

William Ames on the Authority of Conscience

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The concept of conscience is vital for understanding Puritan moral theology. This article aims to clarify the Puritan William Ames's (1576–1633) view of conscience and authority. In his book, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea*, L. John Van Til problematically set up a model of William Perkins (1558–1602) versus Ames to interpret the Puritan views of the authority of conscience. While Perkins embraced liberty of conscience by elevating the authority of conscience under God yet over the state and the church, Ames, bound by the rational Ramist dialectic method, not only rejected Perkins's view of conscience, but also “stripped the individual of his liberty” in the matter of conscience.¹ According to Van Til, the Westminster divines followed the Perkins school, which is reflected in the Westminster Confession of Faith. On the other hand, the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, emphasized the civil and ecclesiastical authority over individual conscience and were the spokesmen and practitioners of the Amesian school until 1689.²

James Calvin Davis, however, depicted a different picture of Ames. For Davis, Ames was not an innovator of the Amesian school but “an accurate representation” of the Calvinist tradition of ambiguity over freedom of conscience.³ This ambiguity is revealed when Ames, on one hand, asserted “the universality and autonomy of conscience” by “rooting conscience in natural law” instead of biblical teachings, but, on the other hand, questioned the effective operation of conscience on sinners.⁴ Likewise, Ames upheld

1. L. John Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1972), 51.

2. See Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, 85–130.

3. James Calvin Davis, “William Ames' Calvinist Ambiguity Over Freedom of Conscience,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 33 (June 2005): 333–55.

4. Davis, “William Ames,” 343–45.

both “the inviolability of conscience” by considering it to be “the internal judgment of God,” and the fact that “conscience may err.”⁵ Therefore, he sometimes made contradictory claims that “an erroneous conscience is required at once to follow the dictates of conscience and to ignore them!”⁶ Confusingly, Davis lamented that Ames compromised the authority of conscience by subjecting it to the written law of God and civil authority, and concluded that Ames “was decidedly undecided about the liberty he wanted to afford conscientious belief and action.”⁷ In short, if the chief complaint of Van Til was Ames’s low view of the authority of conscience, Davis, on the contrary, appreciated Ames’s potential high view of it and was unsatisfied with Ames’s (and indeed the general Calvinist tradition’s) failure to maintain that freedom of conscience.

The two opposite interpretations require clarification of Ames’s teaching on the authority of conscience. As it will be shown, while Van Til’s false dichotomy resulted from his apparently selective reading of both Perkins and Ames, and more critically his exaggeration of the influence of the Ramist method on Ames’s conception of conscience, Davis misinterpreted Ames’s divisions of the law and the unity of divine law, natural law, moral law, and human law. This article, therefore, argues that Ames consistently held human conscience to be bound by the revealed will of God only, which, however, has different manifestations in human history. Both elements of liberty and limitation were there in Ames’s mind in a harmonious way. Seeking only to present the historic teaching of Ames, this article has no interest in judging whether or not Ames held the liberty of conscience in the modern sense, which is both anachronistic and meaningless. This article will first examine Ames’s conception of conscience, which, contrary to Van Til’s reading, reveals more of a Thomist Aristotelian influence. Next, this article will explore how far the revealed will of God, in its various manifestations in natural law, moral law, and human law, binds the conscience in Ames’s theology. Finally, these findings will be summarized in the conclusion.

Ames on the Conception of Conscience

Ames’s systematic explanation of conscience was articulated in his *De conscientia*. At the outset of this book, Ames defined conscience as “a man’s judgment of himself, according to the judgment of God of him,” which

5. Davis, “William Ames,” 345–47.

6. Davis, “William Ames,” 346.

7. Davis, “William Ames,” 354.

thus “belongs to the understanding, not to the will.”⁸ By “judgment,” Ames further explained that “conscience, (I understand most properly with the best schoolmen) [is] an act of practical judgment, proceeding from the understanding by the power or means of a habit.”⁹ The wording here was an intentional deviation from the Franciscan schoolmen including Scotus, Bonaventure, and Durand who “have conscience to be an habit,” as well as from Perkins who considered conscience to be “*A natural power or faculty*.”¹⁰ In his *A Discourse of Conscience*, Perkins taught that conscience is the practical part of the faculty of understanding, “from whence knowledge and judgment proceed as effects,” instead of just belonging to understanding. Specifically, he stressed that conscience “is not a bare knowledge or judgment of the understanding (as men commonly write),” of whom in the margin Perkins refers to Thomas Aquinas.¹¹ By designating conscience as the practical judgment proceeding from understanding, Ames deliberately chose to depart from Perkins and to follow the Thomist tradition on the definition of conscience.

How then does the conscience give judgment? Ames adopted an Aristotelian practical syllogism to effect the force of conscience.¹² The notion of practical syllogism was discussed by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, which was the dominant textbook on philosophical ethics in both Catholic and Protestant institutions until the end of the seventeenth century.¹³ Embraced by the medieval scholastics, including Thomas Aquinas, a syllogism is formulated with three statements, which include the major proposition, the minor assumption, and lastly the conclusion by deduction. Ames illustrated the operation of syllogism in the conscience as follows:

8. William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases thereof* (1639; reprint, Amsterdam: Walter J. Johnson, Inc., 1975), I.1.1. I have modernized the spelling of the quotations for readability. This work is referred to in the text as *De conscientia*, its Latin title.

9. Ames, *Conscience*, I.1.6.

10. Ames, *Conscience*, I.1.4–5.

11. William Perkins, *The Works of William Perkins: Volume 8*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 7.

12. In his philosophical treatises, Ames demonstrates his Ramist anti-Aristotle zeal through his attacking of the Aristotelian metaphysics and philosophical ethics, yet he maintains the instrumental role of the Aristotelian logic for argument and disputation. See William Ames, *The Philosophical and Theological Treatises of William Ames*, ed. and trans., Lee W. Gibbs (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), 63–250, particularly 208–14, 242–46 for Ames’s discussion of syllogism.

13. See Manfred Svensson, “Aristotelian Practical Philosophy from Melancthon to Eisenhart: Protestant Commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics 1529–1682.” *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 21 (August 2019): 218–38.

He that lives in sin, shall die;
 I live in sin;
 Therefore, I shall die.¹⁴

According to Ames, the major proposition, as “a light and a law,” declared the general law, and the minor premise, as “a Booke,” examined the fact or state of man according to that law. The conscience as “a judge” eventually concluded the judgment according to his state and the law declared, either pronouncing one guilty or giving spiritual peace. In this sense, Ames stated, “the force and nature of Conscience therefore is contained in such a syllogism.”¹⁵ This syllogism functioned importantly in Ames’s conception of conscience, but Van Til overstated this when he argued that by this system “Ames locked conscience to a method.”¹⁶ Both Sprunger and Van Vliet noticed that Ames was simply following Perkins in his formulation of the conscience syllogism.¹⁷ In his discussion of the manner that conscience gives judgment, Perkins gave a similar example:

“Every murderer is cursed,” says the mind.
 “You are a murderer,” says conscience assisted by memory.
 Ergo, “You are accursed,” says conscience, and so gives her sentence.¹⁸

Clearly, Perkins’s understanding of the conscience, as a part of the faculty of mind, played an important role in his version of the syllogism. Likewise, Ames made the same formulation, arguing that the law was the presupposition, the state of man was the assumption, and the judgment was the conclusion. Van Til, therefore, not only seems to have misunderstood the Aristotelian syllogism as the Ramist dialectic method, but also seems to have falsely considered it to be the diverging point between Ames and Perkins. That eventually resulted in an unreasonable accusation that Ames’s adoption of the conscience syllogism forced him to reject Perkins’s definition of conscience and the liberty of conscience Perkins promoted.¹⁹

14. Ames, *Conscience*, I.1.8.

15. Ames, *Conscience*, I. 1.8–11.

16. Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, 50.

17. See Keith L. Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames: Dutch Backgrounds of English and American Puritanism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 171; Jan Van Vliet, *The Rise of Reformed System: The Intellectual Heritage of William Ames* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2013), 116.

18. Perkins, *Works of William Perkins: Volume 8*, 50.

19. Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, 48–51.

Since the proposition is the key in the syllogism, Ames proceeded to investigate the source of proposition, *synteresis*, which was apparently absent from Perkins's works. Following the schoolmen, Ames asserted that it is this *synteresis* which dictates or gives the proposition or the law of conscience. The introduction of this scholastic term reveals more clearly Ames's continuity with the Thomist tradition in his understanding of conscience.²⁰ In line with Aquinas, Ames defined *synteresis* to be "a habit of the understanding, by which we do assent unto the principles of *moral actions*, that is, such actions as are our duty." As a habit, *synteresis* is not conscience itself, Ames clarified, but "only the principle of conscience." In essence, therefore, it is the "storehouse of principles."²¹ Ames believed this *synteresis* is possessed by all men without distinction, as is the conscience. Even after the fall, Ames said, "*synteresis* may for a time be hindered from acting, but cannot be utterly extinguished or lost." Accordingly, "no man is so desperately wicked as to be void of all conscience."²² Ames argued that the fall did not affect the universal presence of *synteresis*, but brought some change to its content, which he indicated in his distinction between the "natural conscience" and the "enlightened conscience." While the former "is that which acknowledges for law the principles of nature, and the conclusions arising from them," the enlightened conscience "is that which doth *beside those*, acknowledge whatsoever is prescribed in the Scriptures."²³ The *synteresis* of the natural or unregenerate man stores only the natural moral principles, but the believer's includes some additional scriptural principles which God "has enjoined." The exact content and necessity of the additional scriptural principles beside the natural-law principles were not explained by Ames here, but he was clear that "the revealed will of God whereby man knows his duty, contains both these." This means that *synteresis*, in the broadest sense, is directed by the revealed will of God only, and the natural law principles are also part of the revealed will of God. Ames's connection of *synteresis* with natural law and the revealed will of God determined the infallibility of *synteresis*, as well as the authority of conscience.

Ames discussed the authority of conscience from both its objective and subjective aspects. Objectively, he argued conscience is bound by the

20. For Aquinas's view of conscience and *synderesis*, see Tobias Hoffmann, "Conscience and *Synderesis*," in Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 255–64.

21. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.1–2.

22. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.5.

23. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.7.

revealed will of God only. According to Ames, "the perfect and only rule of conscience is the revealed will of God." He further identified it with "the Law of God" in general, which included both the natural law of God and the scriptural law, including "those things which are commanded in the Gospel." In this sense, "the Law of God only does bind the Conscience of man."²⁴ By binding, Ames meant that "it were a sin to do anything contrary to it (the law of God)." Therefore, strictly speaking, neither any law of men, nor a promise, nor an oath, nor a parent can properly bind the conscience. It is the power and authority of God only to know "the inward workings of the conscience" and to "punish the conscience," and accordingly, only the will of God can bind the conscience.²⁵ Contrary to Van Til's interpretation, therefore, Ames closely followed Perkins by upholding the authority of conscience under God yet over man. Subjectively, Ames also spoke of the office of conscience in respect to the *synteresis*. Ames believed conscience, in this sense, represents the will of God and "stands in the place of God himself."²⁶ In necessary things, therefore, it "binds a man so straightly that the command of no creature can free a man from it."²⁷ This binding authority of conscience on man should be understood as a derivative power from the revealed will of God it represents. While the revealed will of God binds the conscience objectively, it also empowers the conscience to bind man subjectively.

What if the conscience fails to deliver the objective will of God? Ames believed this was the response of an erroneous conscience. Different from a doubting and scrupulous conscience, an erroneous conscience happens when it "judges otherwise than the thing is" by *positively erring*.²⁸ Failing to deliver the objective will of God, an erroneous conscience, however, "binds always so, that he that does against it, sins." This is because, although an erroneous conscience could not represent the will of God "materially, and truly," Ames argued, it still functions that way "formally, and by interpretation." Consequently, "he that contemns (an erroneous) conscience, contemns God himself."²⁹ Underpinning the binding authority of an erroneous conscience, therefore, is still the objective will and authority of God. Ames recognized that the case of erroneous conscience results in a kind of

24. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.8–9.

25. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.10–15.

26. Ames, *Conscience*, I.3.2.

27. Ames, *Conscience*, I.3.4–6.

28. Ames, *Conscience*, I.4.1.

29. Ames, *Conscience*, I.4.6 (emphasis added).

necessity of sinning. Indeed, the one who has an erroneous conscience sins either against his conscience with his evil manner, or against God's law with an evil act. But this necessity, Ames argued, is caused by man's corrupted practical reason by which the mind fails to draw conclusions rightly out of general principles or to understand the commandments of Scripture sufficiently.³⁰ Elsewhere, Ames stated more explicitly "that law which is written and engraved in nature...is in a manner wholly buried by original corruption.... The light of understanding is...obscured with manifold darkness." Therefore, Ames's solution for this was a better understanding of God's written law in the Scripture, as well as the assistance of His grace and the help of teaching.³¹ In short, Ames insisted consistently on the revealed will of God as the only rule of conscience. In book five, Ames further and consistently explicated how the various manifestations of the revealed will of God bind the conscience, which will be the focus of the following section.

Ames on the Binding of Conscience

Conscience and Natural Law

Ames's detailed elaboration of the various kinds of laws appeared in his discussion of man's duties toward his neighbors. Ames used the word "law" (*lex*) and the word "right" (*ius*) interchangeably because the latter for him "implies a power of some authority, commanding this or that to be done."³² Understood broadly, the law is divided into divine law with God as the author and human law invented by man. Following the Thomist tradition, Ames further divided the divine law or the law of God into "*Right Natural*" (natural law) and "*Right Positive*" (positive law). Natural law, Ames defined, "is that which is apprehended to be fit to be done or avoided out of the natural instinct of Natural Light; or that which is at least deduced from that Natural Light by evident Consequence." It thus consists of both "principles known by Nature" and "conclusions deduced from those Principles," while the positive law is added to the natural law "by some revelation of God."³³ Apparently Ames believed that divine law is predominantly natural law, which also is apparent in his identification of the natural law with the eternal law of God. "The *Right Natural* or *Natural Law*, is the same, which usually is called the *Eternal Law*." Their difference consists merely

30. Ames, *Conscience*, I.4.2–3.

31. Ames, *Conscience*, II.1.6.

32. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.1.

33. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.3–5.

in the different naming. In relation to God, it is called *eternal* law “as it is from eternity in Him,” but in relation to man, it is called *natural* law “as it is ingrafted and imprinted in the *Nature* of man, by God of *Nature*.”³⁴ In this way, Ames rooted natural law in the eternal, unchanging will of God, which was in line with his Reformed predecessors.³⁵

Contrary to Davis’s reading, therefore, Ames never held to an independent, natural conscience rooted in natural law, apart from the revealed will of God.³⁶ Rather, Ames believed that because natural law is a participation of the divine law and the eternal will of God, it binds the conscience universally and absolutely. Ames substantiated the binding authority of natural law in the special moral government of God. According to Ames, God governs rational creatures specially by making law, establishing law, and fulfilling the law, from which “arises a covenant between God and them.” Thus, a covenant in essence is “a kind of transaction of God with the creature whereby God commands, promises, threatens, fulfills; and the creature binds itself in obedience to God so demanding.”³⁷ In the initial covenant of creation (works), Ames argued, the law of God is mainly revealed through the law of nature, which was “written in the heart (of man) in the form of disposition [*habitus*], where the first foundation of conscience called *synderesis* is located.”³⁸ Besides, “something positive was added to (though on the same basis as) the law of nature.”³⁹ Therefore, man’s transgression of the outward positive law of God in his abuse of free will implies his profession of disobedience to natural law or the law of God, and thus, “contempt for the whole covenant (of works).”⁴⁰ In this covenantal way, natural law binds the conscience of all humanity in obedience to God. Ignoring Ames’s covenant framework in which natural law operates, Davis downplayed the “religious obligations” in Ames’s conception of natural conscience. Davis seems to portray Ames as a proponent of the freedom and autonomy of conscience.⁴¹ However, that notion would be unthinkable to Ames. In

34. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.6.

35. See J. T. McNeill, “Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers,” *Journal of Religion* 26 (July 1946), 168–83.

36. Davis, “William Ames,” 343–44.

37. William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, trans. John Dykstra Eusden (1629; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), I.10.9.

38. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, I.10.26.

39. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, I.10.28.

40. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, I.11.8.

41. Davis, “William Ames,” 340–41.

this covenant framework, the worshiping of the biblical God, for Ames, is always “a principle of the law of nature.”⁴² In another place, Ames likewise stated that “there are some principles so clear, and written in the hearts of all men... such as this is, *that God ought to be loved*.”⁴³ He believed that loving and worshiping God, therefore, is an essential part of natural law that binds the conscience.

Conscience and Moral Law

For Ames, since Adam’s covenant-breaking could not utterly extinguish the *synteresis* and the conscience of man, neither could it nullify the binding authority of natural law on conscience. Nevertheless, the fall did hinder the *synteresis* from acting, and accordingly, affected the operation of natural law in conscience.⁴⁴ That made the moral law, the written law of God, necessary. According to Ames, moral law “was published by God with his own voice, and twice written in Tables of stone and expressed in the Decalogue.”⁴⁵ With God as its author, moral law is by nature closely related to natural law. Except for the positive law of the fourth commandment, Ames asserted, “All the precepts of the Moral Law are out of the Law of Nature.” To support this statement, Ames argued that the precepts in the decalogue, like natural law, concern “all Nations at all times,” for they are “very necessary to human nature, for the attaining of its end.” Moreover, “grounded upon right reason,” these precepts are approved in substance even by the heathen, and they are so perfect in content that if observed duly, all other human laws would not be necessary.⁴⁶ Namely, this moral law, for Ames, was the promulgation of the natural law in redemptive history. But why does it need to be promulgated if the moral law is the same as the natural law which has been engraved in the hearts of men? Ames answered this objection by appealing to the fallen condition of man. Such promulgation is necessary because the fall has so blinded our understanding, perverted our will, and disordered our affections that “only some relics of that [natural] law remain in our hearts like to some dim aged picture.” Therefore, Ames concluded that there is “no where found any true right practical reason, pure and complete in all parts, but in the written law of God.”⁴⁷

42. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.19.

43. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.4.2.

44. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.5.

45. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.33.

46. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.27.

47. Ames *Conscience*, V.1.28.

Likewise, in expositing the decalogue in his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Ames also spoke of the close relationship between moral law and natural law. He first declared that “this Law of God contained in the Decalogue, or ten words [that is, brief sentences], is the most perfect rule for directing the life of man.”⁴⁸ By “the most perfect rule,” however, Ames did not intend to emphasize the superiority of moral law over natural law. Rather, as in *De Conscientia*, Ames sought to defend the perfection of moral law from its origin in natural law:

Because it contains in itself a delineation or draft of that perfection to which man in his first or innocent nature was created, according to the image of God. And therefore, it is also called the Law of Nature, because that rule of life which was written in the heart of man, according to its primitive and pure nature, is explained in this Law.⁴⁹

Ames believed their difference is simply that moral law is a delineation or explanation of natural law with written words. Accordingly, moral law, as the revealed will of God in Scripture, binds the conscience universally and absolutely just as natural law:

Every command of the Law requires the whole obedience of the whole man. That is, inward as well as outward; of the heart as well as the mouth, and of the hand, or work: *You shall have no other*, etc. *Do not make for yourself*, etc. These are forms of speaking by which such a universal obedience is formally required.⁵⁰

After the fall, all sinners must turn to this moral law and have the conscience enlightened to make a conscientious judgment. “The interpretation of the Scripture...to discern God’s will for a man’s self in his own conscience,” Ames concluded, “belongs to every man.”⁵¹

Nevertheless, it should be noticed that Ames contended that moral law in the state of grace bound believers differently than unbelievers. In his *Marrow*, Ames maintained that natural law in substance “is the same as the moral law of the decalogue.”⁵² Presupposing this continuity of the law or the will of God, Ames refuted the view that the law of God has been

48. William Ames, *The Substance of Christian Religion: Or, A Plain and easie Draught of the Christian Catechisme* (London: Pr. by T. Mabb for Thomas Davies, 1659), 210.

49. Ames, *The Substance of Christian Religion*, 211.

50. Ames, *The Substance of Christian Religion*, 213.

51. Ames, *Conscience*, I. Summary, 55.

52. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.10.16.

abrogated for the faithful. Nevertheless, he admitted that the law of God functioned differently in different stages of redemption history:

It does not have the justifying power it had in the original state of integrity nor the condemning power it had in the state of sin. But it does have the force and vigor of a directing power; and it also retains a certain force of condemnation, for it reproves and condemns sin in the faithful (although it cannot wholly condemn the faithful themselves because they are not under the law but under grace).⁵³

In other words, while the law of God before the fall bound the conscience through its “justifying power” and after the fall through its wholly “condemning power,” it now, manifested as moral law, binds the believers who are under grace mainly through its “directing power,” as well as through its restricted force of evangelical condemnation. This is because what the law requires for believers in the covenant of grace is no longer legal obedience but evangelical obedience.⁵⁴ For that reason Ames reminded his readers that whenever they read about the new man or the new creature in Scripture, this evangelical obedience should always be in their mind.⁵⁵ This freedom of conscience from the bondage of guilt, accusation, and condemnation should also be each believer’s presupposition in his reading of Ames’s cases of conscience.

Conscience and Human Law

By human law, Ames chiefly meant civil law. Ames argued that whatever is not just and right is not law. Therefore, all the human laws are derived from the natural law to a certain degree, either as its direct application or by way of conclusion.⁵⁶ Since it is enacted by man and limited by human reason, Ames argued, “all human constitutions are of necessity liable to imperfection, error, and injustice.” Specifically, human laws are imperfect in the sense that they contain only a limited part of the natural law, and are subject to “addition, detraction, or correction.” Moreover, since they only aim at making good citizens instead of good men as natural law, human laws in function suppress only the outward actions which “disturb the peace and quiet of the common-wealth.”⁵⁷ This continuity and discontinuity of the

53. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, II.1.21.

54. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, II.1.33.

55. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.10.16.

56. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.22–24.

57. Ames, *Conscience*, V.1.25–26.

civil law with the natural law determines how far it could be said to bind the conscience. In fact, Ames clarified at the outset of his *De Conscentia* that “though men be bound in conscience by God to observe in due and just circumstances the laws of men, yet the same laws of men so far as they are man’s laws, *do not bind the conscience*.”⁵⁸

As shown above, Ames insisted that human law does not bind the conscience, even though he admitted the necessity of obeying them “in due and just circumstances.” Does that suggest that Ames held to an ambiguous and inconsistent teaching, as Davis argues?⁵⁹ The qualification that “men be bound in conscience by God” indicated that man’s observance of the human law ultimately should be attributed to the binding authority of God or the law of God, which was Ames’s consistent teaching throughout the book.

In his discussion of the obligations between magistrate and subjects in book 5, Ames addressed this theme again and insisted in the same manner that “nothing but the law of God does properly, directly, immediately, and by itself bind the conscience.... Yet nevertheless, human laws are to be observed *out of conscience towards God*.” That meant, as Ames further explained, “subjects are bound not to oppose them (human laws) out of contempt of authority” because the contempt of authority “is by itself a sin against the law of God.”⁶⁰ It is in this indirect and derivative sense that Ames spoke of the binding authority of human laws, which was more clearly manifested in Ames’s distinction between the human laws which “either urge or declare the Divine (law)” or “directly further the conservation thereof” and the other human laws which he believed were “purely human.” The former laws unquestionably “do bind even the conscience” because of their partaking of “the nature, and force of the Divine Law.” The other human laws “may be either just or unjust, or partly just and partly unjust,” and thus, they “do not so absolutely bind.”⁶¹ But even when such a just law of man did bind the conscience, Ames explained, “The violation then of such or such a Law, which is purely human, is not any special kind of sin, in respect of the matter of Law, but is only so far forth a sin, as it breaks the Law of general obedience.”⁶² Namely, the binding power comes not from the law itself, but from “the law of general obedience” instituted by God. Ames held, therefore,

58. Ames, *Conscience*, I.2.11.

59. Davis, “William Ames,” 349.

60. Ames, *Conscience*, V.25.18–20.

61. Ames, *Conscience*, V.25.21–22.

62. Ames, *Conscience*, V.25.23.

that human laws may and do bind the conscience, but they only bind derivatively, by the authority of divine law.

This point is also illustrated in Ames's support of the civil magistrate to suppress the heretics who err in conscience. According to Ames, the magistrate is instituted by God to be "the greatest of human powers," yet his power is limited by the will of God.⁶³ His primary duty, therefore, is to "promote true Religion, and repress impiety."⁶⁴ Naturally, the magistrate should, "according to the calling and power which he has received from God," restrain the heretics who are "manifestly known and publicly hurtful," even with the sword, if needed.⁶⁵ The reason Ames allowed the civil authority to violate the individual conscience was that the magistrate in this case represents the orthodox will of God to correct the false will of God represented by the heretics. Again, Ames believed what matters ultimately is the revealed will of God. The application of this principle could be seen in the trial of the antinomian Anne Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which Van Til considered to be the proof of Ames's and his followers' departure from Perkins.⁶⁶ But nothing could be further from the truth. Ames was simply following Perkins on this point, who stated explicitly that "it is the Magistrate's duty to compel recusants, schismatics, heretics, and such like, to the hearing and professing of the word" because the primary care of the magistrate is to have "the true religion be professed, and the contemnors thereof punished."⁶⁷ Both of the Puritans, therefore, recognized the true and derivative nature of the binding authority of human laws, whose apparent agreement was somehow missed by Van Til.

Conclusion

The following conclusions may be drawn from the above analysis. First, Ames should never be considered to be an innovator in his conception of conscience and its authority. On one hand, his definition of conscience as an act of practical judgment, his practical syllogism through which conscience operates, and his introduction of *synteresis* all demonstrate his continuity

63. Ames, *Conscience*, V.25.1–3.

64. Ames, *Conscience*, V.25.8.

65. Ames, *Conscience*, IV.4.12–15.

66. Van Til, *Liberty of Conscience*, 51.

67. William Perkins, *A Commentarie Or Exposition Upon The Five First Chapters Of The Epistle To The Galatians: penned by the godly, learned, and iudiciall diuine, Mr. W. Perkins. Now published for the benefit of the Church, and continued with a supplement vpon the sixth chapter, by Rafe Cudworth, Bachelour of Diuinitie* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1604), 615.

with the Thomist tradition. On the other hand, Ames closely followed his teacher, Perkins, by maintaining the revealed will of God as “the perfect and only rule of conscience,” which is specifically illustrated in his treatment of erroneous conscience.⁶⁸ The two Puritans’ distinct definitions of conscience did not affect their essential agreement on the authority of conscience. Therefore, Van Til’s notion of “the Amesian school” must be rejected. Misunderstanding the tradition of practical syllogism, Van Til’s interpretation is problematic, and fails to do justice to both Ames and Perkins.

Second, Ames did not hold an ambiguous view of freedom of conscience; rather, he consistently taught the revealed will of God or the divine law to be the only thing binding human conscience. While he believed that the will of God is revealed in the covenant of works as the natural law written in the heart of man, he also contended that because of the fall of man, it manifests itself in the covenant of grace as the moral law written in tables of stone. Representing the same revealed will of God, he held that the moral law is the same in substance as the natural law, and accordingly, binds the conscience universally and absolutely just as the natural law and the divine law do. The only difference is that, because of the special nature of the covenant of grace, the moral law binds Christians mainly through its “directing power” instead of the “justifying” and “condemning” power for unbelievers. Ames believed that since human laws derived from the natural law, they too may bind the conscience, but only indirectly and derivatively when they are just and right in accordance with the revealed will of God. Ames’s permission for the civil magistrate to punish heretics was the best example on this point. An erroneous conscience does bind the individual, yet the magistrate with a higher calling and authority from God is allowed to compel the erroneous conscience. In this way, Ames consistently upheld the authority of conscience over all purely human authority, yet always under the revealed will of God in its various manifestations. Projecting his modern natural-law theory onto Ames, Davis attempted to segment Ames’s natural-law teaching from its organic unity with divine law and moral law and the important theological context of covenant. His anachronistic proposal of an autonomous, liberal freedom of conscience in Ames was doomed to fail.

68. For Perkins’s similar treatment of erroneous conscience, see Perkins, *Works of William Perkins: Volume 8*, 54–55.