



IX

VOLUME VIII

# Pastoring and the Conscience

Law, Liberty, and Love

A Journal  
for Pastors

# Church Matters

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Church Matters: Pastoring and the Conscience

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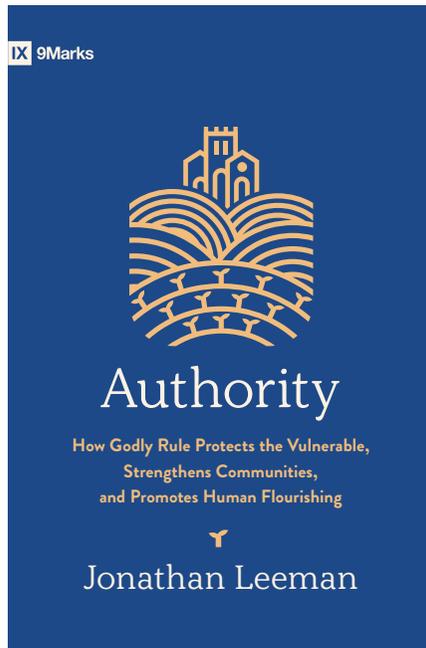
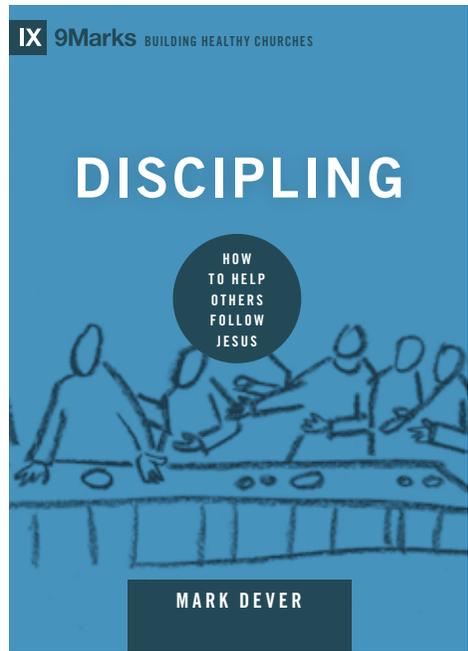
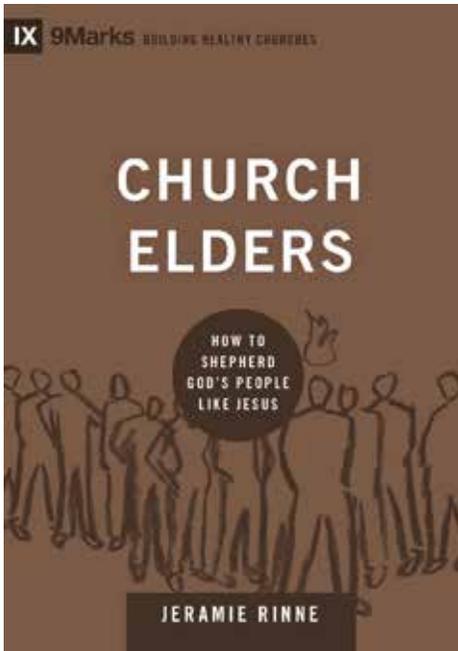
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# Two Risks of Calibrating the Conscience and Why Pastors Must Do It Anyway

by Taylor Hartley

**T**alk of “calibrating the conscience” often comes with two pastoral concerns: legalism in one corner and moral liberalism in the other.

## **Legalism**

Legalism occurs when people (often pastors) require what the Bible doesn't. Think of a church mandated dress code that exceeds what the Bible calls “modesty” (1 Tim. 2:9–10); or consider—community-wide bans on PG-13 movies or tattoos or specific kinds of beverages or Halloween-themed lawn ornaments from Walmart. You may laugh at that last one, but anyone who grew up in fundamentalist circles knows what I'm talking about. In each of these cases, pastors wrongly calibrate (or bind) their members' consciences. They go further than God's Word does.

Now, wrongly binding a conscience risks many things, but let me name a few.

First, it risks making pastoral authority equal to biblical authority. The Bible says Christians are to do A, B, and C. You think D and E would be useful additions. Therefore, you make your members do A through E. In doing so, you conflate God's authority with yours. You not only teach your members to do the same, but you also establish a "what the pastor says goes" church culture.

Second, wrongly binding implicitly teaches works-based salvation. The Bible says that nothing pleases God apart from faith (Heb. 11:6), but legalism moves the goalpost from faith to one's personal track record of rule following.

Third, by requiring uniformity in thought and practice, wrongly binding tends to relieve members of their biblical burden to love one another despite conscience differences.

So, pastor, don't over-bind. Don't require what God's Word doesn't. Leave their consciences free and teach them to love one another in those places of freedom.

## **Moral Liberalism**

Enough on over-binding. What about moral liberalism? Moral liberalism occurs when pastors deny biblical precepts in the name of freedom.

Not all moral liberalism is created equal. It's one thing for a pastor to fail to encourage modesty from 1 Timothy 2:9–10 and quite another for him to allow an unmarried cohabiting couple to join his church. In both cases, the pastor leans into liberty by softening the

“An easy-believism  
gospel sings lullabies  
to the conscience  
while the whole person  
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called Hell.”

Bible's imperatives, though the latter is worse. Still, both his silence and inaction effectively tell his members that God is not concerned about these matters.

Now, it's time to be honest about this issue of *Church Matters*. For at least two reasons, we're slightly (call it 60 percent) more concerned with moral liberalism than we are with legalism in this issue.

First, moral liberalism is more prevalent today among self-identified Christians than ever before.<sup>1</sup> Christians in their twenties, thirties, forties, and even fifties have been inundated with pragmatic Christianity, which underplays sin and its severities. The result has been the triumph of an easy-believism gospel that sings lullabies to the conscience while the whole person teeters at the gate of a very real place called Hell.

Second, many Christians make the dangerous assumption that if the Bible doesn't explicitly forbid something, then God must accept it and even approve of it. "Does the Bible say that reproductive technology, or AI-generated companionship, or putting pronouns in the signature line of an email is a sin? No? Then these things are okay, right?" The method short-circuits moral reasoning.

It's true that Father Abraham may not have debated the pros and cons of ChatGPT. That doesn't mean, however, that the Bible has nothing to say on how to employ AI for human flourishing and limit it where it's dangerous. Instead, with issues like these, we must bring to bear all that we know about God's character, law, and wisdom. In some cases, we must collate references from across Scripture to see more clearly how God would have us proceed.

No doubt, biblical, moral reasoning is hard work, and it requires a whole Bible. How will church members know how to do this work as they face life's thorny conundrums? You, pastor! You're essential to helping your members know what God requires. So, teach, preach, and disciple with an eye toward correctly calibrating your members' consciences that they may learn to obey the Lord in faith.

In *A Quest for Godliness* (1990), J.I. Packer spilled ink for an entire chapter on the Puritan conscience. After an initial summary of their zeal for keeping a clean conscience, Packer turned his attention to the living and asked:

Are evangelicals noted these days for goodness and integrity? Are we distinguished in society for sensitiveness to moral issues, and compassion toward those in need? Do our preachers, earnest

and eloquent as they may be, win for themselves the name that God gave to Noah—"preacher of *righteousness*" (2 Pet. 2:5). . . . We profess our anxiety to keep clear of legalistic bondage, but are we not in much greater danger of Antinomian license? We rightly repudiate the common view that doctrine does not matter so long as one is upright in life; but if we let our reaction drive us into the opposite extreme of supposing that one's life does not matter so long as one is theologically "sound" ("a good Calvinist," we say) then the beam in our own eye will be worse than the mote in our brother's.<sup>2</sup>

I would contest that Packer's line of questioning is even more necessary today than it was thirty years ago.

We need pastors who trumpet God's Word and bind their members' consciences to it. We need pastors to teach on God's law and on a Christian freedom that is more robust and real than the popular soup that sees not sin. Lord willing, this issue of *Church Matters* will equip you, pastor, to do just that.

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1. For examples in support of this claim, see Section IV. 16 and 17. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religion-and-views-on-lgbtq-issues-and-abortion/#abortion-s-legality>.

2. J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, p. 165.



Taylor Hartley is the editorial director of 9Marks and a member of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.



# Section One

# How the Conscience Works

# IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

## IS YOUR CHURCH HEALTHY?

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# The conscience has gotten a lot of play throughout Christian history.

And for the most part, talk of the conscience was so that Christians would understand their obligation to obey God and his Word.

Does talk of the conscience still inspire feelings of obligation today?

Sometimes, certainly. More often, however, conscience is thought to relate to liberty more than to law. It evokes thoughts of freedom more than it does duty. “The Bible doesn’t *explicitly* say I can’t; therefore I can!”

“The Bible doesn’t speak to this issue *directly*; therefore, I am free!”

With so many assuming liberty, how can pastors instruct their members in biblical morality? This issue of *Church Matters* will consider the nitty-gritty, nuts and bolts job that pastors have of binding and freeing consciences according to God’s Word. The goal? That church members may grow in holiness before God while seeking the good of one another.

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“Members with especially sensitive consciences are not in the way of ministry; they are your ministry.”

*Trent Hunter*

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9Marks exists to help pastors build healthy churches. We create resources and host events focused on expositional preaching, gospel doctrine, conversion and evangelism, church membership, church discipline, discipleship and growth, church leadership, prayer, and missions. Learn more at [9Marks.org](http://9Marks.org).

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