

## Conscience: Some Christian Texts, December 2016

### Introductory Note

Origins? The Greek word *suneidesis*, of Ionian origin is found in Democritus (first sighting), and not seen in papyri or inscriptions of earliest writings in Greek. 'Conscience' 'Con Scientia' Scientia, in English is usually translated as knowledge: conscience may be described as 'knowledge within oneself' or inner knowing. It comes from the rich vein of philosophical discourse developed in the extended Greek world and as such was probably not part of the vocabulary used in the Arabic speaking world of the early Gospel texts. It is used for 'an inner voice' or 'the expression of the decision of the human mind'. This is not to say that its meaning it is not there, it is implied and is presupposed in the whole of the Prophetic Movement, underlying the Genesis Sagas, the Historical books and the Wisdom Literature which are foundational for the Christian Texts of the New Testament.

The Greek word 'Suneidesis' is used only twice in Acts, and 27 times in the Letters whose *sitz im leben* is often the wider world where Paul travelled, of the Diaspora all around the Mediterranean and to the Black Sea shores and beyond, where Greek culture was widespread, having developed as the lingua franca of trade/sailors as well as thought and literature in the Latin world of the Roman Empire. In ordinary Greek parlance of the time it seems to be usually used in the sense of judgment on past actions of the self, leading to remorse. Paul takes up the term but uses it in a wider way; he does use it in this old way of judging past actions and blame but also that it may be seen as approving of actions.

It could be summarised as saying that all people, whether they believe or not, are responsible before God, for acting according to their conscience, and for educating their conscience according to their circumstances and possibilities.

### The Parabolic teachings of Jesus:

'Conscience' is presupposed in the Parabolic teachings of Jesus, such as Luke 12,57, re Reading the Signs of the Times:

'Why not judge for yourselves what is right?': likewise 'To whom much is given of them much shall be expected', Luke 12:48, (e of Talents etc. (Mathew 25:14-30: Luke 19, 12-28).

Luke 10:25-37; The lawyer's question: 'What must I do to inherit eternal life'? Reply: what is written in the Law? He replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself'. And Jesus Said, 'Do this and life is yours'.

But the man was anxious to justify himself, and said to Jesus 'And who is my neighbour'? Jesus replied: "A man was once on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of brigands: they took all he had, beat him and then made off, leaving him half dead. Now a priest happened to be travelling down the same road but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite who came to the place saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan traveller who came upon him was moved to compassion when he saw him. He went up and bandaged his wounds, pouring wine and oil upon them. He lifted him up on his own mount, carried him to the inn and looked after him. Next day, he took out two denarii and handed them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and on my way back I will make good any expense you have. 'Which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigand's hands? "The one who took pity on him" he replied: Jesus said to him "Go and do the same yourself".

### Capacity to understand:

There are frequent references to capacity to understand or hear: e.g. Math. 11:15 re prophetic role of John the Baptist, "if anyone had ears to hear, let him listen".

13,34: after explanation of the dandelion growing along with the wheat: "listen anyone who hears"!

The essential freedom of the question: 'Will you also go away?' John 6,67.

### St. Paul

Romans 2:14 (v 13 re hearers /doers: rabbinical distinction between knowledge and action)

'For instance, pagans who never heard of the Law but are led by reason (*phusis*) to do what the Law commands, may not actually 'possess' the Law, but they can be said to 'be' the law. They can point to the substance of the Law engraved on their hearts- they can call a witness, that is, their own conscience – they have accusation and defence, that is their own inner mental dialogue, on the day when, according to the Good News I preach, God, through Jesus Christ, judges the secrets of mankind.

St. Paul also holds that conscience can decide on issues still to happen, and that even though it may err it should be obeyed e.g.: re Food offered to Idols: 1Cor.8:5ff:

(False Gods, “there is no God but one...”)v7 “Some people however, do not have this knowledge. There are those who have been so long used to idols, they eat this food as though it had been sacrificed to the idol, and their conscience, though weak, is defiled by it. Food of course cannot bring us in touch with God, we lose nothing if we refuse to eat, we gain nothing if we eat. Only be careful if you do not make use of this freedom in a way that proves a pitfall to the weak. Suppose someone sees you, a man who understands, eating in some temple of an idol, his own conscience even if it is weak, may encourage him to eat food which has been offered to idols. In this way your knowledge could become the ruin of someone weak, of a brother for whom Christ died. By sinning in this way against your brothers, and injuring their weak consciences, it would be Christ against whom you sinned. That is why, since food can be the occasion of my brother’s downfall, I shall never eat meat again in case I am the cause of another’s downfall.”

1Cor 10v23

“For me there are no forbidden things”; but not everything is good.....Do not hesitate to eat anything that is sold in butchers’ shops, there is no need to raise questions of conscience: ‘for the earth and everything that is in it belongs to the Lord’. If an unbeliever invites you to his house, go if you want to and eat whatever is put in front of you, without asking questions just to satisfy your conscience’. I take my share with thankfulness, why should I be blamed for food for which I have thanked God?

“Whatever you eat, whatever you drink, whatever you do at all, do it for the Glory of God. Never do anything offensive to anyone – to Jews or Greeks or to the Church of God: just as I try to be helpful to everyone at all times, not anxious for my own advantage but for the advantage of everyone else, so that they may be saved”.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer are sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement and they restore the holiness of their outward lives: how much more effectively the blood of Christ, who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God through the eternal Spirit, can purify the inner self from dead action so that we do our service to the living God.

#### Qualities of Conscience Purity/Sincerity/Truth/in Christ

10:22 ‘As we go in let us be sincere in heart and filled with faith, our minds sprinkled and free from any trace of bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.’

13:18 (Paul in regard to his own situation), We are sure that our own conscience is clear and we are certainly determined to behave honourably in everything we do; pray for us’.

1 Tim 1:19 “Timothy, my son, these are the instructions that I am giving you. I ask you to remember the words once spoken over you by the prophets, and taking them to heart to fight like a good soldier, with faith and a good conscience for your weapons. Some people have put conscience aside and wrecked their faith in consequence”. (followed by section on prayer).

2 Cor 1:12 “There is one thing we are proud of, and our conscience tells us is true: that we have always treated everybody, and especially you, with the reverence and sincerity which come from God, and by the grace of God we have done this without ulterior motive”.

A Good Conscience : Ro,12:2. “Do not model yourselves on the behaviour on the world around you but let your behaviour change modelled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do”...“Each of you must judge himself soberly by the standard of the faith God has given him. Just as each of our bodies has several parts and each part has a separate function, so all of us in union with Christ form one body, and as parts of it we belong together. ....Do not let your love be a pretence but sincerely prefer good to evil.

Phillipians 2:5-11f “In your minds you must be the same as Jesus Christ”, (Have this mind among yourselves which is yours in Christ Jesus) RSV

Ephesians 4:17=24

I urge you not to go on living the aimless kind of life that pagans live. Intellectually they are in the dark, and they are estranged from the life of God, without knowledge because they have shut their hearts to it. Their sense of right and wrong once dulled, they have abandoned themselves to sexuality and eagerly pursue a career of indecency of every kind. Now that is hardly the way you have learnt from Christ, unless you failed to hear him properly when you were taught what the

truth is in Jesus. You must give up your old way of life, you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution, so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth,

Ro 13: 1-7 "You must obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, and so anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision, and such an act is bound to be punished...this is the same reason you must pay taxes...Pay every government official what he has a right to ask – whether it be direct tax or indirect, fear or honour".

The Book of Revelation /Apocalypse 3:15-16, to the people of Laodecea) " I know all about you: how you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were one or the other. But since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth".