavior in line with God's laws.³⁵ The idea of a pure conscience is also found in the Pastoral letters (1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9, 2 Tim. 1:3). In those letters, the author advises Timothy to have faith and a pure conscience, something which has been rejected by the people (1 Tim. 1:19; band. 1 Petr. 3:16), and to serve with a clear conscience (2 Tim. 1:3). The pure conscience is a hallmark of the life of believers. Along with faith and a pure heart, the conscience is the source of love in action. In other words, the conscience is valued the place where we discover the secret of faith (1 Tim. 3:9).³⁶

In Rm. 2:15, Paul puts "heart" (*kardia*) and "conscience" (συνειδησις) side by side. Heart and conscience allow the Gentiles to share the same way of life as Jews according to the law. The conscience serves to raise awareness of laws that are written upon their hearts. That awareness is indicated by the verb "to bear witness". The conscience performs as an appraiser who can give judgment or opinions on the cases that it faces.

Understanding of conscience as an assessor is clearly expressed in the passage that speaks about the question of the Corinthians eating food sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:7 ff., 10:25, etc.). Paul discusses two points in this connection. On the one hand, Paul proclaims the freedom of the Christian to adhere to an orderly way of life as guided by an inner voice, which in turn is guided through the word of God. At the same time, he invited people to respect the conscience of

³⁴ Berard L. Marthaler, op.cit, p. 144

³⁵ Ralph P. Martin & Peter H. Davids, *Dictionary of the Latter New Testament and Its Developments* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997) p. 241

³⁶ Colin Brown, op. cit., p. 351.

others.³⁷

Conscience Functions as Controller and Witnesses

In Rom. 2:12, Paul distinguishes between Jews and Gentiles. The difference was not just race but also their religion and beliefs. God, through Moses, gave the law to the Israelites, so that in time they were to be judged according to the law. The law was not presented to the Gentiles in the same way as it was to the Jews as a nation. However, that does not mean that Gentiles are freed from the punishment of God. They also rebel against God. Paul says, "For all who have sinned without law shall also perish without law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law" (Rom. 2:12).³⁸ The original text refers to "people who live without the law" (οἱ ἄνομοι) as Gentiles while "those who live under the law" (οἱ νόμοι) are Jews. Jews have the law as a controller for any action by them. For the law gives them a warning as to whether an action should or should not be done. For example, the function of the law can be seen in the Decalogue with all the prohibitions that begin, "Do not ..." (Ex. 20:3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 14, 15, 17). Advice is also given, as in, "Remember to keep it holy ..." (Ex. 20:8) and "Honor ..." (Ex. 20:12). In other words, the function of the law here is as a controller in each act of the Jews. Thus, it seems clear that the people of Israel, according to Paul, will be judged according to what they know from the law because they have been given it (Rom. 4:14, 16).

The question that arises is, how does the conscience work for the Gentiles (οἱ ἄνομοι)? Do they also have a controller over their actions? Because they do not have the law, they do not know the content of the law. Answering this question, Paul says, "If other nations who do not have the law, by nature they are doing what required by the law, are a law to themselves. In that, they show that the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing and defending one another" (Rom. 2:14,15). "Gentiles" (οἱ ἄλλοι) is meant here as anyone who is not a member of the Jewish nation. Those other nations do not have the law (*nomos*) as a controller for their actions. Twice Paul insists that other nations do not have the law (Rom band. 2:14).

But Paul says that the content of the law is written in their hearts. "Heart" refers to the inner person (Rom. 8:27, 1 Cor. 4:5; 14:25, 2 Cor. 3:2-3; 5:12), which is the center of the mind,

³⁷ Colin Brown, *ibid.* p. 350.

³⁸ C. K. Barret, *A Commentary on Epistle to the Romans* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957) p. 49.

understanding, emotion, will and volition (cf. Rom. 2:29; 6:17; 10:1, 9-10; 1 Cor. 7:37, 2 Cor. 9:7). Upon this heart, God wrote the divine laws (cf. Jer. 31:33; Isa. 51:7).³⁹ Law (*nomos*) as meant here is not the law God gave the Israelites through Moses, but the demands of the will of God as contained in the law. These demands are fulfilled by the with support of their own conscience. Thus, it is true that the Gentiles did not a law written in stone as Israel does, but they have the "natural" (φύσις or φύσεως) law of God. This law is written in their consciences. Its functions is to control their actions.

Another function of conscience that Paul preaches is, "... and their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them" (Rom. 2:14-15). Their conscience acts as a controller as well as a witness. The Greek word used here means "testify". The word is derived from συμμαρτυρεω, which means assert, testify, or provide testimony.⁴⁰ Thus, the function of conscience is not only to control but also to testify. In this case I would like to describe the function of the conscience as a black box in an aircraft. The black box is part of the equipment normally installed in aircraft. Its function is to record all conversations and events that occur on the aircraft during flight. At the end of the flight or in the event of an accident, people open the black box in order to obtain information about history of the aircraft's flights, or the cause of any accident that might have occurred shortly before the end of the flight. In other words, the black box testifies regarding the experiences of the aircraft or the cause of the accident, to help the investigators' evaluation.

The function of conscience is similar to the aircraft's black box. Every day it records the decisions, actions and deeds of our earthly life, including any and all warnings given to us. When the end times occur, people will be judged according to the testimony of their conscience (cf. Rom. 2:14-16). In other words, the conscience serves as a witness before God as to the history of our actions and decisions.

As their controller, the conscience allows Gentiles to fulfill the demands of God's law (cf. Rom. 2:26), while the conscience as their witness to testifies to what they actually do (cf. Rom. 9:1, 2 Cor. 1:12). This is because the conscience serves as an full-time observer (recorder, like the black box) of each person, able to give an assessment of the attitudes and actions of that

³⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38 (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988) p. 100

⁴⁰ William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (trans.) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p 778

person freely and objectively. The conscience is also able to act as a witness to defend or oppose the person. Thus, the role of conscience here is to testify about the attitudes and actions of a person and expose whether they were right or wrong, good or evil. In line with this view of conscience, Paul states, "and their conflicting thoughts accuse or defend". Because when faced with God's law, the conscience can justify or blame the actions performed by each person.⁴¹ It is clear that conscience (συνείδησις) has a dual function that controls and provides testimony regarding every human action, good or evil.

Conclusion

Having described Paul's views on conscience, below some conclusions will be drawn.

First, Paul adopted the term "conscience" from the Greco-Roman world to explain to the Jews in Rome that even though the Gentiles do not have the same prescribed laws as the Jews do to regulate their religious life, they still have a conscience in which God writes the divine will. Therefore on the day of the Lord, Gentiles will also be required to take responsibility for their actions according to the testimony of their conscience.

Second, Paul saw that among Christians there are those who have a strong conscience, but others have a weak conscience. Paul advised the people who have a strong conscience not to be a stumbling block for people who have a weak conscience, particularly in terms of eating and drinking food that had been offered to idols in pagan banquets. Because the opportunity to enter heaven it is not determined by food and drink.

Third, Paul's concept of conscience as guide and witness can be described as the black box of a human being's life experience. Conscience is constantly observing and recording every decision and action that a person makes. Therefore in Paul's view, at the end of life conscience can give witness to everything about each person's life journey, like the black box in an aircraft.

⁴¹ Th. van den End, Tafsiran Alkitab, Surat Roma (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1997) p. 106

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