

FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A THEOLOGICAL APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT: Freedom of Conscience and Human Rights: A Theological Appraisal.

This article explores freedom of conscience as a foundational theological principle underpinning human rights. Conscience is presented as both a divine gift and a moral capacity that affirms the dignity, agency and accountability of the human person. The first part of the study examines key biblical texts that depict conscience as integral to covenantal responsibility, moral discernment, and freedom in Christ – thus providing a theological basis for rights to belief, expression and dissent. The second part traces the theological development of this concept through patristic, Reformation, and modern Protestant thought, highlighting conscience as the ground for religious liberty and civil resistance. The final section offers a constructive Pentecostal public theology of conscience, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in forming the conscience, empowering ethical witness, and sustaining human freedom in society. By integrating these strands, the article argues that freedom of conscience is not only central to Christian theological anthropology but also indispensable to a robust and enduring vision of human rights.

Keywords: *Freedom of conscience, human rights, moral agency, theological anthropology, Pentecostal theology, biblical ethics, liberty of belief, public theology, spiritual freedom, religious liberty*

Introduction

In human rights discourse, the concept of “freedom of conscience” is both foundational and contested.¹ Legal instruments such as the *Universal Dec-*

1 On the relationship between “human rights” and “freedom of conscience”, see Marcel Măcelaru, “The Practice of Equality and the Problem of Religious Liberty” in N. Burcea & T. Schirmacher (eds), *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință*, București, Editura Universitară, 2013, pp. 603-621.

laration of Human Rights² and the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*³ enshrine it as a basic civil entitlement, yet its deeper moral and theological foundations are merely assumed and never explicitly articulated. Admittedly, if “secular” documents such as these were to make reference to theological or religious ideas, most would find it unusual. However, this omission poses a problem, for the normative strength of the concept lies precisely in its anchoring in moral and theological absolutes. Amid the growing ideologization of political life and the corresponding erosion of religious and moral liberties facing our societies in many parts of the world, a stronger foundation for safeguarding religious liberty – and indeed, for upholding the broader architecture of human rights – seems once again necessary. The renewed theological account of conscience offered here seeks to contribute to that foundation.

Far from being a peripheral concern, freedom of conscience lies at the heart of the biblical vision of the human person.⁴ Humanity, in the Bible, is intentionally created, dignified, and morally accountable before God and others. Building on this theological anthropology, Christian tradition has long understood conscience as the interior *locus* where God’s truth is encountered and ethical responsibility is awakened. Conscience, therefore, is neither mere sentiment nor cultural conditioning, neither private intuition nor subjective preference. It is a God-given capacity for moral discernment and faithful response – a space where divine revelation is received and where the human person stands in freedom before both God and neighbour. As such, it is both gift and responsibility: it grounds human agency, enables moral judgment, and invites a posture of vulnerability and accountability in the presence of God.

2 See Articles 1 and 18 of *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* [online]: available at: <URL: <https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf>> [accessed 25 June 2025]. See also: Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “The Transylvanian Diet: A Precedent to Human Rights and Religious Freedom - 400 Years Prior to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” In *Shaping a World of Freedoms: 75 Years of Legacy and Impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Nelu Burcea and Liberato C. Bautista (eds.), New York, United Nations Plaza, UNEQUAL World Research Center, 2023, pp. 205-221.

3 See Article 18 of the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* [online]: available at: <URL: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ccpr.pdf>> [accessed 25 June 2025].

4 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Key aspects of the Freedom of Conscience,” *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință - Supliment (Journal for Freedom of Conscience)*, Les Arsc, France, Editions IARSIC, 2016, pp.30-37.

This, however, is not justification for isolated interiority. Historically, theological reflection on conscience has shaped defences of liberty of belief and inspired expressions of moral resistance against coercive authority. Conscience therefore emerges as a moral and spiritual faculty that reflects both the inherent dignity of the human person and the covenantal accountability to God and fellow human beings, in community and society. When viewed from this angle, freedom of conscience is not only a political right to be protected, but also a theological reality to be affirmed, cultivated, and respected. On this basis, theology is well positioned to offer a more enduring and comprehensive foundation for human rights – especially the rights to religious liberty, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression – than what secular or procedural accounts can offer on their own.

In response to these concerns, the present article proposes that freedom of conscience is best understood and defended through an integrated theological approach that draws on biblical revelation, theological tradition, and Pentecostal spirituality. The argument unfolds in three steps. First, I examine key biblical texts that portray conscience as central to human dignity, covenantal responsibility, and spiritual freedom. Second, I trace the development of the concept of conscience through Christian history, highlighting selected figures and pivotal moments that shaped its use in the context of religious liberty and civil resistance. Third, building constructively on these insights, I formulate a Pentecostal public theology of conscience, emphasizing the role of the Holy Spirit in forming and liberating the inner moral self, empowering ethical witness, and sustaining moral agency in pluralistic societies. In this way, the theological appraisal offered here aims to contribute to a renewed moral and spiritual architecture for human dignity and public justice.

Conscience, Liberty, and Moral Agency in Scripture

To understand the theological grounding of freedom of conscience, we begin by turning to the biblical story. Across Scripture, human beings are portrayed not merely as recipients of divine instruction but as moral agents capable of hearing, discerning, and responding to God's voice. From creation and covenant to the teachings of Jesus and the letters of Paul, biblical texts bear witness to a vision of the human person that underscores moral responsibility, spiritual freedom, and interior awareness. This section explores, with rapid strokes, how the language and logic of conscience emerge

within this biblical vision – not as an abstract faculty, but as a deeply relational and responsive dimension of life before God.

Creation and Human Dignity

The Bible affirms that human beings are created in the image of God (*imago Dei*) and are thus endowed with inherent dignity and moral agency.⁵ According to Genesis 1:26-27, man is not merely a creature among others, but a being uniquely characterised by rationality, relationality, and responsibility. Divine likeness in this context includes the capacity for ethical discernment, decision-making, and stewardship.⁶ This comes distinctively into view when the biblical creation account is compared with other Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies, which often portray human beings as slaves created to relieve the gods of their burdensome labour – defined by duty rather than dignity.⁷ By contrast, the Genesis narrative underscores the human capacity for self-determination. In this regard, Emil Brunner notes,

The fact that God has created man as a person, as a self, means that He has created him in such a way that he must himself determine to be that for which he was designed. This constitutes his freedom; this liberty of self-determination forms the very essence of selfhood, or of personal existence, and, indeed, it is personal existence itself; it is this element which distinguishes personal existence from every other form of existence. But God has created man in such a way that only when he determines himself in accordance with his destiny does he become that for which he was created. Only then is he really free.⁸

Moreover, from the outset, human beings are depicted as capable of hearing God's voice and responding in freedom. This implies that they possess an interior moral compass – a conscience – through which divine truth is engaged and moral complexity navigated.

5 See Marcel Măcelaru, "Created in God's Image: Human Dignity in Biblical Perspective", *Journal for Freedom of Conscience* 9.3 (2021), pp. 596-608.

6 See the interpretations of *imago Dei* in J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, Grand Rapids, Brazos Press, 2005, pp. 43-92; and Christopher J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*, Downers Grove, IVP Academic, 2006, pp. 421-428.

7 Cf. Clare Amos, "The Concept of Human Rights in Christianity", in Catharina Rachik & Georges Tamer (Eds.), *The Concept of Human Rights in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2023, pp. 63-118 (here p. 72).

8 Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1947, p. 170.

This image-bearing vocation is further illuminated in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, where Israel is exhorted to “choose life” by loving and obeying God.⁹ The act of choosing here is not framed as arbitrary individualistic autonomy but as a covenantal responsibility grounded in divine Self-revelation. The appeal to the heart, mind, and will reflects a theological anthropology in which moral freedom is not incidental but intrinsic to human identity as intended by the Creator.¹⁰ The people are not coerced but summoned to covenant loyalty through conscious moral assent. Such language reveals the biblical understanding of conscience as both recipient and agent of divine instruction – a place of interiorized moral discernment shaped by relationship and revelation.¹¹

The Old Testament motif of moral choice, then, is not an abstract ideal but a covenantal imperative, rooted in creation and enacted through history. The freedom to obey or disobey, to discern and to act, lies at the heart of the biblical portrayal of the human person. This capacity for moral response – conscience – is thus not incidental, but integral to what it means to be made in God’s image and to stand responsibly before God and others. I suggest that it is from this vision of moral and spiritual agency that a theological foundation for freedom of conscience can be constructed.¹²

The Non-Coercive Ethics of Jesus

Continuing the Old Testament line of thought, the New Testament offers the example of Jesus, whose ministry reveals a consistent pattern of non-coercive moral invitation. Jesus appeals to the will and conscience of his hearers, presenting the kingdom of God as a call to voluntary discipleship rather than forced submission.¹³ For instance, in Matthew 19:16-22, the encounter with the rich young ruler highlights Jesus’ respect

9 For an analysis of the rhetoric used in this passage, see Timothy A. Lenchak, “Choose Life!” *A Rhetorical Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28,69–30,20*, Rome, Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1993.

10 Cf. Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible*, Milton Keynes, Paternoster / Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008, pp. 61-65.

11 Cf. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2:36*, G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (Eds.), London, T&T Clark, Study Edition, 2009, par. 668, p. 155.

12 For more on “conscience” in the Old Testament, see C.A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, Studies in Biblical Theology 15, London, SCM Press, 1955, pp. 54-59.

13 On this, see the concept of “revolutionary subordination” in J. Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1994, pp. 162-192.

for the autonomy of the seeker. When the young man walks away sorrowful, Jesus does not compel him to stay. His invitation is clear, but the response must be free.

Similarly, John 6:66-67 describes an occasion in which Jesus turns to the Twelve, after many disciples abandon him, and asks: "Do you also wish to go away?" (NRSV). Whatever emotional weight it may carry in the narrative, this question also affirms the agency of the hearers and upholds freedom of conscience even in the face of rejection. Jesus does not manipulate or threaten but allows individuals to choose their path – even when that choice is costly. This is consistent with the characteristic pattern of his call to discipleship, as described in Luke 9:23-24, where following him involves a conscious and willing "taking up of the cross." The emphasis in the same passage on "if anyone would..." suggests that freedom of moral response is a prerequisite of true discipleship.¹⁴

It seems, therefore, that this "refusal" to compel underscores a critical dimension of conscience in the Scripture: the moral weight of personal response to divine initiative. Jesus' ethical pedagogy rests on persuasion, not force; on transformation, not control. As Brunner observes, he is "present in the call which summons to decision," but "only through the decision of the response of faith" do we truly become his.¹⁵ Thus, Jesus' respect for the conscience of others – regardless of whether they accept or reject him – reveals a deep commitment to moral liberty as intrinsic to authentic life.

Pauline Theology of Conscience and Liberty

Besides the example of Jesus, conscience features prominently in the teachings of the Apostle Paul, who offers the most direct engagement with the Greek concept of συνείδησις (*syneidēsis*) – the term usually translated as "conscience."¹⁶ In Romans 2:14-15, Paul observes that Gentiles, who do not possess the Mosaic Law, "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them." This is a striking affirmation of a universal moral awareness, suggesting that con-

14 The radical nature of discipleship is powerfully articulated in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1979).

15 Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, p. 526.

16 On the Greek background for "conscience", see Victor P. Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul*, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, pp. 47-49; and Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, pp. 13-53.

science is a divine gift operative across cultural and covenantal boundaries. It functions both as witness and judge – affirming the good and exposing the evil.¹⁷

Furthermore, in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8–10, where Paul addresses morally ambiguous issues such as eating meat sacrificed to idols, he does not prescribe a uniform rule but instead urges believers to act according to their conscience, while also respecting the conscience of others. Those who feel free to eat must not look down on those who abstain – and *vice versa*. In this context, conscience is relational and communal, not merely individual. It must be exercised in love, humility, and mutual respect.¹⁸ Indeed, Paul warns against violating one's own conscience, even when it is misinformed. In 1 Corinthians 8:12 he even affirms: "When you sin against your brothers and sisters in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ." This unusual claim reveals Paul's high regard for conscience as a space of personal integrity and divine accountability. The principle underscored here is that Christian liberty is not unbounded autonomy but is constrained by love and directed toward the edification of others (cf. 1 Cor. 10:23-24).¹⁹

It seems, therefore, that for Paul, conscience is a moral faculty shaped by the gospel, exercised in the Spirit, and constrained by love. It is both a personal responsibility and a communal concern – "a special mode of self-awareness" in which one's inner sense of right and wrong, together with corresponding social conduct, comes into view.²⁰ This vision upholds freedom of conscience as essential to ethical life in the body of Christ and as a vital safeguard against coercion and legalism.

Conclusion – The Biblical Message

It follows from the above that the biblical witness affirms freedom of conscience as a core dimension of human dignity, moral agency, and faithful response to God. From creation and covenant to the ministry of Jesus and the letters of Paul, the Scripture consistently emphasizes voluntary mor-

17 Cf. Edwin Cook, "Conscience in the New Testament", *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 15.1 (2004), pp. 142-158.

18 Cf. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, pp. 60-65.

19 Cf. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament*, pp. 75-83.

20 See Wendell Willis, "Conscience in the New Testament", in Jeffrey B. Hammond & Helen M. Alvaré (Eds.), *Christianity and the Laws of Conscience: An Introduction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 23-38 (here p. 37).

al assent and ethical engagement grounded in relationship with God and neighbour. Conscience is portrayed not as an isolated cognitive faculty, but as a relational and spiritual capacity – formed through divine revelation, oriented toward the good, and accountable before God.

This vision highlights the inherently free character of conscience. God addresses human beings as moral agents capable of discerning and choosing; Jesus calls without coercing, respecting the agency of his followers; Paul exhorts believers to act in love, honouring both their own convictions and those of others. In each case, freedom of conscience is not framed as autonomous individualism, but as the space in which divine truth is internalized, ethical responsibility is exercised, and communal integrity is preserved.

Crucially, this biblical theology of conscience provides a foundational moral grammar for human rights discourse. It affirms that liberty of belief, expression, and ethical dissent are not merely political concessions, but theological necessities arising from what it means to be created in the image of God and called to covenantal freedom. Human rights – especially those pertaining to religious liberty and freedom of conscience – are best secured when grounded in a theological anthropology that recognizes conscience as a sacred site of divine encounter and moral deliberation.

This scriptural foundation invites deeper engagement with how the Christian tradition has historically understood, defended, and expanded the role of conscience in public life. The following section traces this trajectory, examining how early theologians, reformers, and modern Christian thinkers have articulated the theological significance of conscience as a basis for both religious liberty and the broader development of human rights.

Conscience and Rights in the Christian Tradition

While the biblical witness lays the theological groundwork for understanding freedom of conscience as intrinsic to moral agency and spiritual dignity, Christian tradition provides numerous examples of how this insight was embodied, refined, and defended across the centuries. From early Church Fathers to Reformation thinkers and modern theologians, conscience has been consistently affirmed as the interior space where divine truth and human responsibility converge. As such, the biblical view of conscience endured as a distinctive thread within Christian thought – animating doctrines of religious liberty, shaping acts of civil resistance, and informing

theological foundations for human rights. What emerges is not a marginal concern but a core commitment: that conscience, rightly formed and freely exercised, is essential to faithful discipleship and just society. This section consists of a short historical sketch that traces this development.

Patristic Roots: Origen and Augustine

The early church fathers laid important groundwork for a theological understanding of conscience by emphasizing its role as the interior witness of divine truth. Origen, for example, envisions an inner moral awareness within the soul that discerns goodness, cooperates with divine illumination, and awakens the will toward transformation. Although the term *συνείδησις* appears infrequently in his extant works, Origen's theology of free will, scriptural formation, and moral persuasion presupposes a deep capacity of internal moral judgment. In *De Principiis* (Book 2),²¹ where he develops his views on anthropology and the freedom of the will, the soul's inner faculties are framed in relation to divine revelation. Likewise, in his *Commentary on Romans* (Books 6–10),²² Origen defends human freedom and moral responsibility against determinist doctrines, implying that the moral life cannot be reduced to external compulsion. Ultimately, for Origen, conscience is not an autonomous or detached faculty, but a moral space formed by Scripture, disciplined by virtue, and responsive to the divine voice.

Augustine presents conscience as a profoundly God-oriented faculty – the place where divine truth confronts human interiority. His famous phrase: *fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te* (“Thou hast made us for Thee and our heart is unquiet till it finds its rest in Thee” – *Confessions* 1.1)²³ signals the soul's longing for union with its Creator. This restlessness is not merely existential, but profoundly ethical, arising from the misalignment between human desire and divine will.

21 See Origen, “De Principiis”, in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, & A. Cleveland Coxe (Eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885, pp. 268-300.

22 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Books 6–10, Thomas P. Halton (Ed.), *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 104, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002.

23 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Roy Joseph Deferrari (Ed.), *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 21, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953, p. 4.

For Augustine, conscience is not infallible; rather, it is the inward forum where divine light illuminates truth and the self stands under judgment. In *De libero arbitrio* (II.13.35), he argues that moral discernment requires the soul's participation in the eternal law – a law discerned through rational reflection illumined by God. This illumination is central to his epistemology: truth is not discovered autonomously, but revealed within by the divine light.

Moreover, Augustine closely ties conscience to memory (*memoria*) as the seat of self-knowledge and the space where one encounters both sin and grace (cf. *Confessions* 10.8.15–10.26.37). Memory, for Augustine, is not merely a repository of past events, but a living theatre of the soul's moral and spiritual drama. Ultimately it is where one meets God. In this sense, conscience becomes a relational, illuminated awareness – an interior dialogue shaped by divine presence. It is the space of *coram Deo*, of living before God, where the human person is convicted of sin and summoned to transformation. The voice of conscience, therefore, is not autonomous reason, but the echo of God's justice and mercy within the heart. This rich interiority lends conscience a spiritual and epistemological depth that later rationalist or legalist models often fail to capture.

In patristic thought, then, conscience is framed as both responsive to revelation and oriented toward God, functioning as a sacred space of moral encounter. Through the writings of Origen and Augustine, we discern a vision of conscience that is neither autonomous nor merely rational, but deeply relational – an interior awareness shaped by divine truth and oriented toward spiritual transformation. Origen's theology of moral freedom and spiritual illumination, together with Augustine's reflections on memory, divine light, and interior judgment, together provide a foundational grammar for Christian reflection on conscience. While a fuller account of patristic views would need to engage other voices – Church Fathers who explored the moral and spiritual formation of the self in significant ways – such a treatment lies beyond the scope of this study. The present focus remains with Origen and Augustine as representative figures who helped define the early theological understanding of conscience as a morally significant and theologically grounded faculty. Their insights would echo across later Christian thought and continue to shape the defence of liberty, moral agency, and human dignity.

Reformation Contributions: Luther and Calvin

The Protestant Reformation marked a decisive turning point in the theological and public significance of conscience. At its heart was Martin Luther's dramatic stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521, where, in response to demands to recant his teachings, he famously declared:

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. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience.²⁴

This statement was not merely rhetorical defiance on Luther's part; it crystallized a theological revolution. It reveals that, for Luther, conscience (*das Gewissen*) is the inner sanctum where the individual stands in direct accountability before God, bound not by ecclesiastical or imperial authority but by the Word of God revealed in the Scripture (*sola Scriptura*) and illumined by faith (*sola fide*). In his treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther writes: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."²⁵ This paradox – holding together freedom and service – reveals that, in Luther's theology, freedom of conscience is not grounded in human autonomy, but in the justifying grace of God. Conscience, properly formed by the Word, is liberated from fear and institutional domination, yet simultaneously bound in love to serve the neighbour.

Furthermore, in Luther's theology, conscience serves a dual function: it is the site where the individual is accused by the law (*lex semper accusat*), but also the locus of liberation through the Gospel.²⁶ Lutheran conscience is therefore Christological – it finds rest not in itself, but in Christ's righteousness imputed by grace. Yet this same conscience becomes a prophetic force when threatened by coercion or tyranny. No wonder then that Lu-

24 Martin Luther, "Luther at the Diet of Worms," in Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald & Helmut T. Lehmann (Eds.), *Luther's Works*, Vol. 32, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, pp. 103-130 (p. 112).

25 Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald & Helmut T. Lehmann (Eds.), *Luther's Works*, Vol. 31, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, pp. 329-377 (p. 344).

26 Cf. Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4," in Jaroslav J. Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald & Helmut T. Lehmann (Eds.), *Luther's Works*, Vol. 29, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999.

ther's appeal to conscience grounded in Scripture inaugurated the powerful Protestant tradition of religious liberty and resistance to unjust authority, later echoed by thinkers such as John Milton, Roger Williams and the Magdeburg Confession of 1550.²⁷

In sum, for Luther, conscience is justified by the Word, liberated from external coercion, responsible before God alone, and empowered for public witness and service even under pressure. This conception of conscience not only reshaped Christian theology but also laid moral and theological foundations for the modern human rights tradition – especially the rights to freedom of religion, belief, and conscientious dissent.²⁸

Alongside Martin Luther, John Calvin powerfully emphasized the liberty of conscience, grounding it in a theological vision shaped by the authority of Scripture, the sufficiency of Christ, and the believer's direct accountability before God. His teaching, particularly in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (esp. 3.19),²⁹ makes conscience central to both true worship and moral freedom. For Calvin, conscience includes a sense of divine judgment, whereby individuals bear witness to themselves as their thoughts accuse or excuse them in the presence of God (cf. Romans 2:14-16). It is the true religion of the heart, inseparable from reverence, awe, and spiritual integrity before God.

A core aspect of Calvin's doctrine is that no human authority – whether magistrate or church – has the right to bind the conscience where God has not spoken. He argues that conscience is not subject to the will of men, nor can it be brought under human laws and constitutions (e.g. *Institutes* 3.19.7). Calvin is particularly concerned with ecclesiastical traditions that impose obligations absent from Scripture. Such impositions, he argues, produce spiritual tyranny and encroach on the freedom secured by Christ. Only the Word of God may bind the conscience; anything beyond is an unjust burden. Thus, for Calvin, conscience must remain captive to God's revelation, not to human decree.

27 See *The Magdeburg Confession*, trans. Christian Preus, St. Louis: Concordia, 2025. On the Magdeburg Confession, see David M. Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition*, St. Louis: Concordia, 2001.

28 For more on Luther's understanding of "conscience," see Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013, pp. 75-83.

29 References to Calvin's *Institutes* indicate: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, New Haven: Hezekiah Howe / Philadelphia: William Fry, 1816.

This conviction leads Calvin to draw a sharp contrast between matters essential to salvation and “things indifferent” (*adiaphora*) – practices not explicitly required or forbidden in Scripture. He writes: “we are bound by no obligation before God respecting external things, which in themselves are indifferent; but that we may indifferently sometimes use, and at other times omit them” (*Institutes* 3.19.7). In such areas, freedom of conscience must be upheld. Enforcing uniformity in *adiaphora* undermines this liberty and risks reducing faith to mere external compliance. Calvin thus insists that Christian liberty is preserved only when believers are not coerced in such matters, but allowed to discern and act in light of Scripture and godly reason.

Crucially, Calvin ties conscience not only to liberty but to worship and accountability. Authentic worship, he argues, requires more than outward conformity – it demands a conscience inwardly convinced, illuminated by the Spirit, and humbly obedient (cf. *Institutes* 4.10). Moreover, in his *Commentary on Romans*,³⁰ Calvin underscores the danger of acting against one’s conscience: “...any work, however excellent or distinguished it may appear to be, is reckoned a sin unless it is founded on a right conscience” (cf. Rom. 14:23). Thus, violating conscience – even when it is misinformed – undermines spiritual integrity, because faith must inform every decision.

In sum, Calvin’s doctrine maintains a delicate balance: conscience is liberated from human domination, yet it remains bound in reverence before God. It is not autonomous reason, but a faculty formed by Scripture, shaped by divine truth, and directed by Christ’s lordship. While free from legalistic burdens, it is bound in loving service to God and neighbour. This conception would prove formative for later Reformed theology – shaping enduring discussions of religious liberty, civil disobedience, and the moral architecture of human rights. In Calvin’s wake, figures such as Theodore Beza, the Huguenots, and Puritan reformers extended his emphasis on the sanctity of conscience into a robust political theology that challenged tyranny and affirmed worship as a God-given right.

Modern Protestant Voices

In the modern era, several Protestant thinkers advanced theological defences of conscience in relation to political liberty, moral resistance, and

30 See John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1961.

human rights. For instance, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, John Locke insists that “men cannot be forced to be saved ... therefore, when all is done, they must be left to their own consciences,”³¹ therefore underscoring that conscience cannot be coerced because faith must be free. Locke’s theological anthropology draws on the Protestant tradition to assert that the care of the soul belongs only to the person and to God.³²

In the twentieth century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth offered rich reflections on conscience as the place of divine address. For Bonhoeffer, conscience is not a static moral faculty but the site where Christ claims the whole person for ethical responsibility. In his *Ethics*, he warns against absolutizing conscience in isolation from the will of God revealed in Christ. Conscience is awakened and guided by the encounter with the living Lord.³³ Similarly, Barth views conscience as the responsible hearing of the divine command. He frames conscience as a theological category, rooted in the covenantal relationship between God and humanity, and never autonomous from divine Word and grace.³⁴ In both trajectories, conscience becomes not only a ground for personal integrity but a resource for public resistance. It plays a central role in opposing unjust regimes, challenging ecclesial compromise, and defending the rights of others. The moral courage of figures like Bonhoeffer is inseparable from their theological understanding of conscience as a divinely animated responsibility to act, speak, and suffer for the truth.

In modern Christian ethics and political theologies, the theological foundations of human rights are reasserted. Human rights are no longer grounded in secular rationalism but in the worth of the human person as a moral agent created by God.³⁵ In this view, freedom of conscience is not a modern invention but a theological legacy that supports and critiques contemporary political discourse.

31 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, The Library of Liberal Arts, Indianapolis / New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955, p. 35.

32 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “Reflections of John Locke’s Thinking and the Impact of his Ideas”, In *Proceedings of the 39th International RAIS Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities*, Dr. Yuying Shen Dr. Fotios Vouzas Dr. Simona Franguloiu (Eds.), April 17-18, 2025, Princeton, NJ, USA, pp.168-176. DOI:10.5281/zenodo.15474902.

33 See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, New York: Macmillan, 1962, pp. 148-150, 211-216.

34 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2.36-39, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009, especially pp. 42-218.

35 E.g. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Conclusion – The Christian Tradition

Across the centuries – from patristic wisdom to Reformation courage to modern reenvisioning – the Christian tradition has affirmed conscience as a sacred space, where divine truth and human responsibility meet. Conscience is not reducible to private opinion or cultural convention; it is theologically grounded in the relational and moral nature of the human person, created in God's image and summoned into covenant.

This through-line offers a compelling doctrinal integration: conscience is the place where the human person listens to, wrestles with, and responds to the voice of God. The liberty of conscience, therefore, is not simply a social policy or philosophical right, but a theological affirmation of human dignity, spiritual freedom, and ethical accountability. Consequently, theological anthropology, not abstract Enlightenment rationalism, provides the most enduring foundation for human rights. The Christian tradition insists that conscience must be free because it is ultimately God's domain. Any theology of human rights that seeks durability, coherence, and moral depth must take seriously this long tradition of theological reflection on conscience as the moral and spiritual ground of human liberty.

The Spirit and Freedom of Conscience:

Proposal for a Constructive Pentecostal Public Theology

The proposal advanced in this paper is that Pentecostal theology can offer a vital and often underdeveloped resource for grounding freedom of conscience in the life and work of the Holy Spirit. At its core, Pentecostal spirituality affirms that ethical discernment is not merely an exercise of rational deliberation but a Spirit-enabled capacity to perceive, interpret, and respond to divine truth.³⁶ This view resonates with Apostle Paul's declaration that those who are "led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Romans 8:14-16) and that the Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we belong to God. In this passage, moral and spiritual identity are inseparable: to live as a child of God is to be formed and guided by the Spirit in the inner self. Similarly, Jesus promises that the Spirit of truth "will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). While the context refers primarily to the

36 On these, see Stephen Eugene Parker, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a Practical Theology of Pentecostal Discernment and Decision Making*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 7, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996.

disciples' future understanding of Jesus' revelation, the verse has been taken throughout Christian history as indicative of the Spirit's ongoing role in moral and theological discernment. In Pentecostal interpretation, this text affirms the immediacy of divine guidance: the Spirit speaks not only to the Church corporately but also to the individual conscience, illuminating Scripture, provoking repentance, and directing ethical action.

A genuine Pentecostal approach, then, would challenge overly externalized or legalistic accounts of moral formation. Instead of being shaped by external coercion, the believer is shaped by the internal work of the Spirit – a process of sanctification that engages conscience at the deepest level. The conscience, in Pentecostal theology, is not autonomous but Spirit-attuned; it is empowered by divine presence and oriented toward faithful obedience.³⁷

One of the most distinctive features of Pentecostal theology and experience is its emphasis on spiritual liberty. The oft-quoted phrase “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (2 Corinthians 3:17) has long been used in Pentecostal contexts to affirm the believer's freedom from sin, fear, legalism, and authoritarian control. But this liberty is not merely individualistic or emotional; it is deeply ethical. It enables the believer to live in joyful obedience to God, free from domination by either religious systems or political powers. In Pentecostal communities, the conscience is regularly shaped and activated through practices of testimony, prayer, and prophetic speech. These are not merely charismatic expressions; they are pedagogical and ethical events. In testimony, the believer bears witness to the Spirit's work in conscience – conviction, correction, liberation. In prayer, the conscience is examined before God. In prophecy, the community discerns God's will not only for the individual but for the body and even the wider society. This pneumatological dynamic gives Pentecostalism a unique communal dimension of conscience-formation.³⁸

37 See Cheryl Bridges Johns, *Pentecostal Formation: A Pedagogy among the Oppressed*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 2, Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2010. See also Marcel Măcelaru, “Etica evanghelicilor români: parametri, provocări, perspective”, in Dănuț Mănăstireanu and Dănuț-Vasile Jemna (eds), *Omul evanghelic, încotro? O nouă explorare a comunităților protestante românești*, Iași, Polirom, 2025, pp. 67-113.

38 On these, see the re-casting of the pentecostal ethos by Mark J. Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, London: Routledge, 2016.

Moreover, Pentecostal history³⁹ provides compelling examples of resistance to authoritarian regimes, often rooted in Spirit-shaped convictions of conscience. From Eastern European believers under communism to Latin American Pentecostals resisting dictatorship, the refusal to conform to unjust systems was often justified not through philosophical arguments but through prophetic discernment and an appeal to spiritual authority over state coercion. These testimonies are part of the movement's ethical memory, even if not always formally codified in doctrine. Thus, Pentecostal liberty is not libertinism, nor is it political quietism. It is a form of Spirit-enabled conscience that refuses to be enslaved, whether to sin, ideology, or injustice.

A constructive Pentecostal theology of freedom of conscience requires a pneumatological reimagining of moral and political agency. Conscience, in this framework, is not an isolated faculty of the autonomous self, nor is it a passive echo of inherited moral norms. It is a Spirit-formed moral space – a relational capacity opened by divine encounter, nourished by Scripture, and formed in community. In this sense, the Spirit sanctifies the conscience, not only by convicting of sin but by calling the believer into deeper ethical responsiveness and courage. The freedom of the conscience is not freedom *from* formation but freedom *for* faithful and just action. The Spirit liberates the conscience not to make it sovereign, but to make it servant to truth, justice, and love.

This vision yields important implications for a Pentecostal contribution to human rights discourse. While Pentecostalism has sometimes been hesitant to engage with formal rights language, its emphasis on spiritual freedom, personal dignity, and resistance to coercion aligns deeply with core human rights principles. A Pentecostal public theology of conscience can therefore:

- ✦ Affirm freedom of belief and moral expression as divinely grounded,
- ✦ Support the protection of conscience for all persons, not just believers,
- ✦ Advocate for spiritual and political structures that respect and nurture moral responsibility.

39 On the European side of this history, see the articles in William K. Kay and Anne E. Dyer (eds), *European Pentecostalism*, Leiden, Brill, 2011.

In this view, then, human rights are not merely legal protections but expressions of theological truths: that persons are called by God, formed by the Spirit, and invited into just community. Consequently, freedom of conscience becomes both a theological conviction and a public ethic, sustained by love, enacted through justice, and grounded in the Spirit's presence.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, we have traced a theological vision in which freedom of conscience emerges not as a peripheral ethical principle, but as a foundational aspect of human dignity, spiritual responsibility, and public justice. Drawing from Scripture and the Christian tradition, we have pointed out the possibility of a constructive Pentecostal theology that sees conscience as a morally and theologically significant faculty – one that stands at the intersection of divine call and human agency.

The biblical witness presents conscience as intrinsic to the *imago Dei*, covenantal decision-making, and Christian liberty. From the call to “choose life” in Deuteronomy to Paul’s appeals to act according to personal conviction without violating the conscience of others, the Scriptures uphold moral freedom as an essential feature of faithful living. Jesus’ refusal to coerce belief further affirms that authentic discipleship is grounded in voluntary assent and ethical responsibility.

This theological trajectory is deepened in the Christian tradition, where conscience has been described as the sacred space of moral encounter – whether in the introspective spirituality of Augustine, the bold protest of Luther, or the modern moral resistance of figures like Bonhoeffer and Barth. Across these voices, the liberty of conscience is understood not as moral relativism, but as a theologically grounded response to the authority of God’s Word and Spirit. Moreover, as theological anthropology, it affirms that human rights are not mere legal constructs, but reflections of the moral agency endowed by God.

Finally, we proposed that Pentecostal public theology offers a distinctive and necessary contribution to this vision. With its emphasis on spiritual freedom, the active role of the Holy Spirit, and the ethical authority of communal discernment, Pentecostal theology affirms that conscience is formed, empowered, and liberated by the Spirit for the purpose of faith-

ful witness. Conscience is not only a private faculty but a public resource – animated by prayer, prophetic speech, and resistance to coercion. It resists domination while enabling discernment and justice.

In light of these biblical, historical, and constructive insights, we are called to a renewed theological commitment to freedom of conscience as the moral foundation for human rights. This includes affirming the sacredness of conscience, protecting its exercise for all people, and grounding our advocacy in a theology that joins liberty with responsibility, truth with compassion, and freedom with the Spirit's leading. A Spirit-shaped conscience is not merely an interior guide but a force for justice, reconciliation, and dignity in the public square. It is this vision of moral and spiritual liberty that must animate both our theology and our human rights discourse.

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