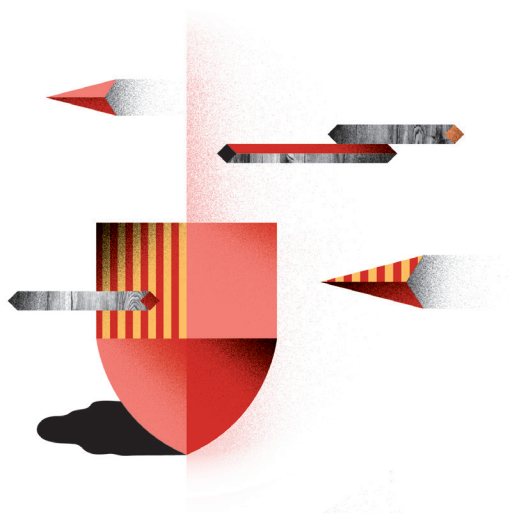


# STAND FIRM



LIVING IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

**JOHN  
MACARTHUR**

## Endorsements

“There is nothing better than following Christ, but there is also nothing harder than following Christ. With the care of a shepherd, Dr. John MacArthur takes us back to Scripture and instructs us how to be a Christian all over again. But he does so by invigorating us with a holy joy, a selfless love, and a sturdy humility. He takes us to our knees in prayer, not only to commune with the living God but to equip us with the grace needed to finish the race. Whether you are ready to begin the race or exhausted from running, Dr. MacArthur is ready to run by your side—even carry you to the finish line if he must—so that together you hear those words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” If you want to know how to run like a Christian, then let this book be your coach.”

—DR. MATTHEW BARRETT

Associate professor of Christian theology  
Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Mo.

“In a society that increasingly looks like the infamous ancient city of Corinth, the church needs vigorous, strong, consistent, powerful Christians (1 Cor. 16:13–14). In this succinct, much-needed, and highly recommended book, Dr. John MacArthur reminds us that true Christian power is not popularity or favor with this world, but the supernatural strength to persevere in uncompromising holiness, sacrificial love, and fervent prayer.”

—DR. JOEL R. BEEKE

President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Mich.

“No one in our generation has stood stronger against the encroaching forces of worldliness that war against the Christian’s soul than Dr. John MacArthur. For over half a century in his pulpit at Grace Community Church, this premier expositor has upheld the high standard of pursuing personal holiness in the believer’s life. This book, *Stand Firm*, is filled with strong doctrine and sound wisdom for winning the battle against our three great enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil. Read this book, and you will be well-prepared for spiritual victory.”

—DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON  
Founder and president  
OnePassion Ministries, Dallas

**STAND  
FIRM**



# STAND FIRM

LIVING IN A POST-CHRISTIAN CULTURE

JOHN  
MACARTHUR

*Stand Firm: Living in a Post-Christian Culture*

© 2020 by John MacArthur

Published by Reformation Trust Publishing

a division of Ligonier Ministries

421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

Ligonier.org      ReformationTrust.com

Printed in York, Pennsylvania

Maple Press

0000120

First edition

ISBN 978-1-64289-221-5 (Hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-64289-222-2 (ePub)

ISBN 978-1-64289-223-9 (Kindle)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher, Reformation Trust Publishing. The only exception is brief quotations in published reviews.

Cover design: Metaleap Creative

Interior design and typeset: Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible® (NASB), Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. [www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org).

Scripture quotations marked ESV are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: MacArthur, John, 1939- author.

Title: Stand firm : living in a post-Christian culture / John MacArthur.

Description: First. | Orlando : Reformation Trust Publishing, 2020. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019025529 (print) | LCCN 2019025530 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781642892215 (hardback) | ISBN 9781642892222 (epub) |

ISBN 9781642892239 (kindle edition)

Subjects: LCSH: Christian life. | Fortitude. | Christianity and culture.

Classification: LCC BV4509.5 .M2526 2020 (print) | LCC BV4509.5 (ebook) | DDC 248.4--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025529>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019025530>

# CONTENTS

|       |   |     |
|-------|---|-----|
| One   | The Christian Life Means Being Called to Holiness . . . .                 | 1   |
| Two   | The Christian Life Means Loving Your Neighbor<br>and Your Enemy . . . . . | 25  |
| Three | The Christian Life Means Loving until It Hurts . . . . .                  | 49  |
| Four  | The Christian Life Means Engaging in Prayer . . . . .                     | 73  |
| Five  | The Christian Life Means Repudiating the Myth<br>of Influence. . . . .    | 99  |
| Six   | The Christian Life Means Persevering to the End . . .                     | 125 |
|       | Notes . . . . .   | 143 |
|       | Scripture Index. . . . .  | 145 |
|       | About the Author. . . . .   | 151 |





# THE CHRISTIAN LIFE MEANS BEING CALLED TO HOLINESS

**T**he New Testament resounds with calls to holiness. We are told to abstain from fleshly lusts (1 Peter 2:11), mortify the deeds of the body (Rom. 8:13), love not the world (1 John 2:15), flee immorality (1 Cor. 6:18), put off the old man (Eph. 4:22), and think on what is true (Phil. 4:8). We read commands to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16), to put on the breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:14), to buffet our bodies to bring them into subjection (1 Cor. 9:27), and to present our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1). We hear the call of the Apostle Paul to cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh (2 Cor. 7:1), walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), and lay aside all bitterness, anger, and malice (Eph. 4:31). Peter quoted from Leviticus in his charge to live disciplined, godly lives: “Like the Holy One who called

you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16). Most Christians are well versed in those commands—we know them and we believe them.

However, familiarity and mental assent are not enough to produce righteous results. In fact, the church seems to be rapidly losing the battle for holiness and purity. Consider the worldliness that pervades the church today. Some congregations are virtually indistinguishable from the world; many more are moving fast on a similar trajectory. Others don’t necessarily wear their worldly affections on their sleeves, but their outward acts of piety and devotion cannot conceal the corruption within.

The reason is simple. The battle for holiness is not primarily about public professions and external displays. Rather, if God’s people are going to be holy, we must first win the battle on the inside.

## The Highest Court of the Human Heart

When Paul was forced to defend himself to the believers in Corinth against the accusations of the false apostles, he did not appeal to the testimonies of friends and ministry partners to verify his virtue. He didn’t point to his miraculous works or the number of churches he had planted to validate his Apostolic credentials. Instead, he appealed to the highest court of the human heart. “For our proud confidence is this: the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in

fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you” (2 Cor. 1:12). Paul called on his own conscience as his best defense.

The value of a clear conscience is a repeated theme throughout Paul’s ministry. In Acts 23:1, he said to the Sanhedrin, “Brethren, I have lived my life with a perfectly good conscience before God up to this day.” In Acts 24:16, he confessed to Felix, “I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men.” And in 2 Timothy 1:3, he wrote, “I thank God, whom I serve with a clear conscience.”

In his first epistle to Timothy, Paul explained that “the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5). He urged his young apprentice in the faith to “fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience” (vv. 18–19). He would later identify “holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience” (3:9) as one of the necessary qualifications for deacons.

Peter likewise understood the value of a clear conscience. In his first epistle, he charged his readers to “keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame” (1 Peter 3:16). External accusations cannot compare in intensity to the internal testimony of one’s own conscience. The Puritan preacher Richard Sibbes described the conscience as “the soul reflecting on itself.”<sup>1</sup> In the courtroom of the human heart, the conscience occupies all the roles. It is the *court reporter*, recording in precise detail everything we do (Jer. 17:1). It is our *prosecutor*, lodging complaints when we are guilty, and

## STAND FIRM

our *defender* who pleads our innocence (Rom. 2:15). As we see from Paul, the conscience is our *witness*, faithfully testifying for or against us (2 Cor. 1:12). It's our *judge* in both condemnation and vindication (1 John 3:20–21). The conscience even serves as our *executioner*, as it plagues us with grief over our uncovered guilt (1 Sam. 24:5).<sup>2</sup>

The false teachers in Corinth made every attempt to tarnish Paul's testimony and call his credentials into question. But their accusations could not sway or silence the clear testimony of his conscience. In the courtroom of his heart, before the Lord, the Apostle knew he was innocent of their allegations.

When we speak of winning the battle for holiness on the inside, we are speaking of the conscience. Victory in the external battle must be preceded by victory in this internal battle. John Owen wrote, "Let not that man think he makes any progress in holiness who walks not over the bellies of his lusts."<sup>3</sup> True holiness must begin on the inside, and the conscience is the primary contact point for that internal reformation.

That reality flies in the face of the world's view of the conscience. Today we're told to ignore the internal pleading of guilt and grief—to take whatever steps necessary to silence the conscience. One author described guilt as a useless neurosis, saying, "Guilt zones must be exterminated, spray-cleaned and sterilized forever."<sup>4</sup> Psychologists and gurus will happily echo that sentiment, encouraging those plagued by guilt to overrule, suppress, and silence their consciences. The message is clear: guilt is misplaced; shame is someone else's fault. The world will try to convince us that the conscience is nothing more than a

nagging hindrance to living life to the fullest, a harmful impediment to self-esteem and the pursuit of guilt-free pleasure and satisfaction.

God's people must not adopt that rebellious perspective. Rather, we need to recognize that the conscience is one of God's greatest gifts to mankind.

## The Soul's Emergency Warning System

In November 1983, an Avianca Airlines jet crashed in Spain. The flight had departed from Paris and was on approach to land at Madrid-Barajas Airport. With the landing gear down and the flaps extended, the Boeing 747 smashed into a series of hillsides within ten miles of the airport runway, killing 181 of the 192 people on board.

The investigation determined that the crash was caused by human error. The flight crew was highly experienced and they were familiar with their surroundings, having made several successful trips into Madrid before that evening. In this case, they believed they had an accurate grasp of the plane's location and ignored all warnings to the contrary. The cockpit recorder captured the computerized voice of the Ground Proximity Warning System repeatedly urging the crew, "Pull up! Pull up!" Some say the pilot defiantly shouted, "Shut up, gringo!" and switched off the device in the final moments before impact.

I can think of no more clear and sobering illustration of the way the conscience is designed to function and the dire consequences of ignoring it. As Paul warned Timothy, those who

## STAND FIRM

fail to heed the warnings of conscience are bound to “[suffer] shipwreck in regard to their faith” (1 Tim. 1:19).

The conscience is an essential device in every human being, and we need to understand the role it plays in holiness. It is the God-given warning mechanism that tells us when we’re on a path to spiritual disaster. In that sense, it parallels physical pain.

Have you considered that pain is a good thing? Pain tells us when something is wrong with our bodies. It alerts us to physical issues we might otherwise overlook, helping us determine what’s wrong and helping to prevent further damage in the meantime. More than that, pain is a God-given mechanism to keep us from destroying our bodies. This is why leprosy—or Hansen’s disease, as it is known today—is such a terrible threat. Long ago it was presumed that leprosy ate away at a person’s extremities—that the disease itself destroyed the fingers, toes, feet, and facial features of its victims. But in the 1800s, it was discovered that leprosy does not consume the body. Rather, leprosy destroys one’s nerve endings and sense of touch. It robs its victims of the ability to feel pressure or pain, and those afflicted with the disease literally wear off their own extremities, scratching deep gouges into their skin and destroying their eyes, facial features, and bodies because they cannot feel the damage they’re doing to themselves. Pain is God’s way of protecting us from ourselves. Likewise, the conscience is a warning system placed in the soul to prevent us from destroying ourselves spiritually.

By God’s gracious design, everyone has a conscience. Woven into the fabric of humanity, it is the inner voice that

senses moral violation. As the Apostle Paul explains, even overt pagans have an innate sense of right and wrong. “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” (Rom. 2:14–15). The conscience works in tandem with our moral convictions to compel us to do what is right and restrain us from what is wrong. It grants the ability to know oneself—to be self-aware, to contemplate, and to comprehend our thoughts, motives, intentions, and feelings. And as it weighs those moral evaluations, it either accuses or excuses our actions. It indicts or exonerates. It gives a sense of well-being, peace, joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment, or it makes one feel ashamed, guilty, fearful, doubting, disturbed, anxious, and depressed.

The ancient Greeks understood the conscience, identifying it as the goddess Nemesis. She was believed to be the very personification of reverence for moral law, calling men and women to lives of virtue. But she also served as the angel of vengeance. In the end, she would overtake people with full retribution for all their reckless transgressions. Nemesis is often depicted flying swiftly in pursuit of terrified sinners, racing with a flashing sword lifted in her hand, ready to strike them dead. That is the conscience. It has a bullying function in one’s life, and it can be the most relentless and disturbing enemy of the sinning soul. On the other hand, we could also call the conscience the truest friend and comforter of a holy heart. It is the most accurate



## STAND FIRM

tool we possess to measure the state of our souls. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:11, “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?”

However, the conscience is not an infallible authority. For all its importance it falls short of being perfect, so we must not confuse it as some kind of internal divine revelation. As one commentator explains it:

The conscience is not to be equated with the voice of God or even the moral law, rather it is a human faculty which adjudicates upon human action by the light of the highest standard a person perceives.

Seeing that all of human nature has been affected by sin, both a person’s perception of the standard of action required and the function of the conscience itself (as a constituent part of human nature) are also affected by sin. For this reason conscience can never be accorded the position of ultimate judge of one’s behavior. It is possible that the conscience may excuse one for that which God will not excuse, and conversely it is equally possible that conscience may condemn a person for that which God allows. The final judgment therefore belongs only to God (cf. 1 Cor. 4:2–5). Nevertheless, to reject the voice of conscience is to court spiritual disaster (cf. 1 Tim. 1:19). We cannot reject the voice of conscience with impunity, but we can modify the highest standard to which it relates by gaining for ourselves a greater understanding of the truth.<sup>5</sup>

Think of the conscience as a skylight rather than lamp. It cannot produce light on its own; it merely allows light to shine through into the soul. Specifically, it conforms and aligns to the highest moral standard each soul perceives, and it prompts its owner to live accordingly. It's a mechanism of the human soul, designed to accurately adjudicate your thoughts, motives, and behavior. But just like the altimeter and radar on an airplane, it requires the right information to function properly.

## How to Train Your Conscience

Though everyone has a conscience, not all consciences are the same. Like everything else about people, our consciences are fallen and imperfect. Some are weak and burdensome, bound to unnecessary scruples or a legalistic moral law. Some are shallow and immature, prone to taking unnecessary offense. Others are calloused and cauterized from years of abuse and neglect. And it's not just a question of their varying sensitivities—consciences are also bound to a vast array of sinful standards and man-made moral laws. The Catholic's conscience is bound to the pope, the sacraments, and the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church. The Mormon's conscience is likewise tethered to the rituals and ceremonies of his or her faith. The same goes for Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists, and agnostics—all their consciences are fixed to the highest moral standard they perceive, whether it was adopted from a religious system or concocted on their own.

In some cases, the conscience has become so corrupted and

## STAND FIRM

perverted by worldly influences that people believe they ought to be lying, cheating, and gossiping. They are convinced there's something wrong with them if they're not routinely getting drunk, taking advantage of others, and engaging in all kinds of immorality. Scripture refers to such people as those "whose glory is in their shame" (Phil. 3:19). Through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord proclaimed, "Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20).

If your conscience is to function the way God designed it—if it's going to shed the light of truth into your soul and hold fast to a standard of morality—you need to calibrate it to the light of the highest, purest, truest moral law. You need to conform your conscience to the truth of God's Word.

Like any skylight, the usefulness of the conscience is determined by the amount of pure light that passes through it. A properly functioning conscience is fully informed by the truth of Scripture. When David said, "Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You" (Ps. 119:11), he was confessing his desire for a fully informed conscience. Christ prayed for the same thing for His disciples: "Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Holiness comes as a result of the Word of God informing the conscience and the conscience informing the person.

And when the conscience is properly calibrated to biblical truth, it sends accurate, trustworthy warnings. When the conscience reflects on the reality of God's truth and cries, "Pull up!

Pull up!” we must listen! So, how do we keep our consciences functioning at maximum capacity? Let’s consider some practical steps.

### *Cleanse Your Conscience*

Before the redeeming work of Christ, there’s nothing the sinner can do to cleanse his own conscience. Decades of nothing but unrepentant sin might dull its sensitivity and stifle its cries, but the conscience continues to accumulate guilt. It’s the silent witness within, always ready to make its detailed case in the soul’s courtroom. That’s one of the primary reasons why our culture is dominated by alcohol and drug abuse—sinners are desperate for anything that will silence the cries of a conscience burdened by a lifetime of sin.

It’s also why the world’s religions of works-righteousness cannot calm or quiet the grief-stricken soul. There is no amount of outward piety that can numb or nullify a lifetime of accumulated guilt. In his heart of hearts, the outwardly pious sinner still knows he’s a sinner and that none of his external acts of devotion and supplication can truly satisfy the shouts of his grieved conscience.

The only means for truly cleansing the sinner’s conscience is the justifying work of Jesus Christ. Only through belief in the gospel can anyone know freedom from the grief and guilt of our sin. Contrasting the efficacy of Christ’s work on the cross with Israel’s sacrificial system in the Old Testament, the writer of Hebrews asks, “For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify

## STAND FIRM

for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (9:13–14). Only Christ’s atoning work can fully satisfy our need for righteousness. Paul describes that glorious reality with these powerful words: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). Only through repentance and faith in the sacrifice of Christ can we be made clean.

In faith, we acknowledge the guilt of our sin and trust in the substitutionary death of Christ to pay our eternal debt and secure forgiveness on our behalf. In Him, we have been bought at a price (1 Cor. 6:20), purified (Heb. 1:3), and set aside for good works (Eph. 2:10). Having been made new creations in Christ, our faith informs our conscience that our past sins have been paid for—that we have been washed and pardoned by the work of Christ. In fact, the writer of Hebrews explains that a cleansed conscience goes hand in hand with the assurance of our salvation: “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). A cleansed and quiet conscience is sweet comfort to the newly redeemed sinner. And it’s not just a one-time cleansing—1 John 1:9 promises, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Once the conscience has been cleansed by Christ, it is the believer’s job to keep it clear.

### *Clear Your Conscience*

It's the duty of every believer to protect the purity of his conscience—to guard against the presence of unchecked sin and keep short accounts through self-examination and faithful confession. The newly cleansed conscience will be all the more sensitive to sin, so it's important to heed its warnings and keep it clear. That's accomplished on several fronts.

First, we must confess our sins. First John 1:9 says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This should be the pattern of the believer's life—an established routine from which we do not deviate. Proverbs 28:13 gives us additional encouragement to that end: "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." David further illustrates the destructive effects of unaddressed sin: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer" (Ps. 32:3–4). Instead, we need to long for the freedom and blessing of keeping a clear conscience before the Lord: "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'; and You forgave the guilt of my sin" (v. 5).

In addition to confessing our sins to the Lord, we need to seek forgiveness and reconciliation from anyone else we have sinned against. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ illustrated the importance of not allowing personal wrongs and grudges to

## STAND FIRM

accumulate: “Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matt. 5:23–24). As children of God, we must likewise cultivate a humble attitude of forgiving others who sin against us. “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions” (Matt. 6:14–15). Forgiveness and restoration should be woven into the culture of the church, marking the people of God as distinct from the world.

Along with seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, we need to make restitution to those we’ve wronged. The Lord included a provision in His law detailing how the Israelites were to pay back their debts to those they sinned against. God said to Moses, “Speak to the sons of Israel, ‘When a man or woman commits any of the sins of mankind, acting unfaithfully against the LORD, and that person is guilty, then he shall confess his sins which he has committed, and he shall make restitution in full for his wrong and add to it one-fifth of it, and give it to him whom he has wronged’ ” (Num. 5:6–7). A lingering debt can cause just as much grief and guilt as active sin. In those cases, true reconciliation isn’t possible without restitution.

Finally, keeping a clear conscience means not overlooking its indictments. We need to echo the words of Paul and do our best “to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men” (Acts 24:16). Don’t put off addressing

your guilt and sin—don't assume it will go away on its own over time. We cannot procrastinate when it comes to dealing with sin. Postponing it inevitably leads to anxiety, depression, and more sin. Allowing sin to linger is an invitation to spiritual cancer. Keeping your conscience clear means addressing guilt and sin immediately, thoroughly, and biblically as soon as you are aware of it.

### ***Strengthen Your Conscience***

The smoke detectors in your home are designed to alert you to the presence of a specific, imminent threat. In the same way, the warning lights in the dashboard of your car are intended to make you aware of a malfunction before the damage becomes catastrophic. But what good is an alarm that routinely misfires, constantly alerting you to nonexistent danger? An inaccurate, inconsistent warning system can be as bad as not having a warning system at all—*worse* if you develop a habit of ignoring it altogether.

In the same way, a misfiring, overactive conscience can do more harm than good.

For example, a conscience that is too closely fixed to personal feelings is often untrustworthy. When it rises and falls with inconsistent emotions, the conscience can falsely magnify doubts and fears rather than reflecting the true state of the heart and its affections. The conscience can also be confused by too much focus on failures with sin at the expense of recognizing the work of God's grace. Such imbalance cripples the conscience's ability to accurately weigh spiritual fruit and



## STAND FIRM

often leads to unproductive and unhealthy doubts about one's standing with the Lord. To function properly, the conscience must be disconnected from the unpredictable whims of the human heart. If it is to be a reliable guide and guard, it must be informed by God's Word alone.

Another common way to corrupt the conscience is to cultivate an unbiblical emphasis on good works. Many Christians—and particularly new believers—fall into the trap of thinking too much about their personal piety. While they're not necessarily trying to *earn* God's favor, they seem to think it's their job to *secure* and *maintain* it through their efforts and acts of self-discipline. That undue emphasis on externals foolishly alters the focus of the conscience, pointing it outward and shifting its attention away from its intended target, the heart. We must not confuse our consciences with a false notion of righteousness. The most accurate, trustworthy conscience is the one that holds fast to God's Word and eschews all man-made standards.

The most familiar cause for malfunction is what Scripture calls a “weak” conscience (Rom. 14:1). The weak conscience is immature and fragile. It's too quick to accuse and too easily offended. It's prone to fret over matters that wouldn't provoke the conscience of a stronger, more mature believer. In fact, it won't allow the believer to do things he is free to do—the weak conscience puts unbiblical limits on the believer's liberty in Christ. Unlike the seared conscience, which has been dulled to the point of insensitivity, the weak conscience is *hypersensitive*.

Paul devoted significant attention in his epistles to instructing the church in how to care for believers with weak

## THE CHRISTIAN LIFE MEANS BEING CALLED TO HOLINESS

consciences. Those who suffer from a weak conscience most often feel the pangs of guilt over activities and associations that call to mind aspects of their former sinful lives. In the first-century church, the primary issue was whether to eat food that had been offered to idols.

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and *their conscience being weak is defiled*. (1 Cor. 8:4–7, emphasis added)

Many of the men and women in the New Testament church had been saved out of paganism and idolatry. While they would have affirmed their faith in the one true God, it likely would have taken some time to fully cast off the familiar influences of their former religious experiences. It's understandable that those immature believers would reject and repudiate their former lives, shunning any aspect of public life that could potentially draw them back into pagan rituals and idol worship. That included eating foods that had previously been offered as

## STAND FIRM

a sacrifice to those false gods. Paul was saying that a mature believer could eat without troubling his conscience—that such a believer would know that the food itself had no bearing on his standing before the Lord. He wrote, “But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat” (v. 8). There was nothing inherently spiritual about the food, but it nonetheless posed a problem for those whose consciences were still stinging from their formerly pagan lifestyles. Paul instructed the rest of the church to defer their freedoms for the sake of these weaker brothers.

We could use more of that attitude in the church today, when too many people thoughtlessly exercise and even parade their Christian liberty. They don't give enough thought to the example of their lives and the impact it can have with weaker, less mature brothers and sisters in the faith. Paul's primary concern with the Corinthian church was not eliminating hindrances to the full exercise of their freedom in Christ. Rather, he was urging them to make sure their freedom did not come at a spiritual cost to a fellow believer.

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience

## THE CHRISTIAN LIFE MEANS BEING CALLED TO HOLINESS

when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble. (vv. 9–13)

Paul is instructing us to defer the exercise of our liberty in Christ, or even surrender it altogether, for the sake of those who are less mature—those who might fall back into old patterns of sin by following our example. At the same time, he’s warning us not to teach weak believers to ignore their consciences, lest it become a habit. We need to be willing to patiently teach and lead young believers in the truth, rather than pushing them to exercise their freedoms too early and violate their consciences.

In a parallel passage in Romans, Paul further exhorts mature believers not to look down on those weaker brothers: “Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions” (14:1). But it’s not just mature believers who might be tempted to pass judgment: “One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and *the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats*, for God has accepted him” (vv. 2–3, emphasis added). Here Paul highlights one of the dangers of a weak conscience—that its oversensitivity can be easily mistaken for fastidious spiritual maturity. Some will point to a conscience that is particularly tender and sensitive as a spiritual strength. It’s actually the opposite—a liability that often leads to unnecessary offense, an unduly critical spirit, and slow spiritual growth.

Those who nurture a weak conscience are also more susceptible to legalism and self-righteousness, mistaking their list of dos and don'ts as a measure of spiritual maturity.

Throughout Paul's descriptions of the weak conscience, he consistently diagnoses it as a case of spiritual immaturity. He writes that these weaker brothers lack knowledge (1 Cor. 8:7) or are "weak in faith" (Rom. 14:1). The Apostle instructs us to support and defer to these immature believers for a while, but we're not supposed to coddle them permanently. The implication of these passages is that those with weak consciences will—or at least *should*—eventually grow out of that state and progress to further spiritual maturity.

Therefore, strengthening the conscience is a function of growing in love for God and the knowledge of His truth. As the believer's understanding of spiritual truth deepens and he develops godly affections, the attraction of the former, sinful life fades. Those things that once tempted and seduced the heart no longer hold the same allure. And as the world loses its influence, the conscience is less prone to false alarms and unnecessary offense. As believers grow spiritually—that is, as their minds are enlightened by the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, and as their faith is built up in love for Christ and His church—the weak conscience will grow stronger and they will embrace freedom in Christ.

### ***Guard Your Conscience***

What good is a state-of-the-art alarm system if you don't pay attention to its flashing lights and wailing sirens? You wouldn't

blithely ignore an alert that your house was on fire or that someone was breaking into your car.

In the same way, the believer cannot afford to ignore the cries of the conscience. When it calls us to attention, we need to act. We need to take seriously the warnings it provides and deal swiftly with the sin it identifies. There is no room for a lackadaisical response—we must instantly go to battle with the flesh, thoroughly “putting to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). On the other hand, there is no better way to damage and darken the conscience than to let sin reside within us and fester. That is particularly true when it comes to sins of the mind.

Nothing is more destructive and deadly to the conscience than the secret sins of the mind. Indulging in the private thoughts of a wicked imagination is a direct attack on the conscience. It’s an act of open defiance, engaging all of one’s inner faculties in the vile, vicious assault. Those who nurture sinful thoughts can’t hope to have a pure conscience. Sowing such impurity internally corrupts and perverts the conscience, defiling it and rendering it effectively useless over time.

God’s people must not buy in to the demonic lie that God is only concerned with the exterior—that sins of the heart and mind are acceptable as long as they remain secret. That false notion undergirded Israel’s system of works-righteousness, and it was one of the first things Christ confronted in His public ministry. He declared:

You have heard that the ancients were told, “You shall not commit murder” and “Whoever commits murder

## STAND FIRM

shall be liable to the court.” But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, “You good-for-nothing,” shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, “You fool,” shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell. . . . You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery”; but I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:21–22, 27–28)

In truth, there is no such thing as a private, secret sin. The wicked imagination is merely the seedbed of external sin. No one “falls into” immorality or adultery—the sinner indulged those lustful desires internally long before he ever acted on them. In the same way, the thief’s heart was corrupted by covetousness long before he ever stole anything. Wickedly toying with sin internally is the best way to guarantee that it will eventually manifest itself externally. And in the meantime, the conscience is battered and defiled while its cries fall on deaf ears.

We cannot afford the occasional dalliance with sins of the mind. We cannot indulge our sinful imaginations with impunity. If we think the sins of our imagination are truly secret, we’re lying to ourselves. There is no corner of our hearts or minds that is hidden from the Lord. David declared: “You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD,

You know it all” (Ps. 139:2–4). We need to echo the conviction of Psalm 44:21: “Would not God find this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.” Nothing is secret from the Lord.

God’s people also need to remember that our thoughts are the truest test of our character: “For as he thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov. 23:7). What goes on in the deepest recesses of our hearts is the best measure of who we really are. “As in water face reflects face, so the heart of man reflects man” (Prov. 27:19). We need to heed the call of Proverbs 4:23: “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

We began by saying the battle for personal holiness is won in the conscience. It’s just as easily lost there too. If we’re going to have a conscience worth listening to, we must not misinform it, or abuse and defile it. We need to guard it faithfully—most of the time from ourselves.

Charles Wesley wrote more than six thousand hymns; we sing many of them to this day. But one of his best—and sadly, one that I have never heard in a church service—is his personal plea for a tender, godly conscience.

I want a principle within  
Of watchful, godly fear,  
A sensibility of sin,  
A pain to feel it near.  
Help me the first approach to feel  
Of pride or wrong desire;  
To catch the wandering of my will,  
And quench the kindling fire.

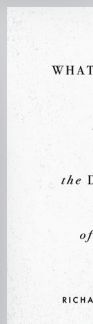
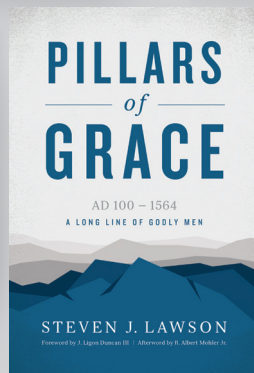
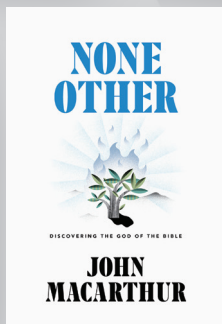
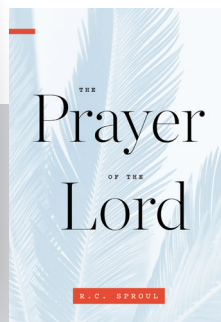
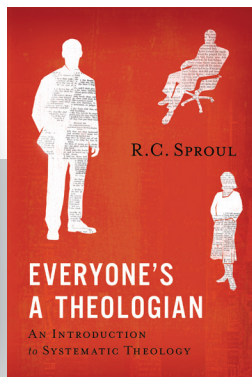
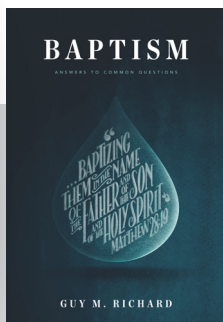
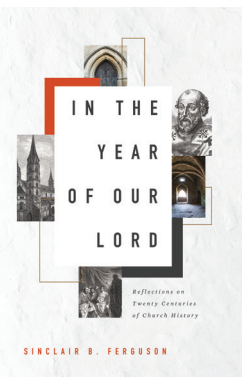


STAND FIRM

From Thee that I no more may stray,  
No more Thy goodness grieve,  
Grant me the filial awe, I pray,  
The tender conscience give.  
Quick as the apple of an eye,  
O God, my conscience make!  
Awake my soul when sin is nigh,  
And keep it still awake.<sup>6</sup>

May that be the prayer of my heart as well.

We publish books that proclaim the historic Christian faith to new generations. *These are books you can trust.*



Order your copy of this title, download the ebook version, or browse our entire collection at [ReformationTrust.com](http://ReformationTrust.com).

**“As the believer’s understanding of spiritual truth deepens and he develops godly affections, the attraction of the former, sinful life fades.”**

---

The Christian life is a war for holiness. Our calling to be set apart lands us in the crosshairs of a culture that opposes God’s truth. Even as the world around us is changing, our battle remains the same. To withstand the temptation to compromise in sin or retreat from suffering, Christians must hold fast to God’s Word. Only then can we live well for the Lord.

In *Stand Firm: Living in a Post-Christian Culture*, Dr. John MacArthur drafts biblical battle plans for maintaining a life of Christian faithfulness. God has revealed what kind of people we are to be in a hostile world, and by His Word and Spirit, He supplies us with everything we need to persevere in holiness, humility, and love.

---

  
*Reformation Trust*

ISBN 978-1-64289-221-5  
  
9 781642 892215

RELIGION / Christian Life / General