



Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ

Andrew David Naselli, J.D. Crowley

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Christian, meet your conscience.

What do you do when you disagree with other Christians? How do you determine which convictions are negotiable and which are not? How do you get along with people who have different personal standards?

All of these questions have to do with the conscience. Yet there is hardly a more neglected topic among Christians. In this much-needed book, a New Testament scholar and a cross-cultural missionary explore all thirty passages in the New Testament that deal with the conscience, showing how your conscience impacts virtually every aspect of life, ministry, and missions. As you come to see your conscience as a gift from God and learn how to calibrate it under the lordship of Jesus Christ, you will not only experience the freedom of a clear conscience but also discover how to lovingly interact with those who hold different convictions.

Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ Details

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From Reader Review Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ for online ebook

Luke Miller says

If books could be taken like medicine, I would prescribe this book to every believer I know. Of course, books do not magically cure us. But I wish they could. Most of the conflicts and disagreements in our church would fizzle out very quickly if everyone just understood the truth in this short book.

This book is written to help Christians work through what we call disputable matters or matters of conscience (the theological triage in chapter 5 should help you identify what should be filed in this folder). In these areas, we do not have clear answers from the Bible about what every Christian should do or believe. Unfortunately, we all have the tendency to conflate what we think and feel with what God actually said, so we are left with this challenging task - applying the Scriptures as the final authority for our lives AND obeying Christ's command to pursue unity with believers who differ with us on how it applies.

The easy route, of course, is simply to hop from church to church until you finally conclude that you have been led to start a home church with your family. But even then, unity is not automatic. Just wait until the kids turn 18. So that's one route. The other route is laid out for you in this book.

This book carefully and thoroughly unpacks all of the texts that deal with a Christian's conscience. Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 are especially highlighted in this book, which was refreshing, because those passages are frequently hijacked by legalists who twist the passage to mean the exact opposite of what it says.

To illustrate the types of disagreements that arise between believers, the authors referenced many examples - modesty, entertainment, music, etc. But the scope of the book did not allow for a thorough defense of the positions they were taking on those issues. So if you miss what they unpack in the early chapters of the book, you're probably going to be offended by something they say in the later chapters. As evidenced by some of the reviews below, preferences and opinions die very slow deaths. Don't worry, though. If you don't like the book, you can just hop to another one. Good news. Switching books is even easier than switching churches.

Heidi says

Fantastic food for thought and careful reflection throughout this book. As a cross-cultural worker, chapter 6 about relating to people from other cultures when our consciences disagree was especially convicting to me and worthy of further study.

“Christian liberty is not about you and your freedom to do what you want to do. It’s all about the freedom to discipline yourself to be flexible for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of weaker believers.” p. 132

Matthew Sims says

This book sheds much-needed light on an aspect of our humanity about which, to our detriment, we think so rarely of: our conscience. Quite unlike anything else I've ever read. Thoroughly biblical and practical. Easy

and delightful to read. Informs well our horizontal relationships, and ties our conscience to Scripture. Exposes our libertine and legalist idolatries. Add this to your reading list.

Ben says

Perfect length. Solid content with useful examples as well as insightful diagrams. The chapter on cross-cultural/missionary focus was a highlight and should be required reading for anyone serving overseas or headed on a missions trip.

Scquest says

Easy to read.
Convicting.
Helpful for cross cultural ministers or expats.
Useful.
Highly recommend this book.

Tori Samar says

There are enough points in this book I agree with, that I'm considering my 2 stars to be more like 2.5. But the book's overall approach didn't sit well with me.

As always, when I give a book a low rating, I like to begin with the good:

-I'm pleased that the authors devoted an entire chapter to defining *conscience*. They understand the need in good writing to define key terms: "People often disagree on a given topic because they are talking past each other at the basic level of definition. They are defining key terms differently. That's why it's so important to define terms when you're studying and discussing a subject." I agree wholeheartedly. And because they took time to define their key term, *conscience*, I as the reader was able to understand and evaluate their message.

-I was encouraged by the hope offered in chapter 3 about what to do when your conscience condemns you. For the unbeliever who carries immeasurable sin and guilt in his life, the gospel offers the hope that for those who place faith in Christ, "God forgives and covers all their sin, and he *never counts that sin against them for all eternity* because he counted that sin against Christ instead." And for the Christian overwhelmed by guilt every time he falls back into sin, he can count on the faithfulness and justice of God seen in 1 John 1. Because Jesus Christ has already propitiated God for us on the cross, God will be faithful and just in forgiving us when we confess to Him. He will not make us pay for sin that Christ already paid for!

-I appreciate that this book made me examine how society and culture add rules to our consciences. It's quite true that many of us hold personal standards that are rooted in where we live rather than what the Bible says. I have no doubt that I have some standards living in my conscience that are more American than Christian. And I agree that this awareness is important for effective missions and evangelism. I don't ever want to be guilty of promoting 'the gospel + the American way.'

-I appreciate the reminder that spiritual liberty is not something to flaunt in the face of weaker believers. In imitation of our Savior, who took on the form of a servant, we are called to restrain our liberty out of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ.

But now onto my concerns with this book, the primary one relating to this set of statements from the authors: “[W]e believe that you should generally always follow your conscience. . . . God didn’t give you a conscience so that you would disregard it or distrust it. . . . As a general rule, you should assume that your conscience is reliable, even if it isn’t perfect.” Sorry, but I’m wary of this assumption that conscience is usually reliable. When we were born, our consciences didn’t somehow escape the reaches of sin. As sinners, our capacity for judging right and wrong is twisted. Just look at what’s going on in the world today, and you’ll see how many people sincerely believe good things to be evil and evil things to be good. Even for the Christian who is being sanctified, we’re still battling those sin effects. Yes, I understand the need to refrain from doing certain things so that you don’t sin against your conscience. I understand that, even for unbelievers, the conscience can send warning signals when sin has been committed. But what if you mistakenly do something because you think it’s right (i.e., you have a clear conscience on the matter), but it’s actually displeasing to God? Then you’ve also sinned. So no, even as a Christian, I’m not yet ready to *assume* my conscience is reliable.

But here’s what I am confident in: God’s Word. Now, at this point, I must mention that the authors said more than once that we shouldn’t obey our conscience when it contradicts God’s will (and His will is found in His Word). Rather, we should calibrate it to match His will. But even keeping that good principle in mind, I don’t think this book emphasizes the primacy of God’s Word over and above conscience enough. Twice, the authors describe the conscience as our compass. I disagree. God’s Word is our compass. Psalm 119 says that the Word is a lamp to our feet and light to our path. Not the conscience. There’s an old hymn that expresses this idea memorably: “Thy Word is like a starry host—a thousand rays of light / Are seen to guide the traveler, and make his pathway bright. / Thy Word is like an armory where soldiers may repair / And find, for life’s long battle-day, all needful weapons there.” Maybe this seems like I’m just parsing words. But there’s a subtle, yet important, distinction here in my opinion. I don’t want to have the mindset of obeying a conscience that’s only *usually* reliable. I don’t want to live by the precept “You should generally always follow your conscience.” I want to have the mindset of obeying the Word that’s *always* reliable. I want to live by the precept “You should always, always follow God’s Word.” Therefore, if my conscience pricks and prods me about anything, I’m not going to assume it’s right and follow. I’m going to turn to the Word and check whether my conscience is pushing me in a biblical direction. I want my moral compass to be external to me, given infallibly by God. Not internal to me, still subject to lingering sin.

I also think the authors neglect to demonstrate how the Bible can really help us work through disputable matters (also called matters of indifference or conscience; these are different from matters that are central to the Christian faith—like the deity of Christ or His resurrection—or matters that establish boundaries between Christians—like denominations). Examples included in the book were getting tattoos, listening to contemporary music styles, celebrating Halloween, eating out on Sundays, etc. I think the Bible has more to say about disputable matters than we give it credit for. Where an explicit command for a disputable matter does not exist, other commands and principles do (love God with all you are, love your neighbor as yourself, do all to the glory of God, “all things are lawful” but not all things are helpful or build up, etc.). These biblical truths can and should greatly influence our thinking in disputable matters. God hasn’t left us to wander around in the dark and hope we’re doing His will. He’s given us His all-sufficient Word (and the Holy Spirit to guide us into truth)!

My final major criticism is with the position the authors (who approach this topic from an evangelical perspective) take as “strong conscience” believers. First of all, let me include their description of strong-conscience vs. weak-conscience believers (this will become very important in a moment): “the position that the ‘strong’ hold is theologically informed, and the position that the ‘weak’ hold is theologically uninformed but not heretical.” In the chapter on calibrating the conscience, the authors mention a few areas in which believers could subtract rules from their conscience, areas such as getting tattoos and listening to certain

music styles (I'm just going to assume that anyone reading this review knows what kind of music styles Christians generally debate about). In other words, the authors believe that Christians have the freedom to get tattoos and listen to the music style of their choice (though Christians may not exercise these freedoms out of love for other believers and for the sake of spreading the gospel more effectively). Now, I mean this with all due respect, but what makes the authors so sure that they hold the "theologically informed" positions in these 'disputable matters'? Regarding music at least, I know (and know of) many believers who have diligently studied the Scriptures and considered issues of aesthetics, holiness, worldliness, associations, worship, etc. And after all that study, they have still chosen to take the more conservative/fundamentalist/traditional position. So is it really fair of the authors to imply that these people are actually just weak-conscience, "theologically uninformed" believers? Who's actually right? I think the authors are more convinced than they should be that they've figured things out.

I am thankful for the way this book made me think. I just wish I could support more of its approach!

Rick Dobrowolski says

Intriguing

This book was very thought-provoking and engaging of Scripture. I appreciated some of the challenges to my conscience. It's a short and quick book, but one that must be interacted with more in the future. I especially appreciated the categories of areas of the conscience that were presented towards the end of the book.

Josh Roland says

This is one of those books that makes me wish there were either 6 stars or that I had been more restrictive in giving out 5 stars. I cannot over emphasize the value of this little book. It was quite helpful! The conscience and Christian freedom is so often misunderstood from both conservative and "liberal" angles. This will be a book I highly recommend and will read several times. Thank you for your valuable insight and practical advice.

Megan says

This book made me think and rethink more than possibly any other book I've read. It really challenged some of the things I've been brought up with and made me think differently about the conscience, what it is, and how it works. My viewpoint has definitely shifted after reading this book.

Barbara says

Conscience: What It Is, How To Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ by Andrew David Naselli and J. D.

Crowley is a fairly short book at 149 pages (not including indexes), but it's packed full.

The authors explore what the Bible teaches about conscience and draw several Scriptural principles that we should apply to matters of conscience.

Since Christians are (or should be) continually reading God's Word and growing spiritually, our consciences will change over the years as we realize some scruples are not Biblically based and as we become convicted of some issues that we had not previously realized were sin. We continually calibrate our consciences to align with God's Word.

But since we're all in different stages of growth and come from different cultures and have been taught different things about right and wrong, all our consciences are not going to be on the same page at the same time. How then do we interact with each other? A good chunk of the book is devoted to this.

Then the authors go beyond our local churches to discuss cross-cultural issues, pointing out especially that when we discuss sin, we need to major on what the Bible clearly says is sin, not sin in our cultural contexts, and we need to be careful that we're not reproducing churches or Christians that mirror the culture that we came from, but rather we need to help them reflect Christ in their own culture.

I appreciated not only this study but also the practicality, balance, and accessibility (easy to understand without a lot of theological-ese) of the book. Highly recommended. My full review is here: <https://barbarah.wordpress.com/2018/0...>

Mike Jorgensen says

This week's book review is of a 2016 release from Crossway entitled, "Conscience: What It Is, How to Train It, and Loving Those Who Differ" by Andrew David Naselli, J. D. Crowley, Foreword by D. A. Carson.

The book begins, as one might expect, with an introductory chapter working towards a definition of "Conscience." After two chapters of discussion, they conclude that "The conscience is your consciousness (or awareness) of what you believe is right and wrong" (42). I found myself marveling at a statement that seemed to lack any particular meaning. However, as the book progressed I saw quite clearly why this discussion was important.

It is hinted throughout the book that our culture attempts to sear or ignore the conscience and that many Christians have learned to do so from the world around us. Naselli and Crowley urge us not to pursue this path and instead, to discipline our conscience and develop it according to biblical truth. While they write in a way that is antithetical to our culture, it should be noted

The most compelling question answered by this book is, "How you should relate to fellow Christians." The question is trickier than it first seems. When dealing with conscience, the authors admit that there are many issues where two Christ-following, God-honoring, Spirit-centered, Bible-believing Christians can disagree. For example, whether or not watching violent sports is morally permissible, the extent to which Christians can enjoy secular music, movies, and arts, or issues like public vs. private schooling. For most, all of these issues are before us on a daily basis. In light of an election year, this section of the book is most important. Operating primarily from Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10, they expound on Christian liberty. Christian

liberty, they assert, is, "the freedom to discipline yourself to be flexible for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of weaker believers" (132).

This book draws regularly from John MacArthur's work on the same topic. That being said, it works much more charitably than that which is frequently associated with MacArthur. The authors will frequently illustrate their points with personal examples of convictions derived from their respective consciences. Yet, when this is done the reader feels no pressure or coercion to adopt a particular view just because it belongs to one of the authors.

In the end, I give this book 3 out of 5 stars. It is graciously short, easy-to-read, and a helpful reflection. It might serve as good material for a small group or indeed, a helpful resource for small group leaders to learn how to resolve conflicts of conscience within a group discussion. One may finish this book with just as many questions as they had going in, but they will be better questions from having spent time reading this.

Allison says

I have been searching for a book about our conscience for a while now, and this book just dropped into my lap a few weeks ago. I am so thankful it did. There have been some personal issues on my heart that I have been trying to figure out if they are sins or just a matter of personal preference. While this book is clear that they are not going to answer everyone's personal questions, I learned so much about my conscience. It is something we need to re-calibrate constantly to add more of God's rules and standards and take away things that are not His laws and standards.

Overall, this book was super informative, super helpful, and I highly recommend it to all believers.

Luke Burgess says

I wanted to like this book, and I appreciated portions of this book; however, in the end, I determined that I disagree with the conclusion that it reaches. I contacted Dr. Naselli regarding my concern and appreciate the fact that he took time to respond to my note. However, neither his response nor my continued consideration has removed my concern.

The basic proposal of this book is that there are "matters of conscience" or "disputable matters" in which every believer should "calibrate their conscience", within the bounds of truth, to the culture, so that they might better reach that culture with the gospel. The book recommends that every believer perform "theological triage" to distinguish what is in fact a "matter of conscience." This triage should resolve each issue into one of three categories: 1. Those Essential to Christianity (I might describe this as the Gospel), 2. Those Reasonable Boundaries (denomination distinctive, polity, etc.), and 3. Disputable matters (one example being how Christians view the "Sabbath").

My concern with what is proposed is threefold.

First, I would contend that the Bible has truth to influence our practice in these "disputable areas." While people may disagree on the implications of that truth, and while it may not be perfectly clear, it is still not to be ignored. I believe that the authors would agree with this, but my concern is that someone reading this book would conclude that if it's a matter of conscience, where there is not explicit clarity, then I am free to "calibrate my conscience" to the culture around me. For instance, the observing of one day out of seven

(commonly referred to as the ‘Sabbath issue’), is foreign to most contemporary cultures. Sunday is just like Saturday for most people. However, the Bible roots this one-in-seven observance in creation, and John refers to the first day of the week as “the Lord’s Day” in the book of Revelation. While we don’t know what it is exactly, it is something, certainly more than our culture is observing. I’d argue that a “day” is also more than one-hour from 11-12 on Sunday, but I digress. So, while this is a ‘disputable area’, it is not something that is to be ignored simply because that is what our culture does.

Second, the Bible warns us that all that is in the world (1 John 2:16) is corrupt. Our hearts are deceitful as well. Using the culture to calibrate the conscience just does not seem to reconcile to that truth. I agree that Peter was instructed by God to change his dietary practices so that he could reach Cornelius and his family (Acts 11). However, Peter had explicit instruction that the ceremonial law was not binding. He was not responding to the culture; he was responding to the revelation of truth. The Scriptures are the basis for our faith and practice, and they are sufficient, right? While there are some amoral things in our culture, there are far fewer than contemporary evangelicalism seems to be promoting. Music style was another issue raised, yet nobody really believes music to be amoral. Difficult to define, certainly. Yet it should be influenced by that which is good, and righteous, and holy if it is to bring glory to God.

Third. After making this basic point regarding the need to calibrate the conscience, the authors go on to make application to missions. One point regards how varying cultures view women’s dress differently. In one culture having the hair uncovered is immodest, in another having the thighs uncovered is immodest, and in another having the chest uncovered is immodest. While I accept the point that Christians need to be sensitive to foreign cultures so as to not project unintended messages, I think this point goes further than intended. If modesty is defined differently by varying cultures, then is its definition flexible within a changing culture? In times past the limitation of mixed-swimming was the norm in many conservative circles. Such limitations now are viewed as prehistoric, and mocked. Now our culture is telling us that girls shouldn’t be troubled with a transgendered individual sharing the same changing area. While modesty is undoubtedly difficult to define, my point is that the culture certainly doesn’t seem to be the proper basis for that definition. And rather than encouraging erring toward being culturally relevant, we would be wise to favor God rather than man.

It is true that we are no longer under law; we are under grace. But grace does not give us license to live and look like the world around us. Grace permits us to live holy, righteously, and godly in this present world.

AddyF says

So good. This was an easy read and an important one for the church. How do you formulate your convictions? How do you respond to those whose consciences differ? I felt like I had a good handle on this topic, but this book challenged me, rebuked me, and encouraged me.

Ryan Hawkins says

I finished this book almost two weeks ago, but simply haven’t reviewed it yet. But I mention this because this is a book which has come into my mind almost daily over and over in these last couple weeks—and I think that’s very unique. Long story short, their treatment on the conscience is great, and especially helpful is their applicable points how to use your conscience to love others and further the cause of the gospel.

The whole book is worth it even just for the first chapter. In this chapter, they explain what the conscience is and how it is a gift from God. It truly is very helpful. And it is uniquely clear on a topic that is evidently biblical, but often dismissed (or just quickly 'explained').

Then the rest of the book they dig into differences between people's consciences, and how to love those who differ from you in their consciences. Much more could be said here, but this was by far the most practical part of this book—and this is why I've been thinking about this book a lot. They convicted me and educated me about how to love people well with your conscience, and how to obey 1 Corinthians 9 and do everything with your conscience for the furthering of the gospel. Again, more could be said, but I recommend this book for this too.

In short, I was tempted to rate this book only 4 stars because some of the detail wasn't too unique. But I'm glad I waited two weeks to review it. I read a lot of books which I finish and then don't think about. But their thoughtful, practical advice—often based on mission work from around the world—is more precious than I at first appreciated.

I do wish a longer treatment on the conscience was available. (And maybe that will be written by Naselli soon!) But this book is a great conscience, thoughtful, and practical work. Definitely worth reading, and then acting upon what you learn.
