

Frequently Asked Questions about Bound Conscience in documents from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality

Why do the ideas of conscience and bound conscience seem so unfamiliar?

For a variety of reasons the idea of conscience has not had a major place in moral reflection for many decades. But the term “conscience” is used often in the New Testament (Acts, Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, 1&2 Timothy, Hebrews and 1Peter), and is common in moral thought throughout most of Christian history. In the Lutheran church, as evident in Reformation writings and its central theological principles, the concept plays an important part in ethics and pastoral care. Indeed, the Reformation’s frequent attention to conscience highlights the pastoral underpinnings of all Lutheran theology and the Lutheran rejection of both papalism and its individualistic equivalent, “enthusiasms” in ethical judgments. (See the essay by Dr. Timothy Wengert for definitions of these terms and for an extended reflection on the whole issue of bound conscience. www.elca.org/faithfuljourney)

How is conscience defined?

There is a vast amount of literature on this topic but we may take as our starting point Martin Luther’s most comprehensive definition: “For conscience is not the power to do works, but to judge them. The proper work of conscience (as Paul says in Romans 2 [:15]), is to accuse or excuse, to make guilty or guiltless, uncertain or certain. Its purpose is not to do, but to pass judgment on what has been done and what should be done...” (*Judgment on Monastic Vows* [Luther’s Works, 44: 298]).

What is meant, then, by “conscience”?

The first meaning of conscience, then, refers to the capacity of the human being to distinguish right from wrong and truth from falsehood. However, Luther and other Reformers also use the term “conscience” in a second way by drawing on Romans 2 and the Christian belief that human beings have an unconditional moral responsibility before God. They apply conscience more generally to mean the entire person as one stands before God and views one’s whole self in the light of God’s Word—God’s Word being understood as law and gospel. This sense that conscience describes the entire person makes clear that talk about conscience is not talk about lightly held or unconsidered “opinions” but about Christians in their personal identity as they stand before God. In most Christian moral traditions conscience provides a way to speak about the integrity of the individual moral agent in her or his deepest understanding of good moral actions and of actions that are wrong, destructive, and dehumanizing. For a person to act against his or her own conscience is itself always wrong because it involves self-contradiction and betrays one’s deep and settled convictions.

Is “bound conscience” in the Bible?

The phrase is not in the Bible, but the concept certainly is. This is most readily illustrated by Paul’s counsel in Romans 14 or 1 Corinthians 8 regarding the acceptability of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. It is crucial to recognize that in the Pauline churches these issues were not minor matters. Meat sacrificed to idols involved, on the one side, the very freedom of faith to declare the idols to be nothing and, on the other, the sense that eating such meat really is participation in idol worship. Paul clearly felt that eating such meat represented no danger to the faith of Christians and carried no taint of idolatry. And yet precisely because these matters were significant, Paul teaches that those Christians who believed this are obligated to walk in love by avoiding meat for the sake of the neighbor’s conscience. This is because that neighbor may well view the matter in such a way as to affect faith itself. If some members of the community are, after study and reflection, still deeply convinced that it smacks of idolatry, then everyone should refrain in order not to scandalize and offend these conscience-stricken members of the

community. (It is significant to notice that Paul seems to assume a continuing conversation within the community as well.)

Where could I find references to the idea of “bound conscience”?

Perhaps the most well-known reference is Luther’s trial for heresy before the emperor in 1521 where he concluded by stating “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason... I am *bound* by the Scriptures I have quoted and *my conscience is captive to the Word of God*” [emphasis added]. This position was for Luther not an easy one to hold and it was not, as later historians often portrayed it, the first instance of a self-referencing conscience shedding the shackles of medieval religion. Luther’s conscience was not free but bound to and by God’s Word, which assured him of God’s free and unconditional forgiveness in Christ. Luther is careful to distinguish his stand from willful and capricious rebellion out of pride or egotism. He has studied Scripture in great depth. He has debated with others. He has written articles and read responses and responded to responses. He continues to be open to future arguments. He could conceivably be wrong. But at the moment of his speaking, he literally has no choice. He *must* be true to what, at that moment, he understands Scripture to say. To do anything else would be self-contradictory, and deeply wrong. It would be duplicity or false witness before neighbor and before God. In moral and religious matters, Christians can experience themselves as bound by their relationship with God to particular understandings from Scripture.

But how does it apply to the debate about same-gender relationships?

Bound conscience describes the situation of those who, after careful reflection and discussion, hold a position on pastoral and ethical concern because they are convinced of it by particular understandings of Scripture and tradition and see it as inextricably linked with faithful living. It also emphasizes the importance of respecting the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ. The reference to bound conscience in relation to questions about same-gender relationships was first introduced to the ELCA conversation in the 2005 Report and Recommendations from the Task Force for ELCA Studies on Sexuality. (See <http://www.elca.org/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Social-Statements-in-Process/JTF-Human-Sexuality/Resources/Historical-Documents.aspx>, Report and Recommendation of the Task Force for the ELCA Studies on Sexuality (2005), p.11). This idea was foundational to the task force recommendation, later adopted by the 2005 Churchwide Assembly, that the ELCA “concentrate on finding ways to live together faithfully in the midst of disagreements....” on this matter. The passage from the report *also* draws attention to how Lutheran Reformers referred to bound conscience in matters regarding pastoral and ethical questions in relation to the life of faith.

What did the 2005 report state?

“When Christians disagree about an ethical issue of this magnitude, one important category for determining the policy of the church may be the recognition that participants in this debate are disagreeing not out of pride or selfish desires, but because their consciences are bound to particular interpretations of Scripture and tradition. The careful way Luther approached moral dilemmas (e.g., in *The Estate of Marriage* [Luther’s Works 45: 17-49] or *Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved* [Luther’s Works 46: 93-137]) showed a genuine concern for the integrity of conscience....”.

So, is this all about each of us asserting our own conscience-bound understanding?

The very fact that several different positions may be bound to Scripture means that we cannot simply assert one interpretation of Scripture over another but are called to respect consciences in the community of faith on this matter. The emphasis of “conscience-bound” is not on declaring oneself to be conscience-bound; rather it is that we recognize the conscience-bound nature of the convictions of others in the community of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:28–29). But not every opinion concerning appropriate behavior constitutes a settled matter of conscience. We grow and continue

to mature throughout our lives. Much of our behavior is guided not by conscience but by customs and conventions that we have not fully examined. Our self-centeredness constricts our moral insights too, as does the inadequacy of our knowledge and our particular social context. It is for this reason that Christians speak of the formation of conscience through study, dialogue, correction, and reflection within a community of faith. It is when we have come—by deep communal searching—to settled convictions so deep that they constitute our very moral identity that we may speak, in humility but with earnest conviction, about what we can and cannot do “in conscience.” In most cases, over time that communal searching will bring all members of the community to deep and shared convictions, but not always.

But still, couldn't anyone just declare themselves to be conscience-bound about anything?

No, the positions described by the task force regarding whether and how to regard lifelong monogamous, same-gender relationships are ones that have been refined and developed over the course of years of debate; each one has support by scholars, church leaders, and many others in the community of faith. Each position refers to careful readings of Scripture. Each understands the cultural and scientific information in different ways. Each is concerned deeply about loving the neighbor and serving the community of the church. Yet each position differs in its conclusion. Again, the point is not simply about toleration but more profoundly a call for bearing the burden of full respect for the fellow believer. It is about the generosity of refraining from coercing members to act in ways they deeply believe to be wrong. It is about speaking and acting with awareness that rejecting the other's stance might also shake that neighbor's faith and trust.

Can conscience be wrong?

Lutherans believe that human beings are fallible and that no one can achieve moral perfection. We believe that conscience is the power to make moral judgments about action but we do not believe that conscience is some sort of implanted, unerring message from God. Conscientious convictions can be wrong. However, even if one believes that the person with whom one disagrees is mistaken in her or his judgments, it is morally very dangerous to compel that person to act against her or his conscience. This is so partly because however deep one's own convictions on the matter are, one must acknowledge that they, too, may be mistaken. But it is also so because to compel someone to act against conscience is an attack on their very integrity as a moral agent, and from their point of view it will be experienced as an attack on the right and the good on which they may be prepared to stake their own well-being.

Is this matter of conscience so central that it determines whether one is saved?

No, it does not. While these questions about morality and ministry practice are significant for individuals and for the life of the church because they affect people deeply, it is important to be clear that in **the** most important sense, one's faith is **not** at stake. Lutherans do not believe that our salvation rests on the correctness of morals or practice. Through Christ's atoning sacrifice we are “cloaked in the righteousness of God.” This is the good news by which we live. In gratitude for the love and mercy we have received, we seek, of course, to live into the life of Christ—that is, into the life of love in which the commands and law of God teach us to discover both our own failures and the ways to live that bless the world. While differing on the morality of same-gender sexual behavior, members of this church remain confident that it is by God's grace in Christ received in faith that we are saved. Free in Christ and bearing one another's burdens, we can make decisions about this important matter according to our best reverent judgments, knowing that we but “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Corinthians 13:12) and are not of one mind. But we are called to do so praying daily that the Holy Spirit may work within us and among us in order that the sinful hearts of each and every one of us may be broken and made new by the Love that passes understanding.