

## ET 2.1 – Introduction to Christian Ethics

### Short pieces relating to birth control, lying, and the recreational use of cannabis

#### A. Must We Always Tell the Truth? - John M. Frame

[http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh\\_frame/Frame.Ethics2005.MustWeAlwaysTelltheTruth.doc](http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_frame/Frame.Ethics2005.MustWeAlwaysTelltheTruth.doc)

The third and ninth commandments, especially, commend the truth to us, as do many other teachings of Scripture. God is a God of truth. He doesn't lie (Tit. 1:2, Heb. 6:17-18, Num. 23:19). He wants us to image him in that as in other ways. Note the biblical polemic against lying in such passages as Psm. 31:18, 63:11, 101:7, 119:29, 163, Prov. 6:17, 12:22, 19:5, 9, Zech. 8:16, Eph. 4:25, 1 John 2:21, Rev. 21:27, 22:15. Satan is the father of lies, John 8:44, and sinners are dominated by lies, Rom. 1:25, 3:8-18, 2 Cor. 4:2-4, 2 Thess. 2:9-12. Scripture condemns false prophets, who tell lies about God, Deut. 13:1-18.

But there are other passages in which people mislead other people without incurring biblical condemnation. Note:

1. Ex. 1:15-21, the Israelite midwives in Egypt.
2. Josh. 2:4-6, 6:17, 25, Heb. 11:31, James 2:25, Rahab's deception. Note that apart from what Rahab *told* her countrymen, even *hiding* the spies amounted to a deception.
3. Josh. 8:3-8, the ambush at Ai. As John Murray recognizes, God himself authorized this deception.
4. Judg. 4:18-21, 5:24-27, Jael and Sisera.
5. 1 Sam. 16:1-5, Samuel misleads Saul as to the reason for his mission.
6. 1 Sam. 19:12-17, Michal deceives her father's troops.
7. 1 Sam. 20:6, David's counsel to Jonathan.
8. 1 Sam. 21:13, David feigns madness.
9. 1 Sam. 27:10, David lies to Achish.
10. 2 Sam. 5:22-25, another military deceit.
11. 2 Sam. 15:34, Hushai counseled to lie to Absalom.
12. 2 Sam. 17:19-20, women deceive Absalom's men.
13. 1 Kings 22:19-23, God sends a lying spirit against Ahab.
14. 2 Kings 16:14-20, Elisha misleads the Syrian troops.
15. Jer. 38:24-28, Jeremiah lies to the princes.
16. Luke 24:28, Jesus acts as if he intends to go further.
17. 2 Thess. 2:11, God sends powerful delusion so that his enemies will believe a lie.

Nevertheless, the predominant view among Reformed Christians is that we should never tell lies under any circumstances. This view was held by Augustine and has more recently been defended by John Murray in *Principles of Conduct*.

Murray explains the above passages by the following principles: (1) In some of them, such as #2, Scripture commends what the liar accomplished without commending his/her lie. (2) As in #5, it is legitimate to withhold the whole truth from someone, but not to misrepresent. (3) As in #3, we need not always act in ways consistent with the mistaken interpretations of our acts made by others (in this case, the residents of Ai).

The first explanation is inadequate in regard to Rahab, for what Scripture commends is precisely her *concealment*, her creating a false impression in the minds of the Jericho officials.

As for the second principle, we can grant that it is sometimes right to withhold truth. But the question is whether it is ever right to withhold truth when withholding it may reasonably be expected to create a false impression in someone else's mind. If it does, as it did in 1 Sam. 16:1-5 and other passages on our list, then it can scarcely be distinguished from lying.

And the third principle depends on a sharp distinction between words that mislead and acts that mislead. Murray is saying in effect that we should never mislead with our words, but we may mislead people by the way we behave. That distinction is not cogent.

And none of these explanations helps us to understand why God himself deceives people in passages #13 and #17.

Charles Hodge says that we are obligated to tell the truth only when there is a “virtual promise.” Essentially, Hodge here is placing the burden of proof on those who wish to *require* truthfulness. But it is not clear what a virtual promise is, or what the criteria are for concluding that one has or has not been made.

Meredith Kline explains the biblical examples of deception as “intrusion.” In his view, the ethics of the end-times differ from the ethics God has given to us in the law and Jesus’ teaching. In normal times, we are to love our enemies and protect them. But in the end times, the enemies of God will have neither a right to life or a right to truth. Now sometimes, Kline says, the end times enter our present time (and so “intrude”). The intrusion is a time of divine judgment, and, in that time, it is legitimate to kill the opponents of God (as did Joshua and David) and also to withhold truth from them.

Scripture, however, does not distinguish two different ethics. Some of God’s commands (like God’s command to Joshua to kill the Canaanites) are for temporary situations. And Kline is right to say that often those situations are instances of special divine judgments. But capital punishment and just war are also subjects of regular, normative ethics. There are times even in advance of final judgment when the wicked deserve to lose their lives. Perhaps even such “normal capital punishment” can be assimilated to the intrusion model, but if so we need to know that intrusion is a normal part of our ethical life, as limited and defined by God’s revelation.

It does appear that the Bible passages listed above all have to do with the promotion of justice against the wicked who are seeking innocent life. Whether or not we speak of these as intrusions, we should note that in the ninth commandment the requirement to tell the truth is conditioned on a relationship, that of “neighbor.” In context, that relationship is specifically legal. The neighbor is the defendant, and the individual “you” is called to the witness stand, in which he must not lie.

This is not to say that the commandment is limited to legal witness, for many other Bible passages, as we have seen, condemn lying more generally. But in these passages, our obligation to tell the truth is based (as in the ninth commandment) on a relationship. In Eph. 4:25, the relationship is our union with one another in Christ.

Now when one person seeks illegitimately to take the life of another, are the two people neighbors, in the sense of the ninth commandment? The Good Samaritan parable does, indeed, extend the meaning of “neighbor” to all needy people who cross our path. But in the situation where someone is seeking to destroy innocent life, rather than to help and heal, does such a neighborly relation exist? I think not. At least, I doubt that those who misled others in the seventeen passages mentioned earlier were in a neighborly relation to their opponents. Certainly those who deceived in those passages didn’t think so. And I think Scripture concurs in their judgment.

There are also other, more trivial situations where questions of truth enter the discussion. Is it wrong to mislead people as a practical joke? No, if it’s a sort of game that will bring enjoyment; not if it hurts. Is it wrong to engage in the flatteries that are a normal part of social etiquette (“Sincerely yours,” “I had a lovely evening.”)? In my judgment, many of these phrases have come to mean far less than a literal reading of them would indicate. Since everybody knows that, it is not hypocrisy to use them that way.

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DF – some other considerations:

- a) we are not obliged to say everything about everything every time we speak. Our communications are necessarily marked by deletion, generalizations, selection, and framing;
- b) context – as seen above (deliberately deceiving in a rugby game etc). Frame touches on this above;
- c) what is being sought – if asked about how clothes look, what is being sought might be affirmation rather than information – e.g. not “I don’t like the colour” but, “you look lovely whatever you wear”;
- d) the use to which what is said will be put. In war, the enemy has already forfeited the right to life (by being guilty of murder / attempted murder) and may be thought, therefore, to have forfeited also the right to truth. Or, another example, if the use to which the truth is going to be put is itself sinful (murderous, for example) then I am under no obligation to give the truth;
- e) the person we are speaking to. Children may not be able to process some truth and so we withhold it from them. The same may be true of some patients. Love means seeking and working for the well-being of the other person and at times that well-being is not secured by telling them the truth;
- f) however, the temptation to “play God” and decide that we know best is great. So is the temptation to withhold truth for selfish reasons and then rationalize using one of the arguments above.

## **B. Some thoughts on Birth Control – DF**

Some think that it is wrong for Christians to use birth control. I disagree.

### **1. Use of birth control is not in itself a failure to trust in God**

If I said that "not jumping off high buildings and trying to fly is wrong because it is a failure to trust God" then you would protest that God has not commanded me to jump off off a high building and try to fly.

And you'd be right so to protest. Because claiming that failure to do something is a failure to trust God does not prove somehow that that something is a command of God. Rather it begs the question - "but has God commanded that?"

Trust relates to God's word. Only if God has commanded us to do something is a failure to do it a failure of trust. The "failure to trust God" line, then, doesn't constitute an argument against birth control - it just invites us to examine whether or not God has forbidden birth control.

### **2. God's command to us to be fruitful and multiply does not make all use of birth control wrong because affirmative duties cannot and should not be being performed constantly**

God commands us to be fruitful and multiply.

But we need to distinguish between negative and affirmative duties. Negative duties are those which require us not to do something. Such as "you shall not murder". And we are to be not-doing that something every minute of every day. Affirmative duties are those which require us to do something. But they do not require that we be doing that something every moment of every day. The command to feed the hungry does not mean that we are to be feeding the hungry every moment of every day. If we did then we would be disobeying other affirmative commands such as that of preaching the gospel, working with our hands, teaching our children, clothing the naked and so on.

An affirmative duty is therefore not binding upon all people to the utmost degree every moment of the day but is to be set in relation to other affirmative duties. Otherwise we'd be having sex all the time the wife was not pregnant - but then we'd not be feeding the poor, preaching the gospel etc. Jesus said "no" to the good thing of healing more people in Mark 1 so as to do the better thing of preaching in the next towns. He commended Mary for not doing the good thing of helping with the meal because she was doing the better thing of sitting at his feet and listening to his word.

Affirmative duties need prioritising and there are many good things which it would be sinful to do because doing them would mean neglecting better things. If screams are coming from a burning house on the other side of the road then to continue to climb the stairs in order to have sex in order to obey the command to be fruitful and multiply would be sinful.

### **3. God's command to us to be fruitful and multiply does not make all use of birth control wrong because we need to understand what the Bible says about fruitfulness**

God commands us to be fruitful and to multiply.

True, but we'd better be clear what this means. God intends a world populated by the righteous. This requires fruitfulness. Fruitfulness (as against barrenness) is a kingdom blessing. In the kingdom the eunuchs will have children (Is 54, 56, Luke 1.36, Ps 113 etc). But in the kingdom, some will make themselves (physical) eunuchs - how then will they enjoy kingdom blessings? (Matt 19) Is Jesus a fruitful tree (Ps 1) or not? If so, then fruitfulness may be by means other than physical procreation. And if by other means then it needs weighing up for a given couple at a given time which avenue of fruitfulness God intends for them - because they may be in conflict. Jesus, other single people, married couples who are not having sex for a while in order to pray (I Cor 7) are all obeying the command to be fruitful and multiply and yet they are all disobeying it *if* it can only be obeyed by physical procreation. Discipling the nations looks like a pretty good way, for example.

### **4. The fact that children are never seen in Scripture as anything other than a blessing does not mean that all use of birth control is wrong**

Some argue that all use of birth control is wrong because children are seen in Scripture as an unmitigated blessing - and it would be wrong to decline a blessing from God.

But all of God's good gifts are unmitigated blessings unless and until they are allowed to obstruct the performance of duties / receipt of greater blessings. And what was said about affirmative duties above (refusing the good in order to

do/receive the best) means that we do say "no" to good things. Once again, this begs the question. The eunuch for the sake of the kingdom declines the blessing of children and is commended for it.

(In fact, Jesus declares a woe on "those who are pregnant and those who are nursing infants" in the day of Jerusalem's destruction. It would seem that if asked, he would have said, "as the days for the Roman armies surrounding Jerusalem draw near, you'd do well to stop trying to have children". Luke 21.23)

### ***5. The fact that one of the prime functions of sex is procreation does not mean that all use of birth control is wrong***

Should sex always have as one of its intentions the production of offspring? Or should it always have that intention at points in the monthly cycle when conception is possible? It is not obvious that the fact that procreation is one of the key purposes of sex means that it is always the primary purpose or must always be a possibility. The physical union of Adam and Eve; the celebration of sex as fun in Song of Songs; the fact that sex points to the union of Christ and the church which itself is not about further progeny; the natural assumption that sex is a good thing even for those who are not fertile (barren, post-menopausal) - all these point to the possibility that sex without the possibility of or intention to have children is lawful.

### ***6. Hard cases may usefully clarify the issue though not necessarily proving the point that all use of birth control is wrong***

Lots of hard cases come to mind. Instances of what seem to us to be "over-large" families by reason of righteous paternal absence (he's fighting to defend the country); lack of space; one more baby and you'll die; recent diagnosis with terminal cancer etc.

Those who think that all use of birth control is wrong object to the use of such hard cases, protesting that all that is needed is obedience to the command to be fruitful and then complete trust that God will bless that obedience.

But do not the hard cases at least give us pause for thought? If a couple had a condition which meant that every child of theirs died within a fortnight of being born or a condition which meant that every child of theirs would be severely learning disabled, are they therefore obliged to carry on having as many children as possible? If the answer is that they should only have sex at moments in the monthly cycle when conception is not possible then the only difference between "anti-birth control" and "pro-birth control" would not be whether you are allowed to restrict the number of children you have but whether you are allowed to do so by artificial means. We don't want to go there ("natural" is good and "artificial" is bad) do we?

If you were a couple in a concentration camp where for the last 20 years every person stayed for 15 months and was then executed and every baby born was, at birth, mutilated and then killed, should you then proceed to try and have as many children as possible? If you can see one circumstance in which it would be legitimate not to try and have as many children as possible then it is clearly not binding upon all couples at all times. If you allow sex except where conception is a possibility you're back with the "natural is good", "artificial is bad" version of having non-procreative sex.

### ***7. A word of caution about binding consciences***

We should be slow to declare actions to be sinful which God has not declared to be sinful. The longer the chain of deduction, the more likelihood of human error having crept into it. The less explicit the command or prohibition of Scripture, the more reluctant we should be to bind the consciences of others. This is not an argument against the anti-birth control position as such. Just a caution.

### ***8. A word of appreciation***

Although, as explained, I do not believe that all use of birth control is wrong, nevertheless, its opponents are onto something important. A word of appreciation is in order.

Many of the anti-birth control people are appalled at the selfishness which characterises Christians' decisions about how many children they would "like". They are right to assert that kingdom priorities should take first place as we consider the size of family. They are also right to assert that in very many circumstances indeed, a large family is not only a great blessing but a great opportunity to grow the church. Christians' thinking has often been dominated by worldly attitudes and agendas. I believe that Christians who declare all use of birth control to be sinful are seriously muddled and unbiblical but I would rather have their kingdom priorities and endeavours to think biblically about every issue than the worldly selfishness of many of the rest of us.

### C. Recreational use of cannabis – thoughts for a mission agency

1. Smoking cannabis is wrong in the UK at the moment. It would be a sin for me to smoke cannabis today and I am committed to not doing so.
2. Smoking cannabis, even where it is legal, is far more often than not sinful for the following reasons:
  - it represents a biochemical solution to a spiritual and psychological/emotional need and to that extent can very easily become a false "saviour"
  - it very often occurs in social settings where concern to belong and to fit in is an unhelpful pressure
  - it very often has as at least a part of its motivation an element of the rebellious in it
  - it very often uses money which could have been put to better use - including better recreational use
  - it sometimes functions (behaviourally, not chemically) as a gateway to other drugs which are in and of themselves sinful
  - its recreational use involves the deliberate and almost immediate alteration of states of consciousness away from the alert and full possession of faculties which should normally characterise the Christian
  - it carries with it significant mental health risks (which, though medically proven, are stupidly denied or ignored by defenders of its use) for some people
3. If you ask me whether it is intrinsically sinful to smoke cannabis for recreational purposes - that is to say that in each and every circumstance for any and every person in the world at whatever level it is always and emphatically a sin as such to smoke cannabis, then I have to say 'no' I don't think it is. I think it is almost always sinful and almost always stupid (for the reasons given above) and I will ALWAYS strongly discourage it and I for one am never ever going to do it again. But to declare that it is in and of itself a sin in every possible circumstance would require a stronger biblical case than I have yet seen.
4. Thus, my main response to questions about the recreational use of cannabis would be, "Why?" What are you thinking about it for? Why would you want to do that? Don't you see how bright and multi-coloured and vibrant it is to be living all out for Christ? Don't you see the treasures of God's Word, of living for others, of being with Christians? Don't you see how many good foods and drinks and musics and games there are to give us physical enjoyment? Don't you see that there are better ways of feeling in or out, calm or confident, relaxed or fuzzy - God-given ways which don't carry all the danger and baggage of this? Why? Don't do it.
5. Even if it were the case that it was chemically exactly the same as alcohol (health risks / states of consciousness / risk of overuse/abuse) it would not BE the same as alcohol for the very important reason that God has commanded the use of alcohol
6. I further want you to know that although I would be very disappointed should this mean I could not serve in X, I am personally resolved that I shall never use cannabis again under any circumstances.
7. Ultimately, I want to serve God and be ruled by his Word. I want to be able to make the case from God's Word with complete faithfulness. If I think that there it is 99% sure that the Bible teaches that recreational use of cannabis is wrong then I neither want to pretend that it is 100% nor stupidly imply that it is only 95%. I also recognise that there are issues of spiritual headship and submission here so that in terms of my practice and my teaching I am willing to be led by the mission's position. But it would be wrong for me to mislead you and suggest that I am 100% certain when in fact I am not.