

CHAPTER 10 IS "FALSE GUILT" BIBLICAL?

Due to the heavy influence presently wielded upon Christianity by human wisdom, the idea of "false guilt" has taken hold in many quarters, especially in the area of counseling. It is surmised that man can sense guilt when he is not guilty of personal sin before God, and that this explains the roots and the intensity of many of the human mental disorders. The Bible, however, reveals principles which indicate that, in reality, there is no false guilt, and, consequently, its explanation of the root cause of the mental disorders is entirely different from the approach of human wisdom.

Of course, examples may be given which *appear* to indicate false guilt, but as they are examined with biblical principles in mind, all guilt will be seen to be true guilt before God, not false guilt (see ahead).

Human Wisdom's False Guilt

Though not fully agreeing with Freud's view, Minirth and Meier make this statement,

Freud seemed to think that all guilt is false guilt – that guilt itself is a bad thing. Most of the psychiatrists we have studied under and

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worked with agreed with the Freudian view that guilt is always an unhealthy thing.¹

The ideas that all guilt is false guilt and that guilt is a bad thing make sense for one who believes, as Freud did, that there are no absolute standards of right and wrong for man, that there is no God to whom he is responsible for his life, and that God has not revealed His will for man in His Word. But why do some Christians, who believe in the one true God who judges man by absolute standards, still embrace the concept of false guilt? Simply raising the question implies concern over this issue, but it is not the purpose of the present chapter to speculate on these things. It is the purpose here to establish whether the Bible teaches the concept of false guilt, or if it even allows for such an idea.

What, then, is false guilt? False guilt is known in psychological literature by many names. It is called false guilt, functional guilt,² neurotic guilt, punitive guilt, or guilt feelings.³ And, in the writings of Christians, it is differentiated from true guilt, existential guilt, love-based corrective feelings,⁴ or value guilt.⁵

False guilt is defined by Minirth and Meier as "feeling guilty for something that God and His Word in no way condemn."⁶ Narramore and Coe concur, but they add that false guilt also results from negative corrective attitudes developed from childhood.⁷

Those Christians who attempt to combine (integrate) human wisdom and the Word of God, therefore, apparently find two sources for the believer's false guilt: 1) the non-biblical standards of his conscience and 2) the improper functioning of the conscience (usually since childhood). More specifically, the believer is said to experience false guilt when he has a weak, overgrown, or too restrictive conscience and feels guilty for violating its non-biblical, non-moral standards (1 Cor 8:7-13; 10:23-33). Also, the believer is said to experience false guilt when, after he sins, his

¹ Frank Minirth and Paul Meier. *Happiness is a Choice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 71, 73.

³ David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, eds., "Guilt," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 534.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Minirth and Meier, *Happiness is a Choice*, 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁷ Benner and Hill, "Conscience" and "Guilt," in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 253, 534-36

conscience judges him guilty and urges punitive guilt feelings within him. The reasoning in this second case is that since the Christian is forgiven for all his sins – past, present, and future – at the moment of his salvation, if he feels guilty for his sin when he sins as a believer, his conscience is exhibiting its improper development since childhood, which needs to be corrected.

Five Biblical Reasons Why There Is No False Guilt

Based upon the biblical teachings concerning both the standards of man's conscience and its instinctive functioning in his heart which have already been extensively addressed in this section and in the previous section, five strong biblical reasons will be given here which indicate that the Scripture neither teaches the concept of false guilt nor allows for it. These reasons will establish how the believer is morally responsible to God for his choices regarding even the non-biblical, non-moral standards he has adopted in his heart. And they will also demonstrate that, though the Christian's conscience may *not* be correct when it declares him to be right in what he thinks, says, and does, it *is* functioning correctly when it judges him guilty, and it *is* reliably indicating actual family guilt *before God*,⁸ both for his failure to maintain a good, unguilty conscience, and for his making personal sinful choices which have resulted in his sense of guilt.

The chapter will then conclude by addressing related issues and by specifying a number of instances which may *appear* to be false guilt but which, upon closer examination, will be seen to be true guilt before God for the personally chosen unloving attitudes in one's heart.

1. According to the Word of God, there is no false guilt because when the believer violates even the personally acquired (but not biblically revealed) standards of his own weak conscience, he is sinning against God.

False guilt has been defined by its proponents as "feeling guilt for something that God and His Word in no way condemn" (see the previous pages). First Cor 8:7-13 is often adduced as an example of such false guilt

⁸ Though the Christian has eternal, positional forgiveness for all his sins through the Lord Jesus Christ at the moment of his salvation, he still experiences family guilt when he sins and is in need of family forgiveness, in order to renew his intimacy with his Heavenly Father (1 Jn 1:9, Prov 28:13, Ps 32:5).

in the Bible. According to Scripture, however, this is an instance of true family guilt before God. Why? In the first place, the believer who acts against his weak conscience in I Corinthians 8 is "defiled" (v.7) and "ruined" (v.11) when he does so, because he is sinning. In the second place, Rom 14 – another passage which deals with the same weak believer regarding the same issue of eating meat offered to idols – reveals that if a believer violates his own non-biblical, non-moral, legalistic standards, he is sinning against God and is for the moment "condemned" by Him.

Rom 14:22-23 states,

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Twice already in this volume the personally acquired, non-biblical standards of conscience have been addressed as one of the four sets of standards by which a believer's conscience judges him. And twice it has been decisively demonstrated that violation of those personally acquired standards is sin against God, not an example of false guilt (see Chapters 3 and 6). It would be needlessly redundant to repeat those studies here. All that needs to be said is that feeling guilty for violating a standard adopted by one's conscience but which "God and His Word in no way condemn" is *sin*. And one's conscience condemns him for that sin. His guilt is not false guilt. It is true guilt – true family guilt before God. In order to renew his intimacy with his Heavenly Father, the believer is in need of confession of his personal sin against God. He is not in need of human wisdom's explanations of why he should not feel guilty or of human wisdom's solutions for dealing with his false guilt.

First Cor 8 and Rom 14, then, are strong passages which reveal that when a believer violates his own legalistic standards, he does not experience false guilt. He experiences true family guilt before God. In other words, though man's conscience is not always right when it defends him as being right, it is never wrong when it judges him guilty of being wrong, no matter what are the standards of his conscience.

"It is always wrong to violate conscience, but if it is not instructed in God's will (1 Cor 8:2, 7; cf. Rom 12:1-2), heeding conscience is not necessarily righteous."⁹

⁹ Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand

"In speaking of this subject we should remember that conscience 'is not an infallible guide, but requires illumination, and therefore each man needs to pray for light; but it is never right to act against conscience.'"¹⁰

As the believer matures, therefore, he should enlighten his heart through God's Word to better understand and accept his freedom in Christ and should be replacing the non-biblical, legalistic standards of his conscience with biblical ones. But until he can by faith, without doubting, embrace his newly understood Christian freedom, he should abide by the standards which remain in his heart, for "he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith, and whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23). Should he violate those standards and feel guilty for it, he should realize that he is truly guilty before God and is experiencing true family guilt, not human wisdom's false guilt.

2. There is no false guilt because nowhere in Scripture is a sense of guilt¹¹ experienced in the heart of one whose attitudes are at that moment righteous (loving) and who is resting in God's forgiveness for his personal sin. Instead, a sense of peace is present.

Contrary to the teaching of human wisdom that a sense of false guilt may trouble a person's heart when he is not wrong, the consistent teaching of God's Word is that the one whose attitudes are right (loving) according to Scripture, and are understood as right according to one's own conscience, does not experience a sense of guilt, including human wisdom's false guilt. The individual whose attitudes are considered right, in fact, experiences a sense of peace in his heart, the opposite of a sense of guilt (see Immaterial Effects of Loving). There is no demonstrable biblical exception to this.¹²

Rapids: Baker Books, 2001), 290.

¹⁰ H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, *The Pulpit Commentary: Acts and Romans*, vol. 18 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), 226.

¹¹ When the phrase "sense of guilt" is used in this work, it should be understood that it is not primarily referring to an emotion in one's brain and body. What is meant is a knowledge and an urging of being guilty which is experienced in one's *immaterial heart*. This may or may not be accompanied by a physiological feeling of guilt. On the other hand, a physiological feeling of what one identifies as his own guilt is necessarily preceded by a sense of guilt in his *immaterial heart* (see Emotions).

¹² For a discussion of how 1 John 3:20 is no exception, please see the first appendix to this chapter.

From Genesis through Revelation, peace is the possession of one whose present attitudes are right in God's sight. Adam and Eve, in their pristine righteousness, were "not ashamed" before God (Gen 2:25). They were at peace in His presence. When sin entered into the world, God in His grace made provision "to revive the heart of the contrite" and to give him "peace, peace" (Isa 57:15, 19). In Ps 119:165, "Those who love Thy law have great peace, and nothing causes them to stumble."

When David was trusting God, he rejoiced, "In peace I will both lie down and sleep" (Ps 4:5, 8). He could say this because, "The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in Thee" (Isa 26:3). Indeed, righteousness and peace are so closely tied in Scripture that it can be said they "have kissed each other" (Ps 85:10).

The same is true in the New Testament. Jesus promised to those who trust in Him, "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me, you may have peace" (Jn 16:33), and, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (Jn 14:27).

Stephen reflected this peace of Christ when he appeared before the Sanhedrin with "the face of an angel" and as he went to his death with a prayer of forgiveness for his persecutors (Acts 6:15, 7:60).

When the believer chooses to entrust his cares to God and "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving" he lets his "requests be made known to Him," he experiences "the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension" (Phil 4:6-7). And as he patterns his life after godly principles "the God of peace" is with him (Phil 4:9).

It is the Holy Spirit that grants this same peace as His fruit in the life of the believer who is controlled by Him (Gal 5:22, Eph 5:18). Furthermore, "the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom 8:6), "for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

To those who walk in godliness the Apostle Paul prayed, "peace and mercy be upon them" (Gal 6:16) and "may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance" (2 Thess 3:16).

Conversely, according to the Word of God, the one who experiences a sense of guilt is not the one whose attitudes are righteous (loving), and he is not the one whose attitudes are neutral (as postulated by human wisdom to be the case in false guilt). On the contrary, a sense of guilt is only experienced by one whose present attitudes are unrighteous (unloving) or by one who is very much aware of his own personal sinfulness in the presence of the holiness of God. Even one with legalistic standards or an

"overactive" conscience experiences a sense of guilt only after he violates his own conscience, which is itself personal sin before God (Rom 14:22-23; see also reason #1).

Throughout the Scripture, it is only as unbelievers and believers embrace or are reminded of personal sin that they experience a sense of guilt. Adam and Eve were afraid of God's judgment because they were "naked" (aware of their sin) before Him (Gen 3:10). Cain anticipated that he would be hunted down because of his sin (Gen 4:14). Joseph's brothers said to one another, "Truly we are guilty concerning our brother" (Gen 42:21). And Judah later said to Joseph, "God has found out the iniquity of your servants" (Gen 44:16).

In 1 Sam the people said, "We have sinned against the Lord" (7:6). And when David violated his own conscience by cutting off the edge of Saul's robe, his conscience smote him (24:5).

This same David – a man after God's own heart – when he was confronted by Nathan about his grievous sins with Bathsheba and against her husband admitted, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Sam 12:13, cf. Ps 32:4, 51:3-4). Then when later his heart convicted him of his sin for numbering the people, he blurted out, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (2 Sam 24:10).

At the other end of the spectrum, Ahab and Manasseh, two of Israel's most wicked kings, experienced a sense of guilt strong enough to drive them to repentance before the Lord (1 Kings 21:27, 2 Chr 33:12).

Even the priest Ezra sensed deeply his own guilt before God, as well as Israel's guilt, when he prayed, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to Thee, My God, for our iniquities have risen above our own heads, and our guilt has grown even to the heavens" (Ezra 9:6).

To these could be added others who experienced a sense of guilt, but always for their own personal sin before God: Job (Job 42:6), Asaph (Ps 79:9), the psalmist (Ps 119:5-6), the wicked who has no peace (Isa 57:21), and even godly men like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel when face to face with the holiness of God and reminded of their own past sinfulness (Isa 6:5, Jer 3:25, Dan 9:4-5, 10:19).

The list of those who experienced a sense of guilt solely because of their personal sin is not confined to the Old Testament, for the witness is the same in the New Testament. Judas, of course, bewailed, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood" (Mt 27:5). But Peter also, when confronted with the power and holiness of God in human flesh, exclaimed, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!" (Lk 5:8). And later he wept in conscience sorrow for the sin of denying his Master (Mt 26:75).

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Even after Pentecost, New Testament believers experienced a sense of guilt when they sinned. Chief among them were Peter and Paul. As the leader of the fledgling Church, Peter "stood condemned" when Paul exposed his hypocrisy (Gal 2:11). And Paul's wrestlings with the flesh are indicative of a heart fraught with self-reproach when he said, "Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:24)

A sense of guilt for personal sin is, in fact, understood of all true believers, for they are said to be guilty of all of God's law when they sin in one point (Jas 2:8-10); they are called on to judge themselves for their personal sins lest they be judged by God (1 Cor 11:30-32); they are characterized by confession of personal sins to God as His children (1 Jn 1:9, cf. Ps 32:5, Prov 28:13); they are called on to admonish one another for personal sin and to stand aloof from the brother who will not admit his sin, in hopes that he will become ashamed and will repent (2 Thess 3:14-15); and as they experience godly sorrow for their personal sin, it leads them to repentance (2 Cor 7:9-10). Indeed, every time believers "put off" wrong thoughts, words, or actions as commanded in the New Testament (see the epistles), they are responding to the instinctive work of their consciences, which have begun by judging them guilty of their sin before God and urging them to do as He commands.

It is, therefore, the unified testimony of Scripture that one whose attitudes before God are presently righteous (loving) and who is resting in God's forgiveness does not experience a sense of guilt (even human wisdom's false guilt). When he does experience a sense of guilt in his heart, however, it is solely because he is either embracing personal sin in his heart or because he is being confronted so strongly with God's holiness that he is very much aware of his past personal sinfulness. It is not because he is experiencing a false guilt which is unrelated to personal sin in his life (see The "Unconscious" or the Conscience?).

3. There is no false guilt because the believer is morally responsible to God for having and maintaining a good, unguilty conscience, and consequently, when he does not have a good conscience but has a guilty one, he is responsible to God for having this as well.

Possession of a good conscience was not only the consistent example of godly believers throughout the Scripture (cf. Acts 23:1, 24:16, 1 Cor 4:4, 2 Cor 1:12, Heb. 13:18), but it is commanded for all Christians both by Peter and by Paul. First Pet 3:15-16 states,

... but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience....

Even in that extremity of life in which the believer is suffering for righteousness' sake, he is to have (possess, maintain¹³) a good conscience.

Whatever may be the accusations of your enemies, so live that you may be at all times conscious of uprightness. Whatever you suffer, see that you do not suffer the pangs inflicted by a guilty conscience, the anguish of remorse.¹⁴

Paul's instruction is the same in 1 Tim 1:19,

... keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith.

Indeed, this is such a vital issue in the Christian life that those "who put away good conscience will soon make shipwreck of faith."¹⁵

What, then, is this good conscience that Christians are responsible before God to maintain? As has been explained in the precious chapter, a good conscience is one which "does not accuse me of anything,"¹⁶ "not because it is insensitive but because it can detect no fault."¹⁷ It is a conscience "which is functioning properly and does not condemn,"¹⁸ is

¹³ "The pres[ent] tense can have the meaning 'to possess,' 'to maintain,' and the part[iciple]' used as an imp[erative] (Beore)": Fritz Rienecker and Cleon L. Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Corporation, 1976), 758.

¹⁴ Albert Barnes and Robert Frew, *Notes on the New Testament: Hebrews to Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 173.

¹⁵ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 653.

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, "1 Cor. 4:4," in *1 & 2 Corinthians: Geneva Series of Commentaries* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 66.

¹⁷ I. Howard Marshall, "Acts 24:16" in *Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1980), 378.

¹⁸ Homer A. Kent, "1 Tim 1:19," in *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 92.

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"free from guilt,"¹⁹ and is "testifying for us, not against us."²⁰

A good conscience, therefore, is a conscience that is operating properly and is not judging one guilty but is judging him good, in accordance with the standards that he knows and has adopted for his life. This is the good conscience which God holds the believer responsible to maintain. And if he does not maintain it, he is disobeying God.

Since a believer is morally obligated before God to possess a good, unguilty conscience, two questions arise. Is it not true that the assessments of one's conscience are independent of him – that whether or not he agrees with them, the instantaneous, instinctive judgments of his conscience are *out of his control*? Yes, this is true (see the previous chapters). How, then can God justly hold the believer *responsible* for the judgments of a conscience which he *cannot control*?

The answer should be obvious. The believer is morally commanded by God to maintain a *good, unguilty* conscience – the assessment of a conscience he *cannot control* – because it is understood by this command that the assessment of his conscience is wholly based upon his making *right moral choices* that he *can control* – choices which are in keeping with the standards he has in his heart.

And since a guilty conscience cannot be present when one has a good, *unguilty* conscience, the Scripture is teaching the converse as well. That is, when the believer has a guilty conscience – in disobedience to God's command to maintain a good, *unguilty* conscience – it indicates that his awareness of guilt (an assessment of his conscience which he *cannot control*) is a direct result of *wrong moral choices* (personal sin, unloving attitudes in his heart) which he *can control* – choices that are in violation of the standards he has adopted in his own heart and that are not made by faith and are therefore sin (cf. Rom 14:23, see reason #1).²¹

¹⁹ Albert Barnes and Robert Frew, *Notes on the New Testament: Ephesians to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 116.

²⁰ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1999), 777.

²¹ Since the unbeliever's conscience operates in the same way as the believer's conscience, the unbeliever's guilty conscience is also caused by his own personal sin before God, whether he admits it or not. This awareness that he is wrong and his sense of guilt, in fact, are designed by God to enable him to see his need for the Savior and to drive him to Him for forgiveness (cf. Acts 2:37). In the same way, the believer's sense of guilt is designed to drive him to confession and repentance of his sins so that he can have renewed intimacy with God (cf. 2 Cor 7:9-10) and can continue to mature in Christ. As to the positive work of the unbeliever's

In other words, both a consciousness that things are good in one's heart before God and a consciousness of guilt in one's heart (a guilty conscience) are revealed in 1 Pet 3:16 and 1 Tim 1:19 to issue from moral choices in the believer's heart for which he is responsible to God. When, therefore, he has a good, unguilty conscience, it is because he is making loving choices in personal obedience to God, choices in accord with what he understands God desires of him. On the other hand, when he has a guilty conscience (in violation of God's command to keep a good, *unguilty* conscience), it is because he is making or has made unloving choices in disobedience to God, choices not made by faith. Thus, a guilty conscience (the opposite of a good, unguilty conscience) issues from one cause and one cause only: personal sin in one's heart of which he is aware. Why? Because if the believer is walking in righteousness, he will be being obedient to God and will have a good, *unguilty* conscience, not a guilty one.

A good, unguilty conscience, therefore, is a moral issue before God. And a guilty conscience is also a moral issue before God. Biblically, there is no *non-moral* condition which produces a guilty conscience. The *non-moral* exception proposed by human wisdom as false guilt does not exist.

But can there be no exceptions? No, not biblically. Certainly, one may in a split second justify or ignore the unloving attitudes in his heart which his conscience instantaneously has called to his attention and for which it has judged him guilty, and then, puzzled, give himself a *wrong reason* for the sense of guilt he is experiencing. But his guilt is nonetheless caused at its root by his own personal sin. It is not false guilt (see The "Unconscious" or the Conscience?).

Likewise, the Christian may have a knowledge or awareness of guilt and a sense of guilt in his heart (a guilty conscience) for violating a non-biblical, legalistic standard he has accepted for his life. But again, his sense of guilt is for violating his own personal, non-biblical standards, which is sin against God, because "whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23). Or one may resent the people or circumstances in his life for the pressures they put upon him – rightly or wrongly. But it is the sin of resentment which is causing his guilty conscience, not false guilt. Or again, the Christian may confess a personal sin to God and not believe that he is forgiven, experiencing both the guilt of the sin he has acknowledged and the guilt of his unbelief. In none of these cases is the guilt which one

conscience, his personal goodness may at the moment give him a human peace, but it will not recommend him to God (Isa 64:6).

senses false guilt. It is all true guilt from personal sin in one's life (see also ahead).

The point made here is so decisive that it will be reviewed. God commands the believer in 1 Pet 3:16 and 1 Tim 1:19 to have a good, unguilty conscience. This is his moral responsibility before God. Though he cannot control the assessments of his conscience (short of wrongly desensitizing it to his sin), the believer can control the right and wrong attitudes, words, and actions for which his conscience judges him. When his choices are loving, his conscience judges him right, resulting in a good, unguilty conscience. And it is his moral obligation to God to make those loving choices. When his conscience judges him guilty, he does not have a good, unguilty conscience and, as such, is being disobedient to God not to have that good conscience – an indication and an affirmation that there is other known personal sin in his heart for which God is also holding him responsible.

Thus, just as the believer is responsible to God for the *positive effect* of the work of his conscience in his heart (the awareness that he is being judged good and not guilty), so is he responsible to Him for the *root cause of this effect* (personal loving attitudes in his heart in accord with the standards therein). When he loses his good, unguilty conscience, the converse is true. Just as he is responsible for the *negative effect* of the work of his conscience (the awareness in his heart that he is being judged guilty), so is he responsible for the *root cause of this effect* (known personal sin in his heart). No non-moral false guilt is indicated or allowed in Scripture. No non-moral issue can produce a sense of guilt in the believer's heart and remove his good, unguilty conscience. Why? Because as he is morally right before God, he has a good, *unguilty* conscience, not a guilty one.

Furthermore, since a believer is responsible to God for having an *unguilty* conscience, this indicates that when his conscience *does* judge him guilty, it is operating correctly. It is not operating incorrectly, as human wisdom postulates. Why? Because he is responsible before God for having an *unguilty* conscience, and God only holds the believer responsible for issues in his life which are moral. Granted, his conscience may operate incorrectly by failing to judge him guilty when it should, but biblically it is *not incorrect* when it judges him guilty. It is correct. And the Christian, not his conscience, is the one in need of correction.

Does It Really Matter?

It might be asked, "Does it really matter whether or not there is any such thing as false guilt?" Yes, it matters a great deal, for the ramifications are vast. If, for instance, one assumes that the Scripture teaches or makes allowance for false guilt in a believer's life, then when he is experiencing a knowledge or awareness of and a sense of *false* guilt (a guilty conscience produced by non-moral issues in his heart for which he is not responsible to God), he cannot at the same time, by definition, have a good, *unguilty* conscience. This means he is being prevented by a non-moral false guilt from obeying God's command to have a good conscience. Not only this, but it means the answer to his false guilt is not the forgiveness of his personal sin through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. But the answer comes from another source. It is attained outside of God's Word from human wisdom.²² Furthermore, the presence of false guilt in the believer's life means that without human wisdom, he cannot even serve God with a clear conscience (2 Tim 1:3, 1 Tim 3:9, Acts 24:16).

In essence, then, when a postulated false guilt is present in his heart, the believer cannot live the Christian life that God desires for him to live, but he must depend on the wisdom of man to enable him to do so – a direct contradiction to the Word of God which tells him not to be taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, *rather than according to Christ*" (Col 2:8, cf. 1 Cor 3:19-20, Isa 55:8-9, Ps 1:1, 119:1-2, see Introduction).

Though it may be a comfort to some believers to think that the sense of guilt robbing them of a good conscience and hindering their Christian lives is false guilt which can be explained away by human wisdom and can be unlearned, they should consider how clear the Scripture is in declaring that the guilt they are sensing is actually the result of their own known personal unloving attitudes toward God and/or others which they are quickly dismissing in their hearts. They should also contemplate how clear the Scripture is in asserting that the answer for their sense of guilt is, as always, paying attention to these unloving attitudes, confessing them as sin to God, counting on the forgiveness they have through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and once again being filled with God's Spirit whose fruit is love and peace and whose work will grant a good conscience (see Moving from Unloving to Loving).

²² Minirth and Meier, *Happiness is a Choice*, 70.

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4. According to the Word of God, there is no false guilt because the believer must have a good, *unguilty* conscience in order to love God and others with *agapé* love, which is his moral responsibility before God. This confirms that a guilty conscience is also his moral responsibility to God, for if he does not have a good, unguilty conscience, it prevents him from loving as he is commanded to do.

A Christian is commanded by God to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, and mind and his neighbor as himself (Mt 22:37-40). He is to love his enemies (Mt 5:44), to love other believers (Jn 13:34), to abound in love for all men (1 Thess 3:12), to walk in love (Eph 5:2), to put on love (Col 3:14), to obey God out of love (Jn 14:15), and to be filled continually with His Holy Spirit whose fruit is love (Eph 5:18, Gal 3:22).

First Tim 1:5 states that this *agapé* love is, in fact, the very goal of the Christian life, and it flows from three sources, all of which are the believer's responsibility before God. The verse states,

But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

In his comprehensive treatment of this passage, Knight comments,

Love [*agapé*], says Paul, is the goal of the Christian teaching....

[Pure]... means in a general sense 'clean' or 'pure'... Thus the pure heart is the one cleansed by the forgiveness and cleansing that comes to those who continually confess their sins....

For love to come to fruition Paul states that one's conscience must be 'good'... Paul means by the good conscience an honest self-evaluation that one's conduct has been obedient, as one evaluates the direction and perspective of one's life at the particular moment....

The qualification 'sincere'... lays emphasis on the genuineness of that trust.²³

These three moral issues – a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith – must all be present in the believer's heart at any given moment in order for him to possess *agapé* love therein. Evidently, then,

²³ Knight, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Pastoral Epistles*, 76-78.

this is the way these issues relate to love. When he confesses all known personal sin, the Christian is cleansed from family guilt and experiences a *pure heart*. At the same moment, as he trusts God in *sincere faith* for the forgiveness he has through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, he attains a *good conscience*, which assesses him as both unguilty and as good. And, in the same instant, he is filled with the Holy Spirit whose fruit is *agapé* love (Gal 5:22). He then maintains his good, unguilty conscience and his pure heart by continuing to walk in *agapé* love in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Only when he chooses again to sin does the believer lose "a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith," and consequently lose the power to love with the *agapé* love which flows from them. But he may regain all these in an instant when he confesses his sin (see also Moving from Unloving to Loving).

What 1 Tim 1:5 is saying is that in order for the Christian to fulfill his moral responsibility to God to love Him and others, he must possess in his heart at that moment three things which are also his moral responsibility before God: a pure heart, a good conscience (by definition, an *unguilty* conscience that judges him *good*), and a sincere faith.

It can be concluded, therefore, that since a *guilty* conscience prevents the believer from having a good, *unguilty* conscience, and consequently prevents him from having *agapé* love in his heart (a moral issue before God), a guilty conscience is at all times a moral issue also, not a neutral one. It cannot at any time be a non-moral issue, because it prevents the Christian from fulfilling his moral obligation to God to love Him and others with *agapé* love. And since false guilt, by definition, is said to be a non-moral issue, not a moral issue before God, false guilt cannot truly exist. That is, all guilt is a moral issue, according to the Word of God – a moral issue which prevents one from loving God and others, which in itself is another moral issue.

This confirms what is also taught in 1 Pet 3:16 and 1 Tim 1:19: a good conscience is one's moral responsibility before God, and its opposite, a guilty conscience, is also his moral responsibility – a result of known personal unloving attitudes, words, and/or actions in his life. In other words, all awareness of and sense of guilt in the believer's heart (or in the unbeliever's heart, for that matter) indicates personal sin before God of which he is aware.

The truth revealed in 1 Tim 1:5 – that *agapé* love in a believer's heart depends upon his having a good, *unguilty* conscience – indicates several things.

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- A) It reveals that the believer's conscience does operate reliably whenever it judges him guilty, and that it is rightly calling his attention to some known personal sin in his heart as the reason he has lost a good, *unguilty* conscience and cannot love with *agapé* love at that moment. This can be said with confidence, because only a moral issue for which the believer is personally guilty before God can prevent his having a good conscience and thus prevent him from obeying God's command to love Him and others with *agapé* love – another moral issue, and, in fact, the basic moral issue of the Christian life. The loss of a good, unguilty conscience, therefore, must be due to another moral issue. And this moral issue is some personal sin in his heart of which he is aware (see also reason #3). The loss of a good, unguilty conscience cannot be due to a proposed false guilt, for which the believer is not responsible to God, because this would mean that a Christian's *responsibility to love* is dependent upon something for which he is *not responsible* to God. This is not only unreasonable, but it would call into question God's fairness and wisdom. May it never be.
- B) The truth revealed in 1 Tim 1:5 also indicates that all the standards by which the believer's conscience judges him are *God's standards* for him at that point in his life, whether those standards are of divine or human origin (see chapters 3 and 6 and reason #1).
- C) First Tim 1:5 reveals, too, that an individual is *aware* of the personal sin which prevents him from having a good, unguilty conscience – aware at least for the moment in which his conscience judges him guilty of it, and for as long as he chooses not to pay attention to it, to justify it, or to ignore it (see Prov 16:2, 21:2 and the next chapter of this work).
- D) First Tim 1:5 reminds the believer, as well, that the personal sin which prevents him from having a good, *unguilty* conscience, and consequently prevents him from loving God and others with *agapé* love as he should, is not only known to him but can be confessed as sin and can be instantaneously forgiven (family forgiveness), resulting in a good, unguilty conscience, the control of the Holy Spirit, and God's *agapé* love present in his heart once again (1 Jn 1:9) (see chapter 5).

Again, Does It Really Matter?

Does all this really matter to the Christian? Again, yes, it matters a great deal. For instance, if it is acknowledged that one is suffering from human wisdom's postulated false guilt, he obviously cannot at the same time have a good, *unguilty* conscience. And if he does not have a good, *unguilty* conscience, he cannot love God or others with *agapé* love, according to 1 Tim 1:5. This places human wisdom at a central position in the Christian life. Why? Because human wisdom's false guilt must be removed in order for the believer to have a good, *unguilty* conscience, which then enables him to love God and others with *agapé* love. And only through man's wisdom can the believer learn to free himself from his non-moral false guilt. He is said to do this by re-developing his poorly developed conscience and by reconstituting the wrongly developed standards of his conscience.²⁴ Then, it is hoped, he will be able to have a good, *unguilty* conscience and, at length, be able to love God and to love others with the *agapé* love commanded of him by God.

Not only this, but since one of the tenets of human wisdom is that a person cannot love others unless he loves himself, that is, unless he has good self-esteem,²⁵ the wisdom of man also proposes another essential source for the believer's love: good self-esteem. Consequently, not only does a Christian need "a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" in order to love God and others, he must have good self-esteem, too. Sadly, then, the first commandment becomes, "Love yourself with good self-esteem;" the second becomes, "Love God;" and the third becomes, "Love others."

The Word of God has a different message. It reveals that false guilt does not exist and that the reason the believer loses a good, *unguilty* conscience is that he has personally sinned and he knows it (though he may

²⁴ For example, human wisdom asserts that one must unlearn the guilt feelings and the punitive feelings he has developed from childhood and must learn from human wisdom that the standards he has developed (also from childhood) are not standards over which he should feel guilty. Then he can rid himself of his over a period of time: Benner and Hill, "Guilt" and "Conscience" in *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling*.

²⁵ "The love of another person is based on one's love of self.... Since the Bible commands Christians to love others and since love of self is the basis of loving others, then it is clear that one needs to learn to love himself correctly." H. Norman Wright, *The Christian Use of Emotional Power* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1974), 146.

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give himself wrong reasons for the sense of guilt he feels – see ahead). To remove his sense of guilt, therefore, he needs to pay attention to and confess his known personal sin to God. This enables him instantaneously to have a good, *unguilty* conscience and immediately to love God and others with *agapé* love. As his good conscience assures him of the peace of God and of confidence before Him, the *result* in his heart is self-respect – good self-esteem. Consequently, the biblical pattern is affirmed. The first and great commandment is "Love God;" the second is, "Love others" and the *result* of loving God and loving others in the strength of the Holy Spirit is self-respect in one's heart – good self-esteem (see Self-Esteem).

5. There is no false guilt because whenever the believer experiences a sense of guilt in his immaterial heart, it prevents him, at that moment from obeying God's command to be continually controlled by the Holy Spirit and thereby to possess the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace – the opposite of a sense of guilt.

There are two and only two heart conditions in which the Christian can conduct his life. He may walk by the Spirit or walk by the flesh. When he is yielded to one, he cannot be yielding to the other. Galatians 5:16-17 states,

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

"Flesh and Spirit are opposites, locked in continual combat. If the Christian is walking in the power of the one, he cannot be in the control of the other."²⁶

Furthermore, every believer is commanded by God to be continually controlled by the Holy Spirit, as Ephesians 5:18 asserts, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit."

"The imperative makes it clear that this is a command for all Christians."²⁷ "The idea of the word is 'control.' The indwelling Spirit o

²⁶ Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., "Gal. 5:16," in *The Wycliff Bible Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1962), 1296.

²⁷ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 72.

God is the One who should continually control and dominate the life of the believer."²⁸

When the Christian is controlled by the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit is present in his life, as indicated in Gal 5:22-23, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...."

"The word 'fruit' is singular, indicating that these qualities constitute a unity, all of which should be found in a believer who lives under the control of the Spirit."²⁹

"Thus, in this relationship, as a believer is yielded to the Lord and controlled by Him, he increasingly manifests the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)."³⁰

With these truths in mind, the first three qualities of the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace – will be examined as they relate to a sense of guilt. If it can be established that a sense of guilt can prevent any or all of these qualities of the Spirit in the believer's heart, it will be confirmed that guilt proceeds from his walking by the flesh – that is, that it comes from personal sin in his heart and only from that source. A sense of guilt cannot be a non-moral, false guilt issue. Why? Because only sin can prevent the fruit of the Spirit.

The first quality of the fruit of the Spirit is *agapé* love. This has been addressed extensively in the last several pages. And it has been demonstrated there that a sense of guilt in the Christian's heart prevents him from loving God and others with *agapé* love. This is because he must have a good, *unguilty* conscience in order to love (1 Tim 1:5). Likewise, since only walking by the flesh can prevent one from walking by the Spirit and possessing His *agapé* love, a sense of guilt must issue from a believer's walking in the flesh. It cannot be the result of a neutral, non-moral false guilt.

Granted, the Christian may experience neutral, non-moral attitudes and emotions in his heart, such as pain and grief, for which he is not responsible to God (see Emotions). However, these cannot prevent him from being controlled by the Spirit, and they cannot prevent him from possessing the fruit of the Spirit. In fact, the Christian may experience the

²⁸ Rienecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 538.

²⁹ Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: SP Publications, 1983), 608.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 640.

fruit of the Spirit even when his world is caving in on him and he is plagued by attitudes and emotions of deep grief and pain (cf. Job 1 and 2, 2 Cor 4:4-7, Rom 5:3-5, *et al.*). But there is only one heart condition which can render him unable to be filled with the Spirit and unable to experience His fruit. And that one condition is his walking by the flesh. Since a sense of guilt also prevents him from being able to experience the fruit of love (1 Tim 1:5), it must, therefore, issue from his walking by the flesh.

Joy, another quality of the fruit of the Spirit, is said to be "grounded in conscience relationship to God"³¹ and "is the sense of well being experienced by one who knows all is well between himself and the Lord (1 Pet 1:8)."³² Joy "is a deep and abiding inner rejoicing which was promised to those who abide in Christ (cf. Jn 15:11). It does not depend on circumstances because it rests in God's sovereign control of all things (cf. Rom 8:28)."³³

Though common sorrow (often known as grief) may ebb and flow in one's life, it can co-exist with the filling of the Spirit, and consequently it can co-exist with the joy of the Lord and with conscience joy (the joy in one's heart when his conscience is clear) (see Emotions). But when the believer experiences *conscience sorrow* (the sorrow which results from a sense of guilt), he is not possessing the fruit of the Spirit which is *conscience joy*. And again, this is because he is walking by the flesh, not walking by the Spirit.

The same can be said of peace. "Peace (*eirēnē*) is again a gift of Christ (cf. Jn 14:27). It is an inner response and quietness, even in the face of adverse circumstances; it defies human understanding (cf. Phil 4:7)."³⁴

"Peace here is not the peace with God which we have in justification, but the peace of God in our hearts, and can be defined as *tranquility of mind based on the consciousness of a right relation to God*."³⁵

As can be seen above, the kind of peace produced by the Spirit in the believer's heart is the opposite of a sense of guilt. Where the peace of God dwells, a sense of guilt cannot exist; where guilt is present, peace cannot abide. There is no room here for false guilt, because either the Christian

³¹ Rienecker and Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, 517.

³² John MacArthur, *MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: The Moody Bible Institute, 1997), 1798.

³³ Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, New Testament*, 608.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest's Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 160.

has the peace of God at any given moment, or he does not. And the pain and estrangement produced in his heart by a sense of guilt is quite the opposite of the tranquility promised as he is controlled by the Spirit (see the chapters Peace and Guilt).

In fact, if a sense of peace and a sense of guilt could abide together in the Christian's heart, human wisdom would not be so intent on attempting to address guilt as false and on explaining it away as simply "guilt feelings."

Since, therefore, the knowledge of unresolved guilt prevents *agapé* love, conscience joy, and the peace of God in the believer's heart, he cannot be walking by the Spirit at the moment these are prevented in his life. He is walking by the flesh. And the conclusion is again unavoidable that when he is experiencing a sense of guilt in his heart, it is because of his known personal unloving attitudes as he walks by the flesh.

Yes, it is true that the Christian who is walking by the flesh may *not* have a sense of guilt. But biblically the opposite is not true. If he *does* have a sense of guilt, it is (without biblical exception) because he is walking by the flesh, not walking by the Spirit. This is the whole point of the studies in the present chapter – to demonstrate that according to the Word of God there is no kind of guilt (viz., false guilt) which can exist in the believer's heart when he is walking by the Spirit in practical, loving righteousness. And when he has a sense of guilt, it is because he is embracing known personal sin, either by clinging to present sin in his life, or by justifying or attempting to ignore past sin in his heart, even for split seconds at a time (see the next chapter).

To sum up, then, since *at every given moment* the believer is responsible to God to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and to possess His fruit of love, joy, and peace in his heart, and since an awareness and sense of guilt in his heart prevent this control and the fruit of the Spirit (peace) *at any given moment*, the presence of a sense of guilt and the consequent absence of a sense of peace in one's heart must be due to known personal sin in his life. Furthermore, the answer to the removal of a sense of guilt cannot depend upon the time-consuming processes of re-training and re-learning which human wisdom proposes for its false guilt – that is, re-training a conscience which has operated incorrectly since childhood so that it does not judge him guilty, and re-learning more reasonable standards for his conscience. Instead, the removal of the believer's awareness and sense of guilt and the presence of the control of the Spirit must be possible *at any given moment*. And they are possible only because they are dependent upon the confession of his known personal sin *at any given*

moment. Then, as he lives a life pleasing to God by being controlled by His Spirit and by following the standards of his conscience (Rom 14:5-8, 22-23), the believer can continue to grow in Christ and to steadily adjust those standards to correspond with the truths of the Word of God – all the while enjoying intimacy with God and the peace which He gives.

Implications of Accepting the Idea of False Guilt

In light of these biblical truths, the Christian who is inclined to accept the concept of false guilt should seriously consider the implications of his position. For instance, he should contemplate how the following passages concerning the peace of God might read in order to accommodate such an idea.

Jn 14:27 – Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you, unless you are suffering from false guilt.

Jn 16: 33 – These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace, unless your false guilt prevents it.

Rom 8:6 – For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, except when false guilt is present in one's heart.

Ps 119:165 – Those who love Thy law have great peace, and nothing except false guilt causes them to stumble.

Phil 4:6-7 – Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unless human comprehension has uncovered false guilt in your hearts and minds.

Isa 26:3 – The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in Thee – unless false guilt prevents this peace.

These five reasons demonstrate decisively that the Word of God neither teaches nor allows for the concept of false guilt. Instead, they reveal that when the believer has a sense of guilt in his heart, it is because of his known personal sin – sin which, even for a brief moment, is presently entertained therein, is justified, ignored, dismissed, or not believed to be forgiven by Christ. According to Scripture, then, the only adequate answer for the believer's sense of guilt is his allowing himself to pay attention to the unloving attitudes, words, and actions which plague him, confess them as sin to God, concurrently count on the family

forgiveness he has through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, and be controlled by God's Holy Spirit (see *Moving from Unloving to Loving*).

Examples of Alleged False Guilt

It has been demonstrated in the last several pages that, according to the Word of God, false guilt does not exist. Instead, when one has a sense of guilt in his heart, it indicates that he is truly guilty of known personal sin before God – truly guilty either of unloving attitudes which are presently being entertained in his heart, or of past personal sin which is plaguing him. This being the case, a host of examples of alleged false guilt may flood the mind. Before these are addressed, however, attention should be called to a principle which runs through them all. This principle might be called the Wrong Reason Principle.

Briefly stated, the Wrong Reason Principle says that when one is not paying attention to the real reason for his sense of guilt, he may give himself a wrong reason for the true guilt he is experiencing. That is, when he chooses not to be sensitive to the instinctive, instantaneous work of his conscience as it convicts him of his guilt for a specific, known sin – sometimes a choice made in a split second – and as his unloving attitude and his sense of guilt linger in his heart, he may give himself a wrong reason for his true guilt before God. This is not uncommon, even for the believer, because human nature generally tends to excuse itself of sin. Prov 16:2 states: "All the ways of a man are clean in his own sight, but the Lord weighs the motives." Likewise, Prov 21:2 says, "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts." Man – be he a believer or an unbeliever – naturally tends to excuse himself for the sinful things he thinks, says, and does. It is part and parcel of the flesh, the old sin nature.

Even when one's unloving attitudes are hidden away in his heart and are covered by nice words or acceptable actions, his conscience is not fooled, and it will still register a sense of guilt. If he declines to pay attention to those attitudes or to justify them, he may begin to lose the connection between his unloving thoughts and the sense of guilt he feels in his heart. This is the condition revealed in Mt 7:3 where Jesus said, "And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not notice [pay attention to] the log that is in your own eye?" Jesus was pointing out the tendency of man not to pay attention to his own sin while taking special note of another's sin in the same area. This is not to say that one with the log does not know his sin is there. He knows it well enough, for in 7:5 he

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is called a "hypocrite" who is first to take the log out of his own eye. Indeed, he knows his sin is there, but he is not paying attention to it. He is conscious of it (not "unconscious" of it), but he is ignoring it and justifying it as a matter of course.

The same thing can happen to anyone. And if he does not pay attention to what his conscience is saying in his heart, he can begin to give himself wrong reasons for the true guilt which he senses.

Such is the case, for example, when a loving child has his father die suddenly of a heart attack, and he consequently blames himself for his father's death. He reasons that since he feels guilty when he thinks about his father's death, then he must have been the reason for his demise. This is not false guilt but a wrong reason for the true guilt which he feels upon contemplating his father's death. His true guilt issues from unloving attitudes toward God (for allowing the death) and perhaps even toward his father for not taking better care of himself. While one should compassionately commiserate with the deep hurt in this child's life at the loss of his father, and while he should "weep with those who weep," he need not try to explain away the youngster's guilt as false guilt.

Any number of situations can be understood as wrong reasons for true guilt, particularly when one is dealing with traumatic events in life. The innocent woman who is sexually violated deserves one's deep compassion. Yet the guilt she feels is not false guilt for her complicity in the act but is true guilt for her reactions toward the perpetrator of this heinous deed and toward God who allowed it to happen.

Likewise, parents who have given birth to a deformed child are not guilty of planning to contribute to the deformity. In their guilt, however, they do need to pay attention to thankless, complaining attitudes toward the God who gave them this child. And the man who is falsely accused of a crime and whose reputation is therefore stained is not truly guilty of the crime, but he is truly guilty of anger or bitterness toward those who have accused him and toward the One who could have prevented it all from happening.

The list could go on and on with heart-rending stories of those who have suffered hurt, injury, defamation, violation, and torture not of their own doing. But their road to true peace of heart is not through human wisdom and the postulation of false guilt. It is through the acknowledgment of their own personal sin and through acceptant thankfulness in response to what the loving Father has allowed in their lives for His sometimes mysterious purposes and for their good (Rom 8:28, Eph 5:20).

Another situation which may be given as an example of false guilt (but which is not) is the person who is being "made to feel guilty" by the expectations of others. Either subtle or blatant pressure is often brought to bear on this person by those who want him to conform to their beliefs, practices, or standards. To attempt to change him, they try to "make him feel guilty" and thus to control him. If the one being pressured to change does not do so, the result is often guilt – true guilt. He is truly guilty not for the unloving rejection he senses from others, but for his own inner responses to them (perhaps resentment, anger, bitterness) and, once again, to God (perhaps thanklessness, pride, anger, etc.).

As one can see, very often true guilt lies in one's *response* to what has happened *to* him, not in his initiation of any wrong in the first place. In this last case, one cannot be "made to feel guilty" if he truly loves those who are treating him very unlovingly.

Closely akin to the last example is the situation in which one is standing for what is right according to Scripture, yet others are opposing him by any number of manipulative attitudes, words, or actions. He is truly suffering for righteousness' sake. First Pet 3:14-16 presents such a case, and verse 16 commands this person to be "keeping a good conscience." This is because even when he is faithfully standing for what is right, at least two things can rob him of a good conscience, neither of which is false guilt. The first is that he may, under duress, give way to the criticisms or treatment of others and cease to stand for righteousness. The second is more subtle. While continuing to hold to that which is right, he may begin in his heart to entertain less than loving thoughts toward his persecutors and, yes, even toward the God who is allowing him to endure such treatment. In either case, it is because of personal sin and a sense of true guilt that one loses a good conscience, not because of personal innocence and false guilt.

Another situation which might be mistaken for false guilt is the guilt present in a person's life when the things for which he is feeling guilty are entirely out of his control. But the Great Controller of all things is God, who "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). The guilt arising here is true guilt for attitudes like worry, thanklessness, or lack of acceptance concerning the situation in which he finds himself (1 Pet 5:6, Phil 4:6, Eph 5:20).

And then there is "survivor's guilt" – the guilt sometimes felt by one who survives a tragedy. This, too, is true guilt, not for surviving, but for something else. For instance, the individual may have in his heart anger, resentment, bitterness, or hatred toward the person or persons whose

decisions have led to the disaster – and especially might this be true if a loved one or dear friend has been lost. Likewise, he may be inwardly angry at God who allowed it all to happen. Or he may feel guilty for his own resentful attitudes toward those who question why he was spared and another more worthy person was taken. Then again, if this survivor has been living a life not pleasing to God, the tragedy may have made him even more sensitive to his sin and brought to his mind his unworthiness to have been spared. Hopefully, though, it will lead him to turn to the Lord Jesus for his forgiveness and for a new direction in his life, with the result being "survivor's gratitude."

When a personal decision must be made on some issue, one may also sense that which appears to be false guilt. In fact, any decision he makes may seem to produce guilt. Again, though, if he truly pays attention to the cause of his guilt, this person will usually find that it is not the decision itself on which he is so undecided, but it is how other people may react to his decision which is causing difficulty. Any way he goes, others may be upset with him or critical of him. If this is the case, the guilt is true guilt for his own wrong inner reactions to those from whom he *anticipates* displeasure. Once he confesses his resentment or impatience or anger as sin (1 Cor 13:4-5) and is again filled with God's Spirit, he will find that God will give him the grace to love all those involved, and he will be able to make his decision by faith without being tossed to and fro by guilt.

Satan's ability to deceive the believer without his complicity and accountability is advanced as another reason for his false guilt. It should be remembered, however, that the Christian is responsible to God not to succumb to the deception of Satan, for he has been given both the command and the power to avoid that deception (cf. Gen 3:1-7, 2 Cor 11:3, 14, 1 Cor 10:13). Eph 6:10-11 says, "Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." Likewise, Jas 4:7 states, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." And 1 Pet 5:8 commands, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith...."

The reason the believer feels guilty when Satan attempts to deceive him is not because of Satan's schemes or attacks. It is because he has personally sinned by *falling* to those ploys – at least in his heart for a moment. Also, it may not even be until after the believer has chosen to sin that Satan gains an opportunity to promote his scheme (Eph 4:27). Biblically, then, Satan does not have the power to deceive the Christian

apart from his responsibility for allowing the evil one to do so. Otherwise, the believer would be at the Adversary's mercy and would be unable to walk by the Spirit each moment as he ought to walk (1 Cor 10:13, Gal 5:16).

A person fraught with depression may also exhibit what others would term false guilt. That is, in the throes of his depression, he convinces himself that he has caused things for which he clearly bears no personal responsibility. But what he really is feeling guilty about is, for example, his hidden anger or bitterness toward his ungrateful, nagging wife or his resentment toward his unsympathetic, oppressive boss.

Another example of a person who seems to be experiencing false guilt but is not is the one who has felt guilty for so long (because of the unloving attitudes harbored in his heart) that he develops superstitions or irrational standards for his life in an attempt to explain and to palliate the feelings of guilt which plague him. He is different from the legalistic individual in two ways. First, in legalism a person's standards usually have some kind of rational explanation behind them, even if they have been adopted due to tradition. In superstition a person's standards have little or no rational basis. Second, when a person has legalistic standards, he only feels guilty when he violates those standards. When he does not violate them, he is not bothered by a sense of guilt. On the other hand, a person whose standards are superstitious is constantly haunted by guilt in his life, no matter what he does. He is driven by a sense of guilt that already exists in his heart. He might be described as "guilt and anxiety looking for an explanation." While with both legalism and superstition the principle applies "Whatever is not from faith is sin" (Rom 14:23), the sense of guilt experienced by the superstitious individual is not basically connected to the violation of his irrational standards. Instead, it is almost entirely due to the unloving attitudes toward God and others which he has been entertaining in his heart even before he adopted his superstitious standards. He is not suffering from false guilt but has given himself wrong reasons for the true guilt that torments his life.

Though there are many and varied situations which appear to be false guilt in life, once the believer accepts the scriptural teaching that all guilt is true guilt, it is not difficult to connect with it the known personal unloving attitudes present in a person's heart that are actually causing it. Then, as these root sins are confessed and as the Holy Spirit produces His love within a believer's heart, the results will be the peace of God in place of guilt, confidence before Him, and drawing near to Him and to others.

A Sense of Guilt after Confession?

Should it be objected that the believer can confess all known sin and still have a sense of guilt in his heart, it should be understood that the root problem is still sin, not false guilt, for the Scripture asserts, "If we confess our sins He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9). And, "The steadfast of mind Thou wilt keep in perfect peace, because he trusts in Thee" (Isa 26:3); "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace" (Gal 5:22); "The righteous are bold as a lion" (Prov 28:1b); "Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God" (1 Jn 3:21).

If a Christian experiences a continued sense of guilt after having confessed his sin, he should look for the deficiency within himself, not assign it to the existence of human wisdom's false guilt in his heart.

There are, in fact, several reasons why a sense of guilt may continue upon true confession of all known sin in one's life. In the first place, one may have sincerely confessed his sin yet not have counted on the fact that he is forgiven. This is unbelief, which may be remedied with heavy doses of the believer's position in Christ as forgiven, holy, and beloved. Since "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ" (Rom 10:17), one's faith can grow to accept the wonderful truths of his forgiveness as he exposes his heart sincerely and consistently to God's Word. After all, even the Apostle Peter was so overcome with the guilt of his denials of Christ that he needed the Lord Jesus to reassure him of His forgiveness, doing so by telling him of the plans He yet had for him (Jn 21:15-19, cf. 1 Jn 3:18-21). The point here, however, is that if guilt remains upon confession of sin, it is not because God's Word is in error about the believer's forgiveness, or that God has not forgiven him, or that some false guilt remains which must be dealt with by human wisdom instead of by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. His sense of guilt remains because of unbelief by the Christian that he is truly forgiven for all of his sin as the Scripture reveals (cf. Col 2:13, Heb 10:10-18, 1 Jn 1:9, Eph 1:7) (see *Moving from Unloving to Loving*).

Another reason that a believer's guilt may remain after confession of sin is that he is not intending to yield to the control of the Spirit upon confession and is therefore stepping back into the flesh to live the Christian life (Gal 5:16-17). Immediately, then, his conscience registers the sin of walking by the flesh, and his sense of guilt remains. It should be remembered that the other side of true confession of sin is a desire to yield oneself to God's Spirit, for only then can the believer please God and find

strength to love as he should love (Eph 3:16) (see Framework).

Again, if one is sincerely confessing, counting upon his forgiveness in Christ, and desiring to yield to the Spirit's control, a sense of guilt may remain if he is not believing (by faith, not by feelings) that he is indeed controlled by the Spirit. Eph 5:18 says that it is God's will that the believer be continually controlled by His Spirit. First Jn 5:14-15 states that if we ask what we know is God's will, He will give us what we ask. Thus, the Christian can be confident that, whether he "feels" controlled by the Spirit or not, he *is* controlled by Him, if that is his sincere desire before God and he is not entertaining known sin in his life (Ps 66:18). Feelings of the Spirit's filling are not necessary in order for the believer to be filled or to be used by God, but if he does *not believe* he is filled until he *feels* filled, unbelief has crept in and a sense of guilt may return.

Upon the believer's control by the Holy Spirit, He immediately brings forth in his heart the attitudes which comprise the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). The Christian now has a choice whether to walk in love or to cease to love. But if he quickly chooses once more to entertain unloving thoughts, words, or actions in his heart, he has sinned again and may expect his conscience to remind him of it. Furthermore, if he knows how and at what time he is to openly express God's love and does not do it, his conscience will again convict him of sin (Jas 4:17). Or perhaps he has confessed one external sin (for example, an angry word) and soon after begins to mull over in his heart another internal sin (for example, a grumbling spirit), with the resultant sense of guilt which follows. In such a case, he should not conclude that confession of sin "does not work" or that he needs human wisdom to explain why he still feels guilty. What he needs is to pay attention to the sin of which his conscience is reminding him and to deal with it. Speaking with a friend may be helpful here (Prov 27:9), but all the believer truly needs is to pour out his heart to the Wonderful Counselor (perhaps even out loud, so that he can pay better attention to what is on his heart – as David and Job did) and cast his concerns upon Him (1 Pet 5:6-7). It will not be long before he sees the root of his problem and will be able to remedy it.

In conclusion, it may be stated again that *man's conscience is not always right, but it is never wrong*. It is not always right when it exonerates him of sin, for conscience may be insensitive or seared. But conscience is never wrong when it judges him guilty, for, according to the Scripture, man is always to follow his conscience, even if it is uneducated biblically and is legalistic, registering non-moral issues as sin. There is, therefore, no such thing as "false guilt," for when man's conscience

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registers a sense of guilt, this indicates true guilt for real sin before God. And physiological feelings which one recognizes as connected to that sense of guilt are aiding him to pay attention to the sin which he needs to acknowledge to God as sin and for which he needs to come to Christ for eternal or family forgiveness.

Summary

There are five strong biblical reasons why there is no such thing as false guilt. First, when the believer violates even the personally acquired (but not biblically revealed) standards of his own weak conscience, he is sinning against God. He is experiencing true guilt before Him and a true sense of guilt in his heart, not false guilt. Second, without biblical exception, a sense of peace is experienced in the heart of a believer whose attitudes are at that moment righteous before God and who is resting in God's forgiveness and acceptance. He does not experience a sense of guilt. Third, the believer is spiritually responsible to God for having and maintaining a good, unguilty conscience. A guilty conscience, therefore, is a spiritual, moral issue before God, not a neutral issue, which false guilt is proposed to be. Fourth, the believer cannot love with God's love, as he is commanded to do, unless he has a good, unguilty conscience — an indication that both loving with God's love and the possession of an unguilty conscience are spiritual issues before God, not neutral issues. And fifth, whenever the believer experiences a sense of guilt, he cannot be controlled by God's Holy Spirit as he is commanded to be — an indication that both the control of the Spirit and the possession of an unguilty conscience are spiritual issues before God.

Though human wisdom proposes situations which may appear to be examples of false guilt, these all can be biblically explained to be wrong reasons for one's awareness of and a sense of true guilt before God, due to the known personal sin in his heart.

APPENDIX

What Does 1 Jn 3:20 Mean?

Those who desire to integrate human wisdom and the Word of God in counseling sometimes appeal to 1 Jn 3:20 as a key verse in their search to justify the concept of false guilt in Scripture. In doing so, they, perhaps unknowingly, violate at least one of the basic principles of sound biblical interpretation. It is explained in *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*.

The principle of preference for the clearest interpretation....

... A corollary to this principle is this one: obscure passages must give right of way to clear passages.... This corollary principle asserts that where there are two passages dealing with the same topic, the clear passage should interpret the obscure and not the obscure the clear.... Our guidance should always be to take the record where it is clear as a guide to doctrine, rather than where it is obscure.³⁶

All serious Bible commentators would agree that 1 Jn 3:20 is one of those unclear passages, and that it is "complex in the Greek and allows several translations."³⁷

For this reason alone, if one is to follow the principle of biblical interpretation quoted above, 1 Jn 3:20 cannot be reasonably adduced to establish false guilt as a concept taught in Scripture, especially since other passages in the Word of God have been shown to clearly and extensively demonstrate that Scripture neither teaches nor allows for that idea.

What, then, could 1 Jn 3:20 mean? Two interpretations stand out and are perhaps the best possibilities. The first places a period at the end of verse 19 and translates the confusing Greek construction of verse 20 as do the King James Version and the New King James Version, "For if our heart condemns us, God is greater than our heart, and knows all things." The interpretation which is followed, then, is the one "adopted by the early

³⁶ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W. A. Wilde Company, 1956), 120, 122.

³⁷ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version*, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: The Zondervan Corporation, 1976), 337.

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Greek commentators and the Reformers³⁸ and by many after them. It has been termed the condemning view. Briefly put, it states,

Only in conscious brotherly love shall we calm our hearts, for if we do not love, our heart condemns us, and God is greater than our hearts, and there is no peace for the accusing conscience.... If our hearts condemn us, then God, who is greater than our hearts, and knows all things, must not only endorse but emphasize our self-accusation.³⁹

Granted, this is not a happy thought, but it is in accord with other clear teaching of Scripture which reveals that man tends to ignore or to justify (to flee from) the unloving motives and other unloving attitudes in his heart for which his heart condemns him. However, God knows even more greatly than man does what is truly there. This is the message of such verses as Prov 21:2, "Every man's way is right in his own eyes, but the Lord weighs the hearts" (cf. Prov 16:2, Jer 17:9).

A second possible interpretation of 1 Jn 3:20 translates the confusing Greek construction in verse 20 as continuing the sentence in verse 19, "We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him, in whatever our heart condemns us, for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things" (New American Standard Bible). In this translation, the believer is seen receiving consolation from the fact that, even though he is troubled by a condemning heart for the already-confessed violations of love he has done in the past, God is greater than his heart and knows that he is accepted by Him, that he is forgiven for those sins, and that He has been at work in his heart producing love for Him and for others. This view can be summarized by the following:

It is precisely in the sphere of a believer's love for other Christians, in which Christ has set him so high a standard, that he may feel deeply his own inadequacy and failure. But if his heart condemns him, he can remind himself that God takes account of those things which at the moment his heart ignores. If he has been engaged in the kind of practical acts of love which John enjoined,

³⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1960), 148.

³⁹ Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 2 (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.), 353, partly quoting Meyer.

his guilt-ridden heart can be persuaded by realizing that God is well aware of his fundamental commitment to the truth.⁴⁰

This interpretation, too, has the support of Scripture. Ps 103:10-13 says,

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

If one is inclined toward the consolatory view, however, he should be careful not to fall prey to the unbiblical reasoning that since man's conscience may err in *not* judging him guilty when he *is* guilty (a truth taught clearly in Scripture – cf. Eph 4:19, 1 Tim 4:2), that therefore his conscience can also err in judging him *guilty* when he is *not* guilty (the concept of false guilt – decisively taught *against* in Scripture, as demonstrated in the present chapter). Instead, he should understand the consolatory interpretation of 1 Jn 3:20 in light of what Scripture teaches elsewhere – that this passage speaks of a believer, who, like the Apostle Peter after his denials of the Lord (Jn 21), is very much aware of his past sin (though it has been confessed) and of his present tendency to weakness and is struggling with counting on the acceptant love and forgiveness of his compassionate Father who knows all things – who knows his past sins and that he is forgiven for them, and who knows his present weaknesses and is patient with him concerning them.

In neither case does the Bible teach that a Christian can be sensing guilt even though he is innocent of any personal sin before God at that moment. In both cases, in fact, he is very much aware of his sin – in the one case because he is sinning, is feeling guilty for it, but is justifying, ignoring, or dismissing it, and in the other case because he has sinned in the past and is having a hard time accepting the forgiveness of God for it (see Moving from Unloving to Loving).

⁴⁰ Campbell, "Galatians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures, New Testament*, 608.

APPENDIX

Should a Christian Feel Guilty when He Sins?

The power of guilt to generate mental unsoundness in man has long been recognized. Human wisdom's answer to the guilt problem has been to postulate that a consciousness (awareness, knowledge) and sense of guilt and the punitive feelings which accompany them are learned in early childhood and, as such, should be unlearned.⁴¹ The Word of God, however, has a different answer – the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ which cleanses from all sin (1 Jn 1:7). Some who attempt to integrate human wisdom with the Scripture in the area of guilt, however, have taken this biblical truth and have suggested that since the believer at salvation is forgiven for all of his sins in God's eyes (positional forgiveness), he should no longer feel guilty when he sins. This proposition is incorrect and unbiblical for several reasons.

First, one's conscience does not cease its instinctive judgment of sin when one becomes a Christian. This instinctive work is, in fact, designed by God not only to urge the unbeliever toward salvation (cf. Jn 16:8-11, Acts 2:37), but also to urge the believer to repentance in order to renew his intimacy with God (2 Cor 7:9-10, 1 Jn 1:9, Ps 32:1-5). Furthermore, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's heart stimulates, rather than diminishes, the sense of guilt he feels when he sins. The Apostle Paul intimated as much in Rom 9:1 when, averring his love for his fellow Israelites, he said, "I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit."

In the second place, to suggest that a believer's eternal, forgiven position in Jesus Christ (his once for all justification – Rom 5:1, 8:1, Col 2:13) signifies he should learn not to have a sense of guilt when he sins is to ignore the fact that, in the process of his progressive sanctification, God Himself considers the Christian guilty when he sins (Jas 2:8-10), condemned (Rom 14:23), and in danger of His temporal judgment (1 Cor 11:28-32). These do not mean, of course, that that sinning believer loses his *relationship* with his Heavenly Father. He does not (cf. Heb 13:5, Jn 10:27-29). But they do indicate that he temporarily loses his *intimacy* with

⁴¹ David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, eds., *Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 253-54, 534-36.

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God until he confesses the sin of which he is aware, receiving "family forgiveness" from Him (1 Jn 1:9, Ps 32:5, Prov 28:13, cf. Ps 66:18).

The Christian's "family guilt," as it might be termed, is plainly seen in Jas 2:8-10,

If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

"Convicted" here is the same Greek word that is used in Jn 16:8, where the Holy Spirit convicts unbelievers of sin, righteousness, and judgment. But in Jas 2, it is the believer, not the unbeliever, who is convicted of his sin "by proof of guilt."⁴² "So James's reasoning is that to commit one act of sin, which breaks one commandment of the law, makes a person 'guilty of breaking' the whole law."⁴³

Rom 14:22-23 carries the same message about the practical family guilt of the believer before God when he sins. In this case, though, he is simply violating his own conscience with regard to a non-moral standard he has personally adopted,

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Instructively, God considers the believer who violates his own non-moral standard to "stand condemned"⁴⁴ because he is not acting in faith, and "whatever is not from faith is sin." While not being eternally condemned, the Christian in this condition is still condemned by God as guilty of sin and displeasing to Him as His child.

First Cor 11:30-32 gives another instance in which the believer is said

⁴² A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1933), 32.

⁴³ Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *Expositors Bible Commentary*, 180.

⁴⁴ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 468.

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to be guilty before God. In this passage, God warns of His temporal, disciplinary judgment on him when he consistently neglects to deal with sin in his life,

For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord so that we will not be condemned along with the world.

Clearly, "these afflictions are judgments from God.... It is because we do not sit in judgment on ourselves, that God judges us."⁴⁵

Since God asserts in His Word that the Christian is guilty when he sins, his conscience does and should hold him guilty and make him feel guilty. Since God considers the sinning believer condemned when he violates his conscience in even non-moral matters, his conscience rightly does and should condemn him in that condition. Since God warns the believer of impending judgment from Him when he sins, his conscience rightly does and should warn him of God's temporal judgment and urge upon him a fear of that judgment.

Finally, all throughout Scripture God's people have sensed their guilt when they were made aware of their sin. Cases in point are David when his heart (conscience) smote him because "I have sinned greatly" (2 Sam 24:10) and when God's hand was "heavy upon me" (Ps 32:4); Isaiah in his "Woe is me.... I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5); Daniel in his prayer of contrition, "Open shame belongs to us, O Lord.... because we have sinned against Thee" (Dan 9:8); Peter in bitter weeping and conscience sorrow over the denials of his Savior (Mt 26:75); and Paul in his identification of the condition of every believer when he walks by the flesh, "I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.... Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:15, 25).

Biblically, then, the answer to the question posed above is clear. A Christian *does* and *should* feel guilty when he sins. Why? Because only after he is conscious of the instinctive work of his conscience (that is, only after he has become aware of his wrong and sensed his guilt before God and with it sensed the fear of His judgment), and only after he has truly confessed his sin to God, being filled with His Spirit – only after these things can he truly count on the family forgiveness he has from God, enjoy

⁴⁵ Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 234.

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his eternal position in Christ, experience the peace of God, have confidence before Him, and possess the renewed intimacy with God which accompanies them (see Framework).