CHAPTER 3

THE PURITAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONSCIENCE

It was demonstrated in the previous chapter that Anglican Puritan ministers accepted that they had significant responsibility in regards to the moral formation of their congregants. Yet, what was the concept of morality espoused by these Anglican Puritans? The goal of this chapter will be to answer this question by providing a detailed explanation of the general beliefs of Anglican Puritans in respect to their understanding of morality. It will be shown that they believed that the conscience was the central component to their ethical theory, as it served as a moral guide for daily living. It was through the conscience that individuals were convicted of sin, but it also helped give direction and fortitude for overcoming temptation. Thus, the Anglican Puritans greatly emphasized the development and strengthening of the conscience. It is through a study of the conscience that it is possible to comprehend the moral system of the Anglican Puritans.

Introduction

Puritans are often characterized by their particular focus on moral living.¹ This is an appropriate assessment, as they put much time and effort into delineating their ideas

concerning what righteous living was and how an individual could develop his sense of morality. In various works of literature, including commentaries, treatises, and instructional guides, the Anglican Puritans set out to explain and promote their ideas concerning moral theory and practice. Thus, it is important to analyze these texts in order to ascertain what the Anglican Puritan understanding of ethics was and, thereby, discern their perspectives on moral formation.

As has been previously stated in chapter one, Anglican Puritans strove to adhere to biblical teachings in their practices. As a result, they developed an ethical system which demanded the centrality of the Bible. It was their desire to have men and

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4Fenner said, “Ye see here that the law of God bindeth the conscience.” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 146. Ames writes, “From hence it appeareth that the perfect and only rule of Conscience is
women live in consistent obedience to the commands and principles found within the pages of God’s Word. Yet, they understood that this task was not simple and required great discernment in determining how the moral teachings of Scripture were applicable to the daily practices of believers. J. I. Packer accurately assesses this Puritan perspective on morality by stating that “the Puritans had a policy of ‘thorough’ in the ethical realm; and they went to great pains to give detailed guidance on the duties involved in the various relationships to God and man in which the Christian stood.”

Puritans were intimately aware of the challenge facing individuals as they sought to apply biblical principles and mandates to their daily decisions and practices in a consistent manner. They realized that individuals would have to analyze numerous situations and determine, on their own, what Scripture called for them to do. They also understood that these persons would have to overcome great temptation in order to choose biblical courses of action, yet they were not swayed in their determination to the revealed will of God.” William Ames, “Of Conscience and the Cases Thereof: The First Booke” in *Consciences with the Power and Cases Thereof* (n.p.: Anno, 1639; Norwood, N.J.: Walter J. Johnson, 1975), 6.


6 Perkins wrote: “the godly though they fall into the same sinnes with the wicked, yet they never give full consent: for they are in their minds, wils, and affections partly regenerate, and partly unregenerate, and therefore their wils doe partly will, and partly abhorre that which is evill.” Perkins, “A Treatise Tending unto a Declaration, Whether a Man be in the Estate of Damnation, or in the Estate of Grace” in *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the University of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, vol. 1 (London: John Legatt, 1612), 372. See also Breward, 8-9 for the purpose of Perkins’ works as being to give guidance for those struggling to overcome sin.

7 Packer wrote, “. . . this ethical teaching was all given (again, just as in the New Testament) not as a code of routine motions to go through with mechanical exactness, but in the form of attitudes to be maintained and principles to be applied, so that however much teaching and advice a man received, he was always left to make the final decisions and determinations. . . on his own initiative, as spontaneous, responsible acts of his own conscience in the sight of God.” Packer, *Among God’s Giants*, 155.
emphasize pure living. Therefore, many of them set about the difficult task of developing a concept of morality which would prove useful for church-goers in understanding morality and in choosing to live rightly.

As one reads the Anglican Puritans on moral subjects, it becomes evident that the central concept in their ethical theories and teachings was the notion of the conscience. The idea of the conscience as an integral facet of one’s moral life permeated much of the writings of the Puritans and would eventually be understood as one of the defining characteristics of Anglican Puritanism. Therefore, it is important to comprehend what was meant by the term “conscience” and how this notion was influential in Puritan morality.

Anglican Puritans held that a good conscience was vital for moral living. It was through the conscience that they believed an individual was able to judge actions, both past and future, and ascertain the biblical and divine perspective of such occurrences. This judgment produced in them a sense of conviction regarding past deeds and/or direction for future dealings. In essence, the conscience became the Anglican Puritans’ interpretive guide for understanding biblical demands for practical

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8See Ames, “Of Conscience,” 19-21 for a discussion on a “Scrupulous Conscience.”

9Packer, Among God’s Giants, 154.

10Van Til, Liberty of Conscience, 14.


12Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 9.

living. Therefore, it is essential to study thoroughly this meaningful concept in order to more fully grasp the Puritan understanding of morality.

While the concept of the conscience was central to the Puritan understanding of morality and was found frequently in their writings, this does not mean that it is a simple notion which can be easily defined. Rather, the Anglican Puritans maintained a thorough and complex view of the conscience which encompassed many aspects of morality.\footnote{See Lindsley for a comprehensive discussion of the Puritan Conscience. Arthur Lindsley, Jr., “Conscience and Casuistry in the English Puritan Concept of Reformation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1982).} The prominent Puritan authors William Perkins, William Ames, and William Fenner went so far as to write entire treatises on the subject of the conscience.\footnote{Perkins, \textit{A Discourse of Conscience}; Ames, “Of Conscience;” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience.”} It is through an analysis of these works, and others which address the subject of the conscience, that the multi-faceted perspective of the conscience held by the Anglican Puritans will be seen.

As will be demonstrated, the conscience was perceived by the Puritans as primarily providing judgment in relation to moral actions. Yet, the notion encompassed many other facets of morality which are important to note. As will be shown, the function of the conscience included such duties as strengthening an individual’s resolve and also producing repentance for wrongdoing.\footnote{Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 16.} Additionally, it is important to note that the conscience was not viewed as a static moral influence. Rather, it was perceived as an element of a person which could be developed to be more accurate, or it could be...
completely neglected. The conscience could also hold great influence over an individual, or it could be weakened to the point of insignificance. Thus, it is important to thoroughly detail the many aspects of the Puritan idea of the conscience in the hopes that the focus of the Puritan pastor’s moral endeavor will be more comprehensively understood.

**Defining the Conscience**

While Puritans produced numerous explanations of the concept of the conscience, it is apparent that the principle feature of such definitions is the judicial nature of the conscience. This can be seen in Ames’ statement that the conscience “is a man’s judgement of himself, according to the judgement of God of him.” William Fenner similarly described the conscience as “the judgment of man upon himself as he is subject to God’s judgment.” Richard Sibbes also provided a related definition in his commentary on Second Corinthians. He said, “For what is conscience, but the soul it self reflecting upon it self? It is the properties of the reasonable soule and the excellencie of it, that it can return upon it self.” Finally, Perkins offered a definition employing

17Ibid., 136.

18Sibbes, *Corinthians*, 224.

19Ames, “Of Conscience,” 1. It should be noted that Ames makes specific mention that his understanding of the conscience includes, but remains distinct from, those scholastics who wrote in previous centuries on the subject. He wrote, “Some of the Schoolemen will have Conscience to be an habit: as Scotus, Bonaventure, Durand. Which though it might be granted for some part; or of the principles of Conscience: yet it cannot be granted simply of all that which is signified by the name of Conscience; for the onely office of an Habite, as it is an Habit, is, Inclinare ad prompte agendum, to make one doe a thing readily: but Conscience hath other operations, which belong properly to it, as to Accuse, Comforte, &c.” Ames, “Of Conscience,” 3.


21Sibbes, *Corinthians*, 220.
slightly different terminology, but conveying the same general idea as the three previous explanations. He wrote, “Conscience is a part of the understanding in al reasonable creatures, determining of their particular actions, either with them or against them.” He went on to explain that there is a divine nature to the conscience which helps arbitrate between God and man. Therefore, although there are some slight differences in phraseology amongst these descriptions, the general understanding held by these Puritans was that the conscience served a judgmental role representing God’s perspective on human actions.

While the explanation of the conscience as a judge of human action is central to an understanding of Puritan teachings, it does not adequately represent the various aspects and intricacies of this important facet of Puritanism. Therefore, several defining characteristics of the conscience will be presented so that the role of the conscience in moral living can be more comprehensively understood. It will be shown that there were three primary features of the Anglican Puritan’s view of the conscience which are particularly beneficial in a description of this moral concept. Through an explanation of these general aspects of the conscience, various particular emphases will be presented so as to provide a complete, if succinct, portrait of the conscience.

The first aspect of the conscience to be presented will be that it was seen as an individualized component. While many entities could influence a conscience, the

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22 Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 5. Perkins cites Aquinas’ teachings on “understanding” when he discusses the matter, but he does not provide more details of how his position on the whole of the conscience related to Aquinas’. Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 2.

23 Ibid., 6.

24 For a more detailed explanation of the Puritan view of the conscience, see Lindsley, “Conscience and Casuistry.”
Puritans emphasized the notion that there was liberty of conscience which should not be impeded. Secondly, it will be demonstrated that the conscience was a spiritual element tied to adherence to Scripture. Details will be provided which explain how the Puritans sought to stress obedience to biblical principles while still maintaining the freedom of the individual. Finally, the third characteristic of the conscience which will be presented was that it was seen as a moral authority, but not an enforcer of action. These three features will be of great assistance in understanding the Puritan view of the conscience, as they help lay the foundation of understanding how the conscience affected morality.

**The Individualized Conscience**

The first aspect of the conscience to be investigated is the important idea that the conscience was individualized. Anglican Puritans perceived the conscience as a moral component inherent in every person. Van Til explained,

> The Puritan as a Reformed Christian, as a believer in the supremacy of the Scriptures, as a believer in the significance of the individual, was confronted with the question of how it was that he stood alone before God and His revelation in the Scriptures. His answer was quite simple: God as creator had endowed him with a conscience, and it was through his conscience that he knew how to act or believe, or how not to act or not to believe.\(^{25}\)

Yet, while every individual possessed a conscience, given to him by God, its role was seen as having vastly different effects in each person.\(^{26}\)

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\(^{26}\)Perkins spent much time explaining that there are different kinds of conscience which affect people in various ways. Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 43-69. It is important to note that he describes “Christian liberty” as a component part of the conscience (44). He went on to explain one facet of this liberty: “I add further, that things indifferent; as bondage, outward libertie, riches, povertie, single estate, marriage, meate, drinke, apparel, buildings, may be used freely, because they are neither commanded by God not forbidden: and in themselves considered, they may be used or not used without breach of conscience” (46-47).
There are two important components of the individualized understanding of conscience which need to be delineated in order to fully comprehend the implications of this characteristic. The first is that the Anglican Puritans understood that a person’s conscience could direct him to differing actions or conclusions from that of his neighbor. It was believed that an individual would assess situations and determine actions or convictions based upon the moral upbringing and grounding of his conscience.\textsuperscript{27} Therefore, the Puritans put great effort into educating and training individuals in the teachings and expectations of the Bible, the only foundation they believed was adequate for directing the conscience.\textsuperscript{28}

The second component of the individualized understanding of the conscience was that it was believed that each person could be influenced by their conscience in various ways. For some, there was great sensitivity and obedience to the conscience. For others, the conscience was neglected and held very little sway.\textsuperscript{29} Because of this, the Anglican Puritans sought to find ways to strengthen the conscience so that it would have more influence over an individual and result in the faithful living out of the commands of Scripture.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{27}Perkins said, “Mans dutie concerning conscience is twofold. The first is, if we want good conscience above all things to labour to obtaine it.” Perkins, \textit{A Discourse of Conscience}, 70. See also Perkins’ continued discussion on man’s duty to the conscience on pages 70-78. Fenner explained, “First, the knowledge of Gods Law is necessary, for else conscience cannot work. A drunkard might be drunk every day in the yeere, and yet conscience could not trouble him nor condemne him of sin unlesse he knew the Law, That God hath forbid drunkennesse.” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 21.

\textsuperscript{28}Ames, “Of Conscience,” 16.

\textsuperscript{29}Ames explained, “The Will can move it selfe, towards an object that is apprehended and judged good for profit or pleasure in some respect, thought reason judge that it is not lawfull but sinfull.” Ames, “Of Conscience,” 24.

\textsuperscript{30}See subheading “Formation of the Conscience”
The Puritan comprehension of the conscience as an individualized component of Christian living meant that each person was given the responsibility and accountability to make choices. They believed that people could be influenced and assisted in decisions, but that the individual would ultimately be liable for his actions. Packer aptly summarized this Puritan viewpoint. He said,

This ethical teaching was all given (again, just as in the New Testament) not as a code of routine motions to go through with mechanical exactness, but in the form of attitudes to be maintained and principles to be applied, so that however much teaching and advice a man received, he was always left to make the final decisions and determinations (whether to follow his pastor’s advice; how to apply the given principles in this or that case; etc) on his own initiative, as spontaneous, responsible acts of his own conscience in the sight of God.\(^{31}\)

As Anglican Puritans developed their concepts of the individualized conscience, one of the resulting consequences was the notion of liberty of conscience.\(^{32}\) According to this idea, each person was accountable to his own convictions and should not be forced to conform to the perspectives of others.\(^{33}\) This led Puritans to conclude that no authority, such as the church or state, should be able to dictate matters of conscience. The Puritan Thomas Taylor articulated this idea in his commentary on Titus. He said,

\[\ldots\] we must consider in every indifferent thing two things: 1. a *libertie* to use them; 2. The *use* of that libertie, which two differ as much as meat set upon the table, and the eating of it. The libertie is in the conscience; the use is an outward thing: the former no Magistrates law medleth with, nor can restraine: but in the latter, his law is a binder. And thus we shut the doore against all Popish ecclesiasticall lawes and canons, concerning fasts, feasts, daies, garments, and infinite other traditions, which they urge as things necessarie to salvation, directly binding the conscience: yea as

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\(^{32}\) See Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*.

\(^{33}\) Ibid., 18.
meritorious, and leading to a state of perfections: whereas indeed they directly fight against Christian libertie; yea many of them against the morall law it selfe.”

This is expressive of the Anglican Puritan belief that individuals should be allowed the freedom to exercise their religious and social practices as they saw fit, so long as it did not violate their own consciences or the valid laws of necessary governance.

The writings of the great Puritan divine, William Perkins, provide helpful insight into this teaching of liberty of conscience. As Perkins decried the usurpation of power by ruling authorities, he illustrated the implication of this belief. He wrote,

I will stand a while to examine and confute the opinion, that the very pillars of the popish church at this day maintain; namely, that civil and ecclesiastical jurisdiction have a coactive power in the conscience, and that the laws made thereby do as truly and properly bind as they speak to mortal and venial sin, as God’s law itself.

Perkins later claimed, “I answer again, that it is absurd to think that God gives us liberty in conscience from any of his own laws, and yet will have our consciences still remain in subjection to the laws of sinful man.” Van Til explained that Perkins maintained his harsh perspective toward the Roman Catholic Church because he believed it impeded “on the liberty of conscience that naturally falls to the Christian man.”

Previously, Van Til also clarified that the reason for Perkins’ insistence on liberty of conscience stemmed from his insistence that the conscience was only capable of directing oneself. He stated that for Perkins the “conscience functions only in relation to actions of the self of which it

34 Thomas Taylor, *A Commentarie upon the Epistle of S. Paul Written to Titus* (Cambridge, 1612), 295.


36 Ibid., 31.

is a part, and thus cannot judge actions of other persons.” It was this understanding of the individualized nature of the conscience, thereby leading to the concept of liberty of conscience, which began to lead many Puritans to oppose several of the religious regulations placed upon them by church officials and state authorities.

As the Anglican Puritans continued to wage a war of words with church officials and the monarchy itself, the concept of liberty of conscience became more and more prominent. This idea became a driving force in Puritan efforts as they sought to free themselves from the demands of the traditional Anglican Church. This is particularly reflected in the vestarian controversies in which many Puritans fought against the demands of the state for them to wear clerical vestments and perform traditional rituals. To some, it might seem that the Puritans were fighting over trivial matters. However, as Hall stated, “The disputes which began about vestments and ceremonies involved deep principles concerning the rights of conscience.” It was this demand for liberty of conscience which was the focus of such controversies and confrontations led by the Puritans.

While liberty of conscience might seem to imply complete moral freedom and antinomianism, this was far from what was ascribed to by the Puritans. Rather, as will be seen, they held that the conscience was to be strictly guided by scriptural teachings.

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38Ibid., 18.
39Ibid., 11.
40Ibid., 14.
Therefore, the liberty of conscience concept was perceived as relating to the freedom of the individual to make moral choices without the strict oppression of the church, but it was still bound by the commands and doctrines of the Bible.  

The Conscience as a Spiritual Reality

A second aspect of the conscience, according to the Puritans, was that it was a spiritual reality. Perkins expressed this mentality as he explained the nature of the conscience. He wrote, “God knows perfectly all the doings of man, though they be never so hid and concealed: and man by a gift given him of God; knows together with God, the same things of himself: and this gift is named Conscience.” Thus, the Puritans regarded the conscience as having a divinely inspired character which was meant to impact their daily lives in a notable manner.

As a gift given by God, the conscience was seen by Anglican Puritans as a spiritual guide or judge. This is portrayed explicitly in the previously presented definitions of the conscience written by Ames and Fenner. In both of these explanations, the conscience was described as man’s awareness of God’s judgment of him in doing good or evil. This spiritual perspective toward the conscience led the Puritans to believe that God gave man conscience to help serve as a spiritual counselor for living out the commands of Scripture. This mentality is expressed by Richard

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42 Ames stated, “In such things which are more remote from their principles, diligent care is to be had, that we also get a certaine perswasion, or belief of them, out of the Scriptures; but if that cannot be obtained, it is lawful in our actions to follow some such opinion, as is certaine and tried by the rule of Scripture.” Ames, “Of Conscience,” 16.

43 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 7.

44 See page 6.
Greenham as he defined the conscience saying, “Conscience is a sensible feeling of God's judgments grounded upon the word, nourished by the consideration of the latter day, stirring up our hearts to the approoving of our doings both before God and men.” As such, the conscience was perceived as having an innate spiritual quality which manifested itself in how the conscience was utilized and what grounds the conscience was to be based upon.

Anglican Puritans believed that the conscience was to provide spiritual direction and conviction. If properly formed, the conscience would give an individual spiritual insight into an action or state of being. Thus, Fenner wrote,

> These are the two lights that every mans conscience goes by: It hath light in some measure to know the Law of God, what he should do and what he should not do; and it hath light in some measure to know himself, what he hath done or not done, whether he hath done as he should yea or not.

While this ability was severely marred in the fall, it was still within the capacity of man’s conscience to provide biblical discernment. In this way, the conscience functioned by supplying an individual with God’s practical judgment.

> It is important to note that while the role of the conscience was similar in some ways to the work of the Holy Spirit, the Anglican Puritans did not view the two as

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47 Ames explained, “Conscience since the fall, or after sinne, is made good againe: 1. By the blood of Christ applied through Faith, whereby the guilt, accusation, and condemnation of it, are taken away. . . . 2. By the virtue of the same blood, in repentance and sanctification of the spirit. . . . 3. By the witnesse of the Spirit, whereby we are assured of the grace of God, not onely for the present, but also for the continuance of it, to the doing of every good worke.” Ames, “Of Conscience,” 37-38.

48 Ibid., 1.
synonymous. The conscience could have a sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit, but it was a distinct entity.\textsuperscript{49} The Holy Spirit, as part of the godhead, was divine in nature, while the conscience was a natural part of man. Fenner explained,

Conscience is joined in commission with God’s own spirit to be an instructour unto us in the way we should walk; so that the spirit and it are resisted or obeyed together, grieved or delighted together: We cannot sinne against conscience but we sinne also against God’s spirit; we cannot check our own conscience but we check and quench the holy spirit of God.\textsuperscript{50}

The reasoning behind such conclusions was that Puritans understood the Spirit as being separate from man and flawless in judgment, while conscience was a part of man and was often errant.\textsuperscript{51} Therefore, it is appropriate to understand the Holy Spirit as influencing the conscience, but not being of the same quality as it. Sibbes provided a helpful perspective of the Puritan view of the Spirit’s role in relation to the conscience in his commentary on Corinthians. He wrote,

And God adds his Spirit to his Word to convince conscience, and to make the winnesse of the Word more effectuall; for although the Word say thus and thus, yet till the Spirit convince the soul, and set it down that it is thus; till it convince it with a heavenly light, conscience will not be fully convict.\textsuperscript{52}

An additional spiritual aspect of the conscience is that, according to Anglican Puritanism, the conscience was ideally meant to be grounded in scriptural teachings. The

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\textsuperscript{49}Lewis Bayly, \textit{the Practice of Pietie: Directing a Christian How to Walke that He may Please God} (London: n.p., 1654), 67.

\textsuperscript{50}Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 24.

\textsuperscript{51}Perkins described the errant conscience by stating, “. . . when a thing is done upon an erroneous conscience, it is not of faith, and therefore it is a sinne.” Perkins, “Cases of Conscience,”100. Fenner likewise says, “It is true, it [conscience] may erroneously excuse or accuse . . .” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 22. See Ames, \textit{The Marrow of Theology}, 89-90 for a briefe explanation of the Puritan view of the Holy Spirit. Of particular note, Ames writes “. . . the eternal counsel of God is attributed to the Holy Spirit” (90).

\textsuperscript{52}Sibbes, \textit{Corinthians}, 224.
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Puritans realized that outside forces often influenced the conscience, but they desired that their consciences be strictly guided by the Word of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith, a work largely produced by Puritans, related this idea. It stated, “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are in any thing contrary to his Word.” Likewise, Ames wrote, “Hence it is that the Law of God onely doth bind the Conscience of man. By the Law of God wee understand that revealed will of God, whereof we have made mention: viz. as it doth also containe those things which are commanded in the Gospell.” Based on such a conception, the Puritans were diligent in their efforts to try and apply the commands and principles found in the Bible to their daily lives.

One of the concerns which arose from the desire of Anglican Puritans to live according to the moral principles of Scripture was how they were to function in relation to the civil laws. They maintained that state regulations should be obeyed, but they were to be secondary to the teachings of the Bible. Thomas Taylor explained this idea in his commentary on Titus. He wrote,

*Quest.* But can any Magistrate make a law to bind the conscience? *Answ.* No, but yet we must obey their wholesome laws *for consciences sake;* which conscience is bound not by the law of the Magistrate, but by Gods law, which bindeth to obedience of the Magistrates laws in all lawfull and honest things; so Paul,

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56Perkins wrote, “For the obtaining of good conscience, three things must be procured; a preparation to good conscience; the applying of the remedy; the reformation of conscience.” Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 70. He goes on to explain that knowledge of the law of God is required for preparation of the conscience (70).
Rom. 13.5. subjecteth not the conscience to the lawes of men, but to Gods ordinance, inforcing obedience to such humane lawes as fight not with his owne. Therefore, the conscience was perceived as being bound by the civil law, but only as long as this did not violate the dictates of the Bible. Scriptural faithfulness was of utmost importance for the Anglican Puritans in regard to their teachings on morality. Therefore, they desired to bind their consciences to the Word of God as much as possible.

As Anglican Puritans sought to find ways to better employ their consciences in a manner faithful to Scripture, they developed a form of casuistry which employed principles found in the new logic called Ramism. Ramism was a philosophy which promoted the use of practical methods for conveying ideas and determining truth. Witchell explained that “Ramist logic was a series of diagrammed, structured syllogisms in which one argument emerged out of another.” McKim further clarified that “Ramus’ method as he defined it moved toward the arranging of ideas beginning with the most general and moving to the most specific.” This dialectic concept began to be appropriated by many mainstream Puritans to convey their understanding of how the conscience was to function. This influence is particularly evident in the works termed

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57Taylor, Titus, 294.

58Fenner wrote, “Gods law is still the supreme bond of conscience... The law of God whereby he willleth and commandeth and forbiddeth this or that in his word, this is the main bond of conscience; When this bindeth it, nothing else can loose it; and contrary, if this loose it, nothing else can bind it.” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 141.


60Donald McKim, Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology (New York: Peter Lang, 1987), 32.


62McKim, Ramism in William Perkins’ Theology, 32.
“cases of conscience” in which the authors set about the methodical task of presenting logical arguments to practical problems.63

As the teachings of Ramus began to be adopted by Anglican Puritans, his dialectical system of logic began to shape the Puritan understanding of the conscience. In a fashion similar to Ramus, the Puritans began to portray the conscience in a syllogistic manner.64 Ames, in particular, explained that the conscience is best understood as a syllogism.65 In this syllogism, the major premise, or proposition, was a principle or law put forth in the Bible. The minor premise, or assumption, references the current state. The conclusion of the syllogism resulted from the application of the assumption to the proposition. Ames explained in detail how he understood the syllogism to be set up. He said, “The Proposition treateth of the Law; the Assumption of the fact or state, and the Conclusion of the relation arising from the fact or state, in regard of that Law; The Conclusion either pronounceth one guilty, or giveth spiritual peace and security.”66 He provided the following syllogisms to illustrate this idea:

\[ \text{He that lives in sinne, shall dye:} \\
\text{I live in sinne;} \\
\text{Therefore, I shall dye.} \\
\text{Orthus.} \]


65Van Til, Liberty of Conscience, 48-50; Ames, “Of Conscience,” 3. Ames wrote, “It [conscience] belongs to judgement discoursing, because it cannot doe its act of Accusing, Excusing, Comforting, unlesse it be through the meanes of some third argument, whose force appeareth onely in a Syllogisme, by that which is deduced and concluded out of it.”

Whosoever beleeves in Christ, shall not dye but live.
I beleeve in Christ:
Therefore, I shall not dye but live.  

Therefore, based on such teachings, the conscience began to be identified in a syllogistic manner and Puritans set about the task of ascertaining proper behavior through identifying the conclusions of various syllogisms.

With the understanding that consciences should be perceived as syllogisms, Anglican Puritans approached dilemmas with the mindset that this methodology could be utilized to determine proper responses for action and one’s standing before God. The “cases of conscience” put forth by these Puritans helped provide the resources necessary for assisting readers in this syllogistic process. Packer explained that these casuistic books were beneficial in “spelling out the standards of conduct set in God’s law so that Christians might be able to live with a good conscience, knowing that they were doing God’s will.” He went on to state that “the century that followed the Reformation was a great age of ‘case-divinity’ among both the Romans and Protestants, but whereas Jesuit casuistry was guidance for the priest in the confessional, that of the Puritans was for the ordinary Christian in everyday life.” These “cases of conscience” helped provide assistance to the Anglican Puritans by addressing a plethora of issues and by showing how one’s conscience should perceive given circumstances or difficulties in life.

67Ibid., 3.
68Packer, Among God’s Giants, 48.
69Ibid., 48-49.
One of the key requirements for syllogisms to be employed by the Puritans was that the major premise be grounded in scriptural teaching. It was granted that some concepts were known innately, but it was a necessity that these and all others were to be firmly supported in the Bible. This attitude toward Scripture is seen in Perkins’ statement concerning the role of God’s Word in relation to the conscience. He said, “Therefore the word of God alone by an absolute and sovereign power bindes conscience.” Van Til further explicated Perkins’ views found throughout his writings. He said,

Perkins would admit that conscience had some sort of a priori sense of right and wrong, but that was not the source of information for a Christian conscience; the Christian informed his conscience by looking into the Bible, particularly the moral law. The moral law for Perkins was, however, more than the Decalogue of the Old Testament; it embraced the moral law taught in the New Testament as well. How one applied the moral law was illustrated in his practical divinity or cases of conscience.

Therefore, with this priority of scriptural adherence, it was necessitated that God’s Word be the source for the general principles and commands set forth in the proposition of the

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71 Sibbes explained that all men are bound by general rules of nature, but those that have the Bible have a better guide. He wrote, “. . . all have a rule: those that have not the Word which is the best rule of all, yet they have the Word written in their hearts; they have a natural Judicature in their souls; their conscience excusing, or accusing one another, they have a general rule, you must do no wrong, you must do that which is right.” He goes on to explain, “In the soule there is a treasurie of rules by nature; (the Word doth add more rules, the Law and the Gospel) and that part of the soule that preserves rules is called intellectual, because it preserves rules; all men by nature have these graven in the soule.” Sibbes, Corinthians, 221.

72 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 10.

73 Van Til, Liberty of Conscience, 19.
syllogism. By holding to this standard, the Anglican Puritans worked to ensure that their consciences were congruent and obedient to the Bible.

Van Til argued in his text *Liberty of Conscience* that the “cases of conscience” texts, particularly those of William Ames, which employed a Ramistic method of syllogisms, were so practical and prescriptive that they infringed upon individual liberty. He wrote,

> With the stress on system and unity in Ramus’ dialectic, identification of conscience as dialectic by Ames locked conscience to a method that by its nature projected an aura of determinism into the field of moral problems. Stated another way, reliance upon conscience when it was a comprehensive method eliminated the need to think in terms of conscience as something that could have liberty.  

He went on to write,

> In locking conscience to method, method became authoritative in the same way that the government was in its policy of toleration. In terms of sphere sovereignty Ames’s position is more difficult to characterize, but it is clear that he advocated a view that stripped the individual of his liberty.

If correct, this assessment is quite troublesome for the Puritan view of the conscience. As has been demonstrated, one of the primary characteristics of the conscience was its individualistic nature, which provided a sense of personal liberty in decision making. Yet, if Van Til is accurate in his critique, Puritans who employed methods similar to Ames should be seen as adopting a differing view than earlier Puritans and one in which the individualistic nature of the conscience is limited.

76 Ibid., 51.
While Van Til’s argument is noteworthy, his position is ultimately flawed in that it misconstrues the Puritan concepts of biblical casuistry and liberty of conscience. These two ideas are not incompatible and, actually, are supportive of one another.

Greenham explained the importance of maintaining a careful balance between liberty of conscience and obedience to Scripture. He stated,

We must not make our conscience like a cheverel purse, stretch it too farre, or too narrow, that is, be not too righteous, as the Anabaptists, and the Familie of love . . . . Wee must not let our conscience be looser than the Scriptures be, for then wee shall be prophane. Take heede of extremes, for vertue is a meane betweene extremes, taking something of one, and something of the other: knowledge of generals and conscience of particulars.  

It was through the cases of conscience presented by various Puritan authors that individuals were provided with direction and insight in order that they might know how a biblical principle could be employed and applied in given cases. These works were not intended to serve as dictatorial requirements put upon the lives of Puritan Christians. Rather, they were to provide examples and answers to those who were seeking to be faithful in their application of Scripture to their daily lives under the freedom they possessed as individual believers. As such, Van Til’s conclusion should be rejected in favor of one which is open to seeing liberty of conscience and syllogistic casuistry as compatible and not mutually exclusive.

As has been seen, the Anglican Puritans were adamant that the conscience was a spiritual force working in the lives of individuals. They held that it served an

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77 Greenham, “Godly Observations,” 816.

78 As the quotation from Packer on page 62 has already shown, the practical ethical writings of the Puritans were meant to provide principles to be followed and not legalistic enslavement to particular actions. Packer also stated, “Puritan ethical teaching was not authoritarian; it was offered as exposition and application of Scripture, and was to be checked against Scripture by those who received it, according to the Protestant principle of the duty of private judgement.” Packer, Among God’s Giants, 155.
intermediary role in which it provided God’s assessment of actions. As such, these Puritans believed it was crucial to maintain a conscience which was grounded on Scripture. To help assist in the employment of the conscience in a manner faithful with the principles and teachings of the Bible, the Anglican Puritans adopted the view that the conscience was to be seen as a syllogism, the major premise of which was to be based on the Word of God. In this way, the conscience was perceived by the Puritans as a spiritual reality providing God’s judgment on individual lives.

The Conscience as a Moral Authority

In addition to its individualistic and spiritual nature, the Anglican Puritans also characterized the conscience as a moral authority. According to this third facet, the conscience was to be seen as a guiding force and judge of morality. However, it was understood that while the conscience could provide ethical discernment, it could not force behavior. Accordingly, individuals could, and often did, act contrary to their conscience’s leading. The conscience served to inform the person, but the will of a person would ultimately determine the action which was made. In this way, the conscience functioned as a moral guide and discerner, providing insight and instruction, but without the ability to actually constrain. Therefore, Puritans believed that the stronger the conscience was, the more influence it could have when decisions and assessments were made. Thus, Fenner described the consequences of the weakened conscience. He wrote, “Where ye see that weak consciences are apt to be misled. The


80 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 5.
reason is this. Because when they see others whom they know to be more learned and judicious then themselves to do so and so, that may soon tempt them to do it though their conscience be against it.”

Accordingly, while the conscience was seen as the key component in ethical dilemmas, it was understood as serving a guidance role and not a controlling function.

Although Anglican Puritans believed the conscience only operated as an advisor of actions, this does not mean that the role of the conscience should be diminished. Rather, as the judge of past and future action, the conscience was perceived as the primary moral authority in one’s life. Even though the conscience could not force action, it could determine what ethical behavior was. Perkins spoke of the conscience as having a sort of divine authority in pronouncing moral judgment. He said, “. . . conscience is of a divine nature, and is a thing placed of God in the middest between him and man, as an arbitratour to give sentence & to pronounce either with man or against man unto God.” As such, Anglican Puritans taught that it was a sin to act against one’s conscience. Ames explained this notion by writing,

. . . conscience, though erroneous, bindes always so, that hee that doth against it, sinneth. The reason is, because he that doth against conscience, doth against Gods will: though not materially, and truly; yet formally, and by interpretation: because what the conscience doth declare, it declareth as Gods will.

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82 Fenner explained, “Conscience judgeth of a thing to be done, whether it be good or evil, lawful or unlawful. . . The second office of conscience is to counsel for the doing of that which is good, forbearing of that which is evil. . . conscience doth not only give good counsel, but if it have leave it will bring arguments to perswade to follow it.” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 33.
83 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 6.
These Puritans held that if an individual’s conscience was directing him to a particular choice, all things considered, then the person was to choose that action. To behave contrarily would mean that an individual believed a particular option was proper and he knowingly chose to take a course of action which was against what he believed was moral. Ames explained, “he that contemneth Conscience, contemneth God himself; because that which Conscience doth dictate, is supposed to be the will of God.” 85

One of the consequent questions which arose from the idea that the conscience was to be a moral authority was whether the accurateness of the conscience influenced whether actions taken were sinful or not. 86 The issue at hand was if a person’s conscience was either misinformed or not astute and following its guidance would lead to sin, then was disobedience to the conscience, leading to proper behavior, sinful? In response, Anglican Puritans taught that acting against the conscience, even though it was directing wrongly, would be sinful. 87 Because the best judgment of an individual, incorrect as it may be, was rejected and a person chose to act according to what he thought was sinful, he was being immoral. Thus, the Puritan who possessed an errant conscience was guilty of sin whether he acted according to or against his conscience. Baxter explained: “If you follow it [erring conscience] you break the law of God in doing that which he forbids you. If you forsake it, and go against it, you reject the authority of God, in doing that which you think he forbids you.” 88


In circumstances in which an errant conscience was present, Puritans maintained that, while still sinful, it was better to act against the conscience then against the direct commands of God. Ames detailed his rational for this conclusion with five claims. Concerning an errant conscience, He said,

Such a conscience doth not bind to do what it saith. First, because there is no obligation to unlawful things. Secondly, because Conscience bindeth not to do, but by virtue of some command of God; but such a conscience is not grounded upon any command: for the Law of God can neither incline nor bind any man to sinne. Thirdly, because this error is always a sin, but a sin doth not bind to practise it. Fourthly, because such a Conscience hath never so sure a ground, as that there needeth not further examination and inquiry into things. Fiftly, because man is bound to lay down such a conscience; for although that be not exactly enough spoken which some do affirme, namely; That such a Conscience bindeth a man to lay down it selfe; yet it is most certaine, that a man is tied to lay downe such an erroneous Conscience, for it is a part of that old man, whom we are commanded to put off, Ephes. 4.22.\(^89\)

Therefore, Anglican Puritans maintained that it was better, though still sinful, to put away an errant conscience than to follow it into disobedience of clear scriptural dictates.

The possibility of having an erroneous conscience which possessed moral authority meant that Anglican Puritans were all the more emphatic that a conscience be properly informed and equipped. Thus, Baxter cautioned against blindly following a conscience and, instead, encouraged the thorough education of this moral faculty. He said,

There is a dangerous error grown too common in the world, that a man is bound to do every thing which his conscience telleth him is the will of God; and that every man must obey his conscience, as if it were the lawgiver of the world; whereas, indeed, it is not ourselves, but God, that is our lawgiver. And conscience is not appointed to or authorized to make us any duty, which God hath not made us; but only to discern the law of God, and call upon us to observe it: and an erring

conscience is not to be obeyed, but to be better informed, and brought to a righter performance of its office.\textsuperscript{90}

Thus, for those possessing an errant conscience, the proper course of action, if possible, was to correct it through biblical instruction. Baxter provided a helpful illustration of his understanding of this matter. He stated,

If you command your servant to weed your corn, and he mistake you, and verily think that you bid him pull up the corn, and not the weeds; what now should he do? Shall he follow his judgment, or go against it? Neither; but change it, and then follow it; and to that end, inquire further of your mind till he be better informed: and no way else will serve the turn.\textsuperscript{91}

It is important to note that the Puritans acknowledged that there were occasions in which the conscience of an individual was reasonably doubtful in regards to an action.\textsuperscript{92} In these circumstances, the conscience directed action, but there was not complete confidence in its leading. This is differentiated from the errant conscience in that, for the doubting conscience, there are no clear scriptural teachings on such subjects to provide obvious guidance to the conscience. Thus, in circumstances such as these, careful consideration of the conscience was encouraged in order to avoid improperly acting.\textsuperscript{93}

In an effort to explain the details of how one should respond to the doubting conscience, Ames specified that there were two types of doubting: speculative and practical. He further described them by stating, “Speculative is that, which is not


\textsuperscript{91}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{92}Ames, “Of Conscience,” 16.

\textsuperscript{93}Baxter went so far as to outline sixteen different rules to guide the understanding of the various ways in which sin was understood and avoidance encouraged. Baxter, \textit{Christian Directory}, 118-20.
immediately conversant about a practise or action. . . . Practical, is that, which immediately is conversant about some particular action."  

Ames went on to explain that it is permissible to perform an action even if speculative doubt remains “because he that doth so, doth not necessarily doe either against a doubting Conscience, nor without a perswaded Conscience.” However, he also taught that it was impermissible to act against practical doubt. He gave four reasons for this assertion:

The reason is, 1. Because a man cannot doe it of faith, Rom. 14.23. 2. Because, he that doth so, doth not sufficiently abhorre sinne: for willingly and wittingly he exposeth himselfe to the danger of sinning. 3. Because he is not full enough addicted to Gods will, for as he that doth that willingly, whereof he doubts, whether it bee acceptable to his friend or not, doth against the law of friendship: so he that doth that, whereof he doubts, whether it be acceptable to God or not; doth against the law of love to God. 4. In things doubtfull, the safest way is to be chose; but that is the safest part, which if we follow, it is certain we shall not sinne.

Thus, for the Anglican Puritans, there was a recognition that the conscience did not always provide a clear directive and, often, guidance was needed in order to ascertain how to react to its leading.

One of the essential expectations of an individual encountering a doubtful conscience, according to the Puritans, was that efforts be made in order to solidify its leading. Instead of merely allowing the conscience to remain in a state of doubt, a person was to strive to remove the apparent uncertainty. Thus, Ames encouraged:

in all those doubts which doe any way belong to our practise, diligent enquiry is to be made, that we may clearely perceive the truth and not doubt; because while the minde remaines in doubt, the action must of necessity want that perfection which it would have, if it were done with Knowledge, and certainty of judgement. For the

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95 Ibid., 18.
96 Ibid.
more certaine our knowledge is, touching those things which we doe, the more confident we are in doing, and more joyful when wee have done, them.\textsuperscript{97}

Therefore, similar to those who possessed errant consciences, the individual who had a doubting conscience was to go to the necessary lengths to solidify it through proper education and training. The aim in this process was to have a good conscience which could accurately and thoroughly reveal divine judgment on actions.

As the conveyor of God’s moral assessment, the Puritans maintained that the conscience possessed a strong moral authority. Therefore, they held that a good conscience, properly informed, was always to be obeyed and accepted. It represented man’s understanding of God’s judgment for a given situation and, therefore, provided an individual with an ethical assessment which was to be followed. While it could not impose any behavior, the conscience could provide judgment and guidance to the will.

\textbf{The Moral Duties of the Conscience}

It has been demonstrated that the Anglican Puritans understood the conscience to hold a central place in their system of morality. The conscience was perceived as being an individualized spiritual influence which possessed moral authority over an individual. With this characterization established, it is important to turn now to an analysis of the particular roles of the conscience in relation to morality.

Anglican Puritans taught that the conscience had two primary moral duties. The first of these was to provide practical judgment of acts to be done, while the second was to judge past behavior and bring about repentance or affirmation. In explaining the binding nature of the conscience, Perkins delineated these judgmental roles when he said,

\textsuperscript{97}Ibid., 17-18.
“To bind, is to urge, cause, and constraine it in every action either to accuse for sinne, or to excuse for well doing: or to say, this may be done or it may not be done.”

Understanding both of these aspects of the conscience, described by Lindsley as the legislative and judicial functions, is important for grasping how the Anglican Puritan viewed morality. The first of these was directed forward and helped the Puritan see how he was to live. It functioned by providing practical direction for the individual. The second worked by assessing past actions and giving a sense of peace and corroboration or bringing about conviction and repentance. In these ways, the conscience helped provide the guidance necessary for living in an upright and obedient manner.

The Instructive Role of the Conscience

Anglican Puritans believed that the forward focused practical judgment of the conscience worked by providing ethical insight for an individual into future events. When a person faced a moral dilemma, this discerning facet of the conscience worked in two ways. The first was that it provided the knowledge of what choice the person was to make. In this regard, it functioned as the moral reasoning of the individual. Fenner

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98 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 9. Previously Perkins wrote, “The proper actions or duties of conscience are twofold: to give testimonie, or to give judgement” (7). It is important to note that he is here not dividing the role of the conscience into the forward and backward looking aspects as argued for in this dissertation. Rather, he understood the testimonial role to be that of a “register” (8) in which past actions were remembered. While it could be argued that this is a proper way of understanding the conscience, other authors seem to center their understanding of the conscience around the concept of “judgment,” incorporating the testimonial facet within the backward focused judgments. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, the testimonial role of the conscience will be understood as being a component of its duty to convict. These functions and their derivative terms will be used synonymously throughout this paper, unless otherwise specified.


described this aspect of the conscience as being a “preacher.” He said, “It is a preacher also to tell us our duty both towards God and towards man; yea, it is a powerful preacher; it exhorteth, urgeth, provoketh; yea, the most powerful preacher that can be; it will cause the stoutest and stubbornest heart under heaven to quake now and then.”

As such, the Anglican Puritans understood that the conscience would analyze a situation, call on the learning previously provided, and through sensitivity and receptivity to the Holy Spirit, provide direction. As has been seen, this was often accomplished through a syllogistic process in which a person could assess and determine biblical courses of action. Thus, the Puritans believed it was crucial to have a conscience that was well informed of Scripture and God’s commands.

It is important to note, once again, that the conscience was believed to play an advisory role and not a dictatorial one. This is especially significant as the practical guidance aspect of the conscience is delineated. It should be emphasized that, while the conscience was perceived as judging and directing one’s choices, the Puritans did not believe it had the ability to force actions. Perkins explained that the conscience should be seen as part of one’s understanding and he differentiates this from one’s will. He said,

I say Conscience is a part of the understanding, and I shew it thus: God in framing of the soule placed in it two principal faculties, Understanding and Will. Understanding is that facultie in the soule, whereby we use reason: and it is the more principall part serving to rule and order the whole man: and therefore it is placed in the soule to be as the wagginer in the waggin. The will is another facultie

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102 Ibid.
103 Packer noted that this syllogistic process is often performed so quickly that the individual often does not fully realize the steps being accomplished. Packer, Among God’s Giants, 143-44.
whereby we doe will or nill any thing, that is, choose or refuse it. . . Now, conscience is not placed in the affection nor will, but in the understanding.  

Van Til explicated Perkins’ view by stating, “As the wagoner guides the wagon, so, too, reason and conscience in the understanding guide man. Will, by contrast, only has the power to choose or refuse some course of action; it can give no direction.” Thus, the conscience was seen as having the ability to guide an individual, but it was not able to ensure that its direction was followed.

The second aspect of the forward focused conscience, according to Anglican Puritans, was that the conscience also helped provide the fortitude to make moral choices. As it informed and directed action, the conscience solidified the resolve of the person to withstand temptation and choose obedience to Scripture. Ames referenced this subject as he discussed the notion that there are weak and strong consciences. He wrote that an imperfection of the weak conscience “is in the purpose and settlednes of heart, being easely drawne to what is evill.” Contrarily, he described the consequences of a strong conscience by stating, “In such a resolution and settlednesse of heart, whereby it is so strengthened in truth and godlinesse, that it cannot easily be remooved.” This did not necessarily mean that an individual whose conscience was directing him toward a particular path would choose rightly. However, it was understood that the stronger a person’s conscience was, the more likely it was that the conscience would hold sway over

104 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 5.
105 Van Til, Liberty of Conscience, 18.
107 Ibid., 40.
the will. Therefore, Anglican Puritans believed it important to find ways to strengthen and fortify the conscience.

The Reflective Role of the Conscience

While the conscience’s role as judge for future moral dilemmas was significant, its reflective role was also crucial. Anglican Puritans believed that the second way the conscience functioned was by looking back on situations and actions and providing analysis of choices made. Perkins described a twofold method in which this judicial facet of the conscience functioned. He said, “The proper actions or duties of conscience are twofold: to give testimonie, or to give judgement.” In both of these ways, the reflective role of the conscience worked to bring assessment to past actions and behaviors.

In order to comprehend fully the judicial role of the conscience, it is important to understand what was meant by both the “testimonie” and “judgment” duties of the conscience. The first of these is purely referential in nature. Sibbes provided a lengthy explanation of this idea in his commentary on First Corinthians. He summarized his view by writing,

In a word, to clear this further concerning the nature of conscience, know that God hath set up in man a Court, and there is in man all that are in a Court. There is a

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108 Ames, “Of Conscience,” 39-40. Fenner is also helpful when he explained that a firm and renewed conscience will be watchful and able to war against sin. Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 132.

109 Fenner wrote that man is to “labour to strengthen” a weak conscience.” Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 136.

110 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 7.
Register to take notice of what we have done: besides the general rule . . . there is conscience which is a Register to set down whatsoever we have done, exactly.\textsuperscript{111}

Perkins explained this concept similarly. He said,

The manner that conscience useth in giving testimonie, stands in 2. things. First, it observes & takes notice of al things that we do: secondly, it doth inwardly & secretly within the heart, tell us of them all. In this respect it may fitly bee compared to a Notarie, or a Register that hath always the penne in his hand, to note & record whatsoever is said or done.\textsuperscript{112}

In this way, the conscience was seen as possessing a testimonial function whereby it kept a detailed record of deeds done.

While the conscience served to bear witness to past events, it was not limited to this chronicling role. Rather, it went on to either affirm or bring about conviction for those actions done. Again, Sibbes is helpful as he put forth five functions of the conscience in regards to previous activities, only the first two of which are purely testimonial. He wrote,

It [what has been done] may be forgotten a while, by the of lusts, or one thing or other; but there is a Register that writes it downe, conscience is the Register.

And then there are Witnesses, *The testimony of conscience*: conscience doth witness, this I have done, this I have not done.

There is an Accuser with the witness, the conscience it accuseth, or excuseth.

And then there is the Judge, conscience is the Judge there: it doth judge this is well done, this is ill done.

Then there is an Executioner, and conscience is that too, upon accusation, and judgement there is punishment.\textsuperscript{113}

Perkins likewise explained this judgmental function. He said,

The second worke of conscience is to give judgement of things done. To give judgement is to determine, that a thing is well done or ill done. Hereine

\textsuperscript{111}Sibbes, *Corinthians*, 222.

\textsuperscript{112}Perkins, *A Discourse of Conscience*, 8.

\textsuperscript{113}Sibbes, *Corinthians*, 222.
conscience is like to a judge that holdeth an assise, & takes notice of inditements, and causeth the most notorious malefactour that is, to hold up his hand at the barre of his judgement.\textsuperscript{114}

In this way, the reflective aspect of the conscience served to give assessment of past actions to determine whether they were done well.

The Anglican Puritans were not satisfied with a conscience that merely judged actions and left man in his current state. Rather, they believed it important that the judgments produce appropriate responses in the life of the individual. It was hoped that when the conscience negatively judged actions, an individual would repent of those ways and make different choices in the future. Perkins expressed this idea by stating, “The effect of the accusing and condemning conscience, is to stirre up sundrie passions and motions in the heart, but specially these five.”\textsuperscript{115} He then went on to detail each of the five responses. He said,

The first is \textit{shame}, which is an affection of the heat, whereby a man is grieved and displeased with himselfe . . .

The second passion is \textit{sadnes} and sorrow. . . sorrow ariseth of a mans sinnes, for which his conscience accuseth him. . .

The third is \textit{feare}, in causing whereof conscience is verie forcible. . .

The fourth is \textit{desperation}, whereby a man through the vehement and constant accusation of his conscience comes to bee out of all hope of the pardon of sinnes. . .

The last is a \textit{perturbation} or disquietnesse of the whole man: whereby all the powers and faculties of the whole man are forth of order.\textsuperscript{116}

Fenner thus concluded that “Conscience is the most sovereigne means (under God and his holy Spirit) to work repentance in men that can be.”\textsuperscript{117}
As the Anglican Puritans dealt with the convicting function of the conscience, one of the resulting consequences which become prominent was the concept of a troubled conscience. The Puritans used this language to define people experiencing the emotions expressed above by Perkins. Fenner aptly described this idea of a troubled conscience as “a conscience accusing for sinne, and affrighting with apprehensions of Gods wrath.”

Similarly, Sibbes wrote,

In good, the testimonie of conscience breeds joy, for it enjoyes the pleasures of this life, and the comforts of it with the favour of God; conscience tells the man that he hath gotten the things well that he enjoys, that he hath gotten the place, and advancement that he hath well: that he enjoyes the comforts of this life with a good conscience, and all things are pure to the pure. If he have gotten them ill, conscience upbraids him alway, and therefore he cannot joy in the good estate he hath. If a man had all the contentments in the world, if he had not the testimonie of a good conscience, what were all? What contentment had Adam in Paradise, after once by sin he had fallen from the peace of conscience? None at all. A little that the righteous hath, is better then great riches of the ungodly; because they have not peace of conscience.

The result of this emphasis on having a settled conscience was that Puritans spent a great deal of effort seeking ways to ensure the maintenance of a peaceful conscience through efforts to consistently live morally, as well as through various means meant to comfort the troubled conscience.

While the conscience frequently convicted one of wrongdoing and brought about a “troubled” sense, it was not limited to this negative response. Instead, the conscience was also understood as eliciting positive reactions. Perkins called such responses excusing or absolving. He described the excuse as “an action of the conscience

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118 Ibid., 85.
119 Sibbes, Corinthians, 228.
giving judgement that the thing is well done.” He went on to explain that “To absolve, is an action of the conscience giving judgement that a man is free and cleare from fault and so from punishment.” He concluded that the responses to such judgments include “boldnes and confidence” and “Joy & rejoycing.” In these ways, the conscience worked by bringing judgment and the resulting responses to such findings.

Concluding Thoughts on the Conscience’s Moral Functions

It was through both the instructive reasoning and the reflective analysis that the conscience was understood to function according to the Anglican Puritan. As has been demonstrated, the Puritans believed each of these aspects of the conscience was important for moral living. Yet, in his thesis on the Puritan conscience, Lindsley seeks to prove that the judicial nature of the conscience was the view emphasized by the Puritans. While Lindsley does an admirable job at demonstrating his perspective through the writings of Perkins and Ames, he does not offer sufficient evidence to validate such claims. In particular, Lindsley seems to diminish the initial chapters of Ames’ Conscience and the Cases Thereof in which Ames delineated his view of the conscience. In his opening pages, Ames focused predominantly on the legislative role of the conscience, not the judicial. However, Lindsley does not give due consideration to this section of the text and, instead, seeks to show that Ames’ position is similar to that of

121 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 40.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid., 41.
125 Ibid., 193-223.
Martin Luther, wherein the judicial function is primary.\textsuperscript{126} While it is true that some Puritans, such as Perkins and Sibbes, stressed the reflective role of the conscience, this does not necessitate the conclusion espoused by Lindsley.\textsuperscript{127} Rather, as has been seen, both facets of this practical judgment were integral to the Puritan understanding of the conscience. Therefore, while some Puritan authors may have highlighted one characteristic of the conscience, it is important not to neglect the totality of what Anglican Puritans taught, particularly in those texts which focus on providing a thorough explanation of the conscience.\textsuperscript{128}

\textbf{Formation of the Conscience}

It has been made apparent that the conscience played a significant role in Anglican Puritan moral teachings. As the ethical guide for daily living, the conscience was seen as a foundational component for Puritan life. Yet, the conscience was not viewed as a static force that was unaffected. Rather, Anglican Puritans believed that an individual’s conscience was fluid, capable of being strengthened, weakened, encouraged, and informed. Fenner expressed this mindset as he taught how an infirm conscience can be remedied. He said,

\textsuperscript{126}Lindsley does make a noteworthy statement regarding the reasoning for the emphasis on the reflective role of the conscience. He said, “The judicial conscience must be established prior to dealing in detail with his legislative dimension. The Gospel is the foundation for the Law in the Christian life.” Lindsley, “Conscience and Casuistry,” 221-22. Lindsley does not seek to fully prove this statement, but his limited efforts do show that there may be validity to such a conclusion.

\textsuperscript{127}Perkins, \textit{A Discourse of Conscience}, 40, 70-78; Sibbes, \textit{Corinthians}, 222.

\textsuperscript{128}The three major treatises on the conscience presented in this paper, Perkins’ \textit{A Discourse of Conscience}, Ames’ “Of Conscience,” and Fenner’s “Treatise of Conscience” all mention the judicial and prescriptive functions of the conscience.
If any have weak consciences let them labour to strengthen them. Ye see what imperfections are in a weak conscience; how apt it is to be offended and to judge other mens liberty, how prone to misleading: therefore let every good soul labour to be strengthened. ¹²⁹

As such, texts were written and efforts were made to help educate and build up this component of morality. ¹³⁰

As Anglican Puritans wrote on the subject of conscience formation, there are two facets of understanding which became prominent. Sibbes expressed these ideas as he wrote on the importance of laboring to gain a good conscience. He said, “labour to have good rules to guide it [conscience]. And then, labour to obey those rules: knowledge and obedience are necessary, that conscience may give a good witnesse.” ¹³¹ From this, it can be concluded that Sibbes understood the formation of the good conscience to involve both the gaining of proper knowledge and the efforts to obey the informed conscience. Thus, it is important to look at each of these aspects in Puritan writings to more fully comprehend their notions of building up the conscience.

Developing the Conscience through Education

The first facet of conscience formation is the understanding that the conscience could be developed through proper education. Anglican Puritans understood that if the conscience was not adequately informed, it would not function properly. Thus, Sibbes concluded that “an Ignorant man can never have a good conscience, especially a man that affects Ignorance; because he hath no rule: he labours to have none. It is not merely


¹³⁰See footnote 68.

¹³¹Sibbes, Corinthians, 224.
ignorance, but likewise obstinacy with ignorance.”\textsuperscript{132} Therefore, the Puritans maintained that work must be done in order to gain a knowledgeable conscience. Perkins wrote that in order to obtain such a good conscience, the conscience must be properly prepared. The obtaining of knowledge is necessary for this to take place. He said, “In the preparation, foure things are required. The first, is the knowledge of the law, and the particular commandements thereof, whereby we are taught what is good, what is bad; what may be done, and what may not be done.”\textsuperscript{133} With this understanding, Puritans sought to properly inform the conscience so that it might know what biblical living was.

As Anglican Puritans taught on the idea of educating the conscience, they stressed the importance of not just being educated, but being appropriately educated. They maintained that a person could not be expected to live rightly if he did not know what right living was.\textsuperscript{134} As has been previously expressed, the Puritans believed the Bible was the primary foundation on which the conscience was to function. As such, they taught that the conscience was to be educated in the Word of God in order for it to be properly informed. Thus, Fenner drew the conclusion, “the knowledge of Gods Law is necessary, for else conscience cannot work. A drunkard might be drunk every day in the yeere, and yet conscience could not trouble him nor condemne him of sin sin unlesse

\textsuperscript{132}Ibid., 225.

\textsuperscript{133}Perkins, \textit{A Discourse of Conscience}, 70. The three other preparations are as follows: “The second, is the \textit{knowledge} of the judicall sentence of the law. . . . The third, is the \textit{just} and \textit{serious examination} of the conscience by the lawe. . . . The fourth, is a \textit{sorrow} in respect of the punishment of sinne, . . .” (70-73). While these are important aspects of preparation, they seem to be built upon the foundational preparation of the first: knowledge of the law. Therefore, discussion will be focused upon this primary element.

\textsuperscript{134}Baxter, 115.
he knew the Law, That god had forbid drunkennesse.”¹³⁵ Therefore, the Anglican
Puritans worked to ensure that every person’s conscience was equipped with the
knowledge and expectations found in Scripture.

Throughout the Anglican Puritan teachings on the subject of educating the
conscience, there appears to be two avenues whereby the individual pursued knowledge.
The first of these was through personal labor. The Puritans believed that it was necessary
for every individual to consistently strive to be informed with God’s Word. Ames
expressed the reasoning for this as he emphasized the importance of God’s will binding
the conscience. He wrote, “Hence it is that the Law of God onely doth bind the
Conscience of man.”¹³⁶ Therefore, he stated that there was a necessity of the conscience
being enlightened by God’s Word. He wrote that an “Inlightened” conscience is one
which “acknowledge[s] whatsoever is prescribed in the Scriptures.”¹³⁷ Thus, it was of
great importance for the Puritans to pursue a conscience which was fully informed by
Scripture.

The centrality of Scripture for the Anglican Puritan’s perspective on the
conscience meant that they put an emphasis on working to ensure that one fully
understood the teaching of the Bible. This was viewed as a task which had to be
endeavored upon personally in order to be accomplished. Thus, Sibbes wrote, “Let us
labour to have right principles, and grounds, to cherish principles of nature common with
the Heathens: and to lay up principles out of the Word of God, to preserve the

¹³⁷Ibid.
admonitions, and directions, and rules of the Word.”138 Perkins is helpful in understanding how this was achieved. In particular, he provided three means by which the individual may “increase in the knowledge of the word of God.” He wrote,

... ignorance, it is a great and usuall impediment of good conscience. For when the minde erreth or misconceiveth, it doth mislead the conscience, and deceive the whole man. The way to avoid this impediment it, to doe our indeavour that we may daily increase in the knowledge of the word of God, that it may dwell in us plentifully: to this end we must pray with David, that he would open our eyes, that we might understand the wonders of his law: and withal wee must daily search the scriptures for understanding, as men used to search the mines of the earth for golde ore, Prov. 2.4. Lastly, we must labour for spiritual wisdom, that we might have the right use of Gods word in every particular action: that being by it directed, we may discerne what we may with good conscience doe or leave undone.139

In such ways, the Puritans held that the conscience could be informed of scriptural teachings in order for it to be rightly formed.

The second avenue whereby the conscience could be educated appropriately came from sources outside of the individual. Anglican Puritans believed entities such as the family, the church, and the community played important roles in providing knowledge which would influence the conscience.140 Sibbes expressed the significant influence by which outside forces come to bear on an individual. He wrote,

The cause that men live wickedly is false principles: therefore they have so vile consciences as they have, their hearts deceive them, and they deceive their hearts. They have false principles put into them by others, they are deceived, and they deceive their hearts, they force false principles upon themselves.141

138 Sibbes, Corinthians, 225.
139 Perkins, A Discourse of Conscience, 75.
141 Sibbes, Corinthians, 225.
Thus, it was understood that while the Bible was to be the primary grounding of the conscience, other sources could influence and sway the conscience, be that in ways congruent with scriptural teachings or contrary to it.

The Puritan belief in the significance of outside forces in the education of the conscience meant that they put great responsibility on others to rightly affect the consciences of those with which they had influence. Ames explained this understanding as he related the duties of one man to another in regards to sin and training in righteousness. He answered the question of who should reprove others by saying,

This duty in some manner belongs to all men who have the use of reason: because it is a Precept of the natural Law, a deed of Charity, and a general duty of Neighbour towards Neighbour, as hee is so... Yet more especially it belongs to them, who either by reason of their calling, ought to looke to the good of other.\textsuperscript{142}

Ames went on to specify the significance of oversight in conscience building as it related to parenting duties. He said, “They [parents] are bound either by themselves, or others, to bring them up in the Discipline, and feare of the Lord... the reason is, because Parents ought not onely to provide that their Children may live, but that (as farre as in them lieth) they live well to God.”\textsuperscript{143} In this way, outside influences, such as parents, held significant power over the education of the conscience for individuals they encountered. The information provided through these entities, be it correct or incorrect, helped lead to the state of the conscience in each person.

\textsuperscript{142}Ames, “Of Conscience,” 134.
\textsuperscript{143}Ibid., 157.
Developing the Conscience through Strengthening Its Influence

The second feature of note in the study of conscience development for Anglican Puritans is that they maintained that the impact of the conscience on an individual could change. For some, the conscience was the primary influencer in moral decisions; for others, it was merely a voice among many. Ames explained this idea as he wrote concerning the weak and strong conscience. He said, “A Good Conscience admits of degrees, for which cause it is by the Apostle distinguished, into a weake and a strong Conscience, Rom. 15.1.”

He then described a weak conscience as “that which is purged by unfained Faith, but is troubled with these imperfections, which all beleevers, for the most part, doe outgrow by time.” Ames explained that one of the imperfections the weak conscience must be concerned with was the strength of the conscience to withstand evil. He understood the weak conscience to be “easely drawne to what is evill” while the strong conscience was able to withstand such temptations. In this way, the Puritans believed that the conscience’s abilities to direct an individual were not stagnant and could be strengthened.

A result of the Puritan understanding of the weak and the strong conscience was that they sought to find ways to strengthen the conscience so that it might be more firmly established and hold sway over an individual. As has previously been stated, Fenner expressed the view that an individual was to “labour to strengthen” the weak conscience.

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144 Ibid., 38. See also Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 134-37. Fenner used both the language of weak/strong and firm/infirm.


146 Ibid., 39-40.
In turn, this strengthened conscience would have more influence in directing the will of a person in accordance with scriptural teaching. Thus, the Anglican Puritans held that with much work, a person’s conscience could be positively affected and become effective in leading him in moral pursuits.

As the Anglican Puritans worked to develop means by which the conscience could be strengthened, one of the primary concepts which surfaced was an emphasis on comforting the conscience. These Puritans maintained that when a conscience was troubled, other individuals could minister to the person experiencing duress and help him strengthen his conscience. This is demonstrated in the life of the Puritan pastor Richard Greenham. Samuel Clark described his influence by stating,

For having great experience and an excellent faculty to relieve and comfort distressed consciences, he [Greenham] was sought to, far and neer, by such as groaned under spiritual afflictions and temptations . . . Yea the fame of this spiritual Physician so spread abroad, that he was sent for to very many, and the Lord was pleased so farre to blesse his labours that by his knowledge and experience many were restored to joy and comfort, out of unspeakable and insupportable terroours and torments of conscience.\textsuperscript{148}

Perkins also spoke of this ability to comfort the consciences of others. He went so far as to provide six rules to be followed in such a process. He wrote,

I. One is, that the comfort which is ministred, be allayed with some mixture of the law. . .
II. Another rule is this: If the distressed party, be much possessed with griefe himelf, he must not be left along, but always attended with good companie. . .
III. Thirdly, the partie in distress must be taught, not to rest upon his own judgement, but always to submit himself: and be content to be advised by others, that are men of wisedome, judgement, and discretion. . .

\textsuperscript{147}Fenner, “Treatise of Conscience,” 136.

\textsuperscript{148}Samuel Clarke, \textit{The lives of Two and Twenty English Divines, Eminent in their Generations for Learning, Piety, and Painfulnesse in the Work of the Ministry, and for their Sufferings in the Cause of Christ} (London: A. M., 1660), 16.
IV. Fourthly, the partie distressed, must never heare tell of any fearefull accidents, or of any that have been in like, or worse case then himselfe is. . .

V. Fiftly, the partie that is to comfort must beare with al the wants of the distressed. . .

VI. Sixtly, he that is the comforter, must not be discouraged, though after long labour and paines taking, there follow small comfort and ease, to the partie distressed. . . 149

In these ways, Anglican Puritans believed that outside forces could influence the conscience of an individual and work to strengthen it. 150

As has been demonstrated, the Puritans maintained that the conscience was an entity which was very fluid. Its role in the life of each person could change as it grew stronger or weaker and as it gained more knowledge or neglected training. Therefore, the Anglican Puritans strove to educate and positively affect one another’s consciences. In the methods they developed, they hoped to provide for the formation of the conscience so that each individual would have the ability to consistently live morally.

Conclusion

As has been shown, the key component of Anglican Puritan morality was the idea of the conscience. It was understood that the conscience was the guide for ethical living. As the judge of actions, past and future, the conscience was responsible for helping bring about purity. Therefore, Anglican Puritans felt strongly that those who were in roles which could influence and help strengthen other’s consciences had a duty to


150 Ames wrote of the great responsibility of the minister to ensure the application or moral principles to the lives of those under his care. He says, “Because of [this] slownesse in men to . . . apply, there is a necessity laid on all Ministers, not only to declare Gods will generally, but likewise so farre as they are able, to helpe, and further both publicly, and in private, the application of it.” Ames, “Of Conscience,” 30.
properly exercise their sway in a way that would be result in godly living in those around them.

Because of the significance of the Anglican Puritan pastor in the life of the individual, as established in chapter two, he was given great responsibility in relation to properly educating the conscience. This, in combination with the stress on basing the conscience’s judgments upon scriptural teachings, meant that the Puritan ministers were given the significant charge to training up their congregant’s consciences to be informed of the dictates of the Bible. In turn, this would allow each person to be able to form proper biblically based syllogisms with which to assess actions. In addition, it was his duty to comfort and develop the consciences of those under his care so that they would be able to choose proper biblical behavior. Therefore, Puritans maintained that the pastorate played a crucial role in the task of moral formation.

In the following chapters, the numerous methods utilized by Puritan pastors to develop consciences, both in public and in private, will be presented. In these various ways, it was hoped that the Anglican Puritan ministers would be able to hold significant sway over their congregants and help promote godly and pure living.