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Shrewd as a Snake, Innocent as a Dove: The Ethics of Missionary Dissimulation and Subterfuge

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**“SHREWD AS A SNAKE, INNOCENT AS A DOVE:”
THE ETHICS OF MISSIONARY DISSIMULATION AND SUBTERFUGE
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*“Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—
why destroy yourself?
Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—
Why die before your time?
It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other.
The man who fears God will avoid all extremes.”
Ecclesiastes 7:16-18*

Whenever I quote the above passage to my students as an illustration of the Bible’s ambiguity with respect to ethics, reactions always seem to be directed toward the phrase: “*do not be overwicked...*” The question is raised, usually with a timid smile: “Does this mean I can be a little bit wicked, then?”

Many Christians would have no trouble answering such a query: it would never be permissible to be “a little bit wicked.” More thoughtful Christians will ask the question, “What did Solomon mean by this statement? Why would he seemingly indicate that one can be ‘overly righteous’ and/or ‘overly wise?’ Is that even possible? And what, then, would it mean to be ‘overly wicked?’ Is it not preferable that we remain ‘black or white’ in our approach to ethical decisionmaking? Would it not be better to be ‘hot or cold,’ as opposed to ‘lukewarm?’”

For many, I’m sure, a simplistic extremism is preferable to the kind of ambiguity found in Ecclesiastes. But the Bible reflects a worldview that is much more complex than the “black and white” molds into which many Christians generally try to squeeze everything. The Word of God often speaks in terms of “tensions” and “paradoxes;” seemingly irresolvable “contradictions” that force us to deviate from our predispositions and launch out into the sometimes relativistic world of “the real.”

The Ambiguity of Old Testament Ethics

With respect to the tensions that exist within the realm of Biblical ethics, there are several examples that may be used to illustrate the complexity of Godly decisionmaking. We often take points of law or principle and apply them in certain ways, concluding that God is pleased by such applications and that these renderings should be required of all. A majority of Christians would insist, for instance, that according to the commandment that forbids one to “*bear false witness against one’s neighbor,*” God is NOT pleased when we lie, or when we speak less than or other than “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” But a careful examination of the Bible’s narratives will most likely lead us to the conclusion that things are not always so simple in God’s economy.

A case in point is that of the Hebrew midwives Shiprah and Puah, who, when commanded to kill all the male infants born to Hebrew mothers, “*feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live*” (Exodus 1:17). When questioned by Pharaoh as to why they disobeyed his direct orders, their reply was that the Hebrew women gave birth more quickly than Egyptian women and that they (the midwives) were unable to arrive in time to carry out the genocidal directive (1:19). While this might have been true in some cases, it is exceedingly doubtful that it would have been true in *all* cases. Consequently the judgment of commentators is that the midwives either blatantly lied to Pharaoh or at least distorted the truth. Whichever was the case, “*God was kind to the midwives...he gave them families of their own.*” So—did the God who “*cannot lie*” (Numbers 23:19) commend the distortion of “truth” in this case?

Then there is the story of Rahab the prostitute who hid the Hebrew spies and blatantly lied to her questioners regarding them: “*Yes, the men came to me, but I did not know where they had come from. At dusk, when it was time to close the city gate, the men left. I don’t know which way they went...*” (But she had taken them up to the roof and hidden them under the stalks of flax... (Joshua 2:4-6).” Here is an incontrovertible case of lying and deception. But despite this form of subterfuge, Rahab was considered sufficiently worthy to become one of the human ancestors of Christ (Matthew 1:5) and had her name recorded in the Hebrews “Hall of Faith” (11:31).

Another passage is that of 1 Kings 22:20-23, in which God seeks a means of luring the evil king Ahab to his death. After several suggestions, “*a spirit came forward, stood before the Lord and said, ‘I will entice him.’ ‘By what means?’ the Lord asked. ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouths of all his prophets,’ he said. ‘You will succeed in enticing him,’ said the Lord. ‘Go and do it.’*” So here we have a case in which God not only condones lying but commands it.

Providing a case of “Biblical tension,” however, is the situation with Abram and his wife Sarai. “*As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ They will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you...’ But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai*” (Genesis 12:11-13, 17). Here is a case where dissimulation and subterfuge were *not* blessed by God. Abram comes across as a somewhat cowardly misogynist who is rebuked by a heathen ruler at God’s instigation.

The Ambiguity of New Testament Ethics

It may be argued by some that under the New Covenant, conditions would necessarily be of a more stringent character than under the Old. In the Sermon on the Mount, for instance, Jesus expresses a much higher standard for Christian conduct than what was required for the Children of Israel (Matthew 5:17-48). But in the same narrative is recorded Jesus’ command to his disciples to be as “*shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves*” when they moved out among the people to whom they were to bring the message of the Kingdom. The snake, of course, has always been symbolic of Satanic evil. The directive to the disciples, then, is one that certainly has an “edge” to it; being “*shrewd as a snake*” would imply that one is to be sly, cunning, and crafty; perhaps even a bit “shady” at times. Certainly at the very least it implies being extremely “street-smart”—able to navigate the decisionmaking process while living among non-Christian people.

A similar exhortation to “shrewdness” is found in Luke 16:1-15. Here Jesus relates a parable that appears to cast in a positive light a wastrel manager who adopts a very questionable strategy of “*making friends for himself through use of worldly wealth.*” In actuality, Jesus is complimenting the man’s *shrewdness*—not necessarily his actions. The point of the parable is that Christians should be much more sly, cunning, and crafty in their dealings with fellow humans than they generally are. Jesus’ words are essentially an indictment of Christians for their naivete and (often) immaturity and childishness in interpersonal relationships. He considers non-Christians generally to be more adept than Christians in relating to fellow human beings—and this should not be the case for “*the children of the light.*”

We find Jesus practicing this sort of shrewdness himself in such situations as that seen in John 7:8-14. Given his public persona at this point in his ministry, he was expected to attend the Feast of Tabernacles. But he told his brothers, “*You go to the Feast. I am not going up to this Feast, because for me the right time has not yet come.*” The text records that “*having said this, he stayed in Galilee. However, after his brothers had left for the Feast, he went also, not publicly, but in secret...Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach.*” So there was a secretiveness, a definite “shrewdness” about his actions from time to time. When he healed individuals, and when he revealed himself as Messiah to his disciples, such actions were invariably accompanied by the command to “*tell no one.*”

On the other side of the equation, we would want to examine the evaluation by the apostle Paul of his own attempt at “shrewdness” during his trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin. “*...[K]nowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, he called out in the Sanhedrin, ‘My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead’*” (Acts 23:6). One would have to stretch things *very* far to see this statement as in any sense “true,” since Paul was actually charged with insurrection and inciting to riot. His somewhat dubious ploy succeeded; his claim led to a theological debate between the opposing parties. But before long, his conscience and/or the Holy Spirit apparently convicted him regarding his outcry. In Acts 24:20-21 he “confesses” this subterfuge as something which might be “*held against him*”—at least a mistake, and perhaps even a decision made in defiance of the law of God. It seems that Paul recognized that what he had said was not the truth, and he was in essence apologizing for the claim.

So—what can we conclude? Are God’s requirements with respect to “openness” and “honesty” absolute and unbending? Or are they sometimes “flexible?” Is it permissible to be “a little bit wicked” on occasion? If this were a perfect world there would be little doubt that we should take unbending and absolutist positions in any and all situations. But this world is far from perfect—the human race is mired deeply in its sinfulness both at the individual and at the societal/institutional level, and because of the instances recorded in Scripture noted above, we are forced to think differently about such things than would perhaps be our theological preference. *Generally* speaking, God has ethical standards that he requires and expects his people to obey to the letter. The principles (or “laws,” if one prefers) revealed in his Word are absolute in the sense of being supra-cultural and supra-temporal, because they are essentially a reflection of his immutable nature and character. To go against such principles and laws is offensive to him and arouses a deep anger within him. But it seems that God *sometimes*—on rare occasions—allows, and even honors, certain forms of what many would consider deceit, lies, subterfuge, and dissimulation.

Ethical Decisionmaking in Missiological Contexts

Does God make exceptions to his general principles when the overarching purpose of an action is sufficiently meritorious? Specifically, if such purposes or goals are *missiologically* motivated? There are, of course, many different ethical situations that missionaries are confronted with. This essay will be limited to dealing with a sampling of “macro-issues” along with a handful of “micro-issues” that may fall under each of the following categories.

- “Tentmaking”—offering to perform a non-ministerial type of work as a means of gaining access to a “closed” or “limited-access” country with the ultimate goal of communicating the Gospel message. Is it ethical to pass oneself off as an aid worker or an ESL teacher when one’s primary motivation for entering a country is to preach the Gospel of Christ?
- “Contextualization”—adapting missionary personnel, the gospel message, discipling techniques, aspects of theology and ecclesiastical structures to a foreign context in order better to communicate one’s message. Is it ethical to “become anything and everything to a culture in order to win the more to Christ?” Is it ethical to “change” the message of the Gospel to make it more “acceptable” to a target culture? Is it permissible to adopt any and every cultural custom in order to make new converts “feel at home” in the Christian faith?
- New adaptive movements such as “Messianic Judaism” and “Jesus Mosques”—involving retention of a national or even religious identity in order to avoid the negative consequences of openly declaring oneself to be a follower of Christ. Is it ethical to pass oneself off as a “Jew” or a “Muslim”—to the point of even separating oneself from persons who call themselves “Christians”—when one in actuality is indeed a born-again believer in Jesus Christ?

“Tentmaking”

“Tentmaking” could very easily be considered a form of subterfuge or dissimulation. A person gains access to a country that is technically “closed” to overt missionary activity through the practice of a “secular” trade or profession in that particular country. Teaching English as a Second Language, functioning as an educator in a non-religious field, serving as a relief or development worker, as a physician or nurse, as a businessperson—none of these activities is openly “religious” or ministerial in orientation. A Christian “tentmaker” plies his trade or profession during “the day,” so to speak, and in his free time establishes relationships and builds contacts for the purpose of communicating the Gospel of Christ.

In one sense, of course, such an approach is perfectly legitimate. One must certainly have valid credentials (i.e., academic degrees, skills and/or training) in order to receive permission to enter and work in limited access countries, and one must perform one’s “job” at a certain level of competence if one is to be permitted to stay over a longer period of time. In this sense the person is doing what he or she was contracted to do. But from the standpoint of ethics, if the host government of such a nation was aware of the person’s primary motivation for entering the country (i.e., to bring about religious conversions), would that government have given permission to enter? If the answer is “no” and the person is aware that the answer would have been “no,” then the person has essentially used subterfuge to enter.

This kind of situation may not be problematic so long as the visa or work permit application does not ask concerning one's motivations for entering the country, or does not specifically restrict one from "religious proselytization." But what if the paperwork includes such questions or prohibitions? Is a bit of "data dropout" justifiable in such cases? Or even an outright falsehood—"for the sake of the Gospel?" If we are withholding data in order to establish or maintain our freedom to act on behalf of Kingdom concerns, could such an approach be seen as essentially the same as that which Jesus adopted when he repeatedly told different groups *not* to reveal his true identity? Those he healed were not to tell anyone who healed them (Matt. 8:4, 12:16). Evil spirits who recognized him were prohibited from saying who he was (Mark 3:12). And all of his disciples were commanded not to let it be known that he was the Messiah (Matt. 16:20).

So, then, would a case requiring "data dropout" be a situation in which "*we must obey God rather than men* (Acts 5:29)?" Or should it be viewed as a case where "*everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established...he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves* (Romans 13:1-2)?"

Might I suggest that the consciences of various Christians could conceivably be "tuned" to different "allowance levels," by which I mean that the consciences of some might be more attuned to the Acts passage, while others may adhere more strictly to the Romans 13 passage? In such cases, might it not be permissible to allow those with "Acts 5 consciences" to apply for entry to "closed countries" on a basis that "Romans 13 consciences" would not find acceptable? I would be surprised to learn that such differences did *not* exist among the twelve apostles. Simon the Zealot, for instance, who was the closest thing to a "terrorist" in his day, most likely had a conscience very differently "formatted" from that of, say, Nathanael—"a true Israelite in whom there was nothing false."

"Contextualization"

Essentially, the concept of "contextualization" involves adaptation of specific aspects of Christian theology and lifestyle to the institutions and beliefs of various (usually non-Western) cultures. Here the question is asked, "If my adaptation of certain theological concepts or lifestyle issues is rooted in a desire to attract indigenous persons to the faith, how far am I permitted to 'bend' my theology and lifestyle in order to accommodate and (hopefully) win those persons? Am I permitted, for instance, to 'submerge' or 'downplay' certain aspects of Biblical faith which may prove to be 'stumbling blocks' to the people of a particular culture for the sake of winning a convert, hoping that 'later' I might be able to 'correct' or 're-work' those aspects, bringing them into closer conformity to biblical requirements? Or should I be 'up front' about such matters from the beginning, to produce a 'truer' convert from the start?"

Paul's testimony in 1 Corinthians 9:20-22 is the basis for nearly all matters of contextualization: "*To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law...so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law...so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.*" But how far would Paul have been willing to push this philosophy? Surely he would not have advocated that a Christian become "a prostitute for the sake of reaching prostitutes?" Or "a thief in order to win thieves?"

Perhaps an examination of some "micro-issues" would help us to establish parameters for contextualization. Take, for instance, the issues of "bribery" and "smuggling." With respect to the former, the Bible is actually ambivalent regarding the practice of "paying money under the table," as it were. Ecclesiastes 7:7 states that "*extortion turns a wise man into a fool, and a bribe corrupts the heart,*" mirroring the Mosaic Law which prohibits the practice, "*for [it] blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous* (Exodus 23:8)." The book of Proverbs, however, offers a different evaluation of the practice: "*A bribe is a charm to the one who gives it; wherever he turns, he succeeds* (17:8);" and "*a gift given in secret soothes anger, and a bribe concealed in the cloak pacifies great wrath*" (21:14). So—does the Bible permit and approve of bribes? Or does it forbid them?

Our answer to this question must certainly be contextual and deal with the two factors of *motivation* and *situation*. We would judge that the payment of money or goods for the purpose of gaining permission to carry out an activity that is in strict violation of a biblical law or precept would be impermissible. Such a situation would certainly fall under the category defined by Ecclesiastes as "*corrupting*" and by Exodus as "*blinding and twisting the*

words of the righteous.” On the other hand, money or goods bestowed for the purpose of “smoothing the way” for a biblically *legitimate* activity (or, at least, an activity not prohibited by the Bible) might better be seen as a “tip” (i.e., a reward given for special service), and would therefore fall under the category of the kind that “*soothes anger*” or “*pacifies great wrath.*”

With respect to the issue of “smuggling” (i.e., the carrying of items such as Bibles clandestinely across borders), Biblical revelation may be said to be ambiguous. Acts 5:29 states: “*We must obey God rather than men!*”—a passage often used by advocates of smuggling. However, there are highly questionable assumptions being made when this passage is invoked. One such assumption would be that Christians are under a command from God to place a Bible into the hands of every person on this planet as part of the Great Commission. That we are commanded to “*make disciples in all nations*” and to “*preach the Gospel to every creature*” is unquestionable. But the preaching of the Word of God took place all through the 1400 years that preceded the invention of the printing press which allowed the mass production of Bibles—and with relatively great success. Can we insist, then, that “Bibles must be placed into the hands of every person—even if this means smuggling them”—in order to fulfill Christ’s command?

“Messianic Jews” and “Messianic Muslims”

Messianic Judaism and “Jesus Mosques” have been controversial partly because of questions raised regarding the integrity of those who have become members of these movements. Is being a “Messianic Jew” or a “Messianic Muslim” a form of dissimulation that is essentially a betrayal of biblical requirements for followers of Christ? Or is it merely being “true to one’s heritage” in a way that preserves kinship networks that will facilitate additional contacts for the sake of the Gospel?

Messianic Judaism is a movement that sprang up in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. While some Jewish-background believers justify retention of their Jewishness by classifying their activities and customs as strictly *cultural*, for many “retaining their Jewishness” has also meant retaining *religious* customs derived from the Mosaic covenant or from rabbinic (i.e., post-exilic or Diaspora) Judaism. In addition, a large number of non-Jewish believers have become enamored of the so-called “Jewish roots” of the Christian faith and have tried to incorporate many aspects of Jewish worship into otherwise traditional Protestant worship services.

Problematic is the fact that many of the practices of rabbinic Judaism have been developed by Jews in a state of unbelief, and therefore such practices should be treated no differently than those of other non-Christian religions. The “portable Judaism” developed by Johanan ben Zakkai and his successors represents a humanistic religious development that retains certain elements of Old Testament Judaism but which goes beyond these and, in many cases, completely reinterprets them. Many of the rituals connected with holidays, the development of and dependence upon Talmudic commentary—all of these items have appeared separately from the revelation of the One True God. A case in point: rabbinic Judaism requires a Jewish male to wear a skullcap when participating in a synagogue assembly; prayers and other religious activities may only be carried out while his head is covered. The New Testament, on the other hand, forbids a male to wear any kind of headcovering while performing religious functions (1 Corinthians 11: 4). When forced to choose between the two conflicting traditions, which will the Messianic Jew follow? In every case that I am personally aware of, the choice has been made to follow the rabbinical practice instead of the New Testament requirement—a highly troublesome decision.

As for rituals derived from the Mosaic Covenant, the book of Hebrews pronounces such practices to be *obsolete* (Hebrews 8:13). They are no more than *shadows* in comparison with the spiritual realities entrusted to the Christian Church (Hebrews 10:1-10). To continue to participate in that which the Bible calls “obsolete” is, I believe, at best questionable, and at worst foolish. By Jesus’ own command, new wine is not to be put into old wineskins, and an old garment is not to be patched with cloth from a new one (Matthew 9:16-17).

In addition to the above illustration, let me suggest two other problems. First is the vehement hatred for Messianic Judaism that Orthodox, Hasidic, and Conservative Jews generally display. While Messianic Jews insist that their approach is justified because of “the large number of Jews it has brought to Christ,” other observers have noted that an equally large or even greater number have been lost to the Gospel message due to an inability to overcome the offense that Messianic Judaism gives.

Second, an emphasis upon retention of one's "Jewishness" essentially violates the principle of Ephesians 2:11-21 and Galatians 3:28. The apostle Paul makes it clear in these passages that followers of Christ constitute a "third race," the members of which are no longer to be distinguished as either "Jew" or "Gentile." To distinguish oneself as a "Messianic Jew" is actually as meaningless as it would be to try and distinguish oneself as a "Messianic American."

Even more disturbing to me than Messianic Judaism, however, is what is often called the "Jesus mosque" phenomenon. Within this movement, some missionaries to countries where Islam is the predominant religious expression call themselves "Muslims," justifying this usage with the claim that the word "muslim" simply means "one who is submitted to God"—a claim that (hopefully) all Christians can make. New believers in such contexts are never referred to as "Christians" or "converts;" they remain "Muslims." They often choose not to associate with historic Christian churches in countries where such communities exist. In keeping with this policy, baptisms are either delayed, performed clandestinely, or dispensed with altogether, since this practice would serve to segregate new believers from their society. Islamic forms of worship are retained, including worship in structures called "mosques." The five daily prayers are prayed at the exact times that the Muslims pray. The main worship service is held on Friday, as is the custom of Islam, rather than on Sunday.

Muslim leaders are outraged by such deception, considering it unworthy of "spiritually-minded" persons. From the standpoint of New Testament Christianity, it is difficult to see how these believers could have any sense of "separation," or of being "*called out of darkness into light*," as the New Testament so clearly directs (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Is it ethical, then, to retain any aspect of one's "former status or condition" in order to preserve one's situation—or even one's life in the case of converts to Islam—upon acknowledging the Lordship of Christ? Subjecting such practices to two specific questions could go a long way in avoiding the problems discussed above:

1. Do my status or activities involve adoption or retention of specifically *religious* items or practices? In other words, in claiming to be a Messianic Jew or a "Jesus Muslim," am I incorporating aspects of rabbinic Judaism or of classical or folk Islam in order to establish my identity as a "special" or "distinct" kind of follower of Christ? If so, then I believe that I fall short of the standards required by Deuteronomy 12:4.
2. Or do my status and activities involve retention of *cultural* items which could be judged as essentially "neutral?" If upon careful examination and even discussion with indigenous persons regarding the meaning assigned to specific practices I discover that there are no religious connotations to these, then I may choose to adopt such practices as a means of more closely identifying with my target audience in accordance with 1 Corinthians 9:22-23.

Motivation and Martydom

For what purposes do missionary personnel or those they bring to Christ indulge in dissimulation and subterfuge? What if the motivation is to preserve one's life—or the lives of others? May Christians practice what Muslims term *taqiyya*—withholding truth, "bending" truth, or blatantly stating an untruth in order to avoid persecution or death? Or should the New Testament and historical Church traditions of *martyrdom* trump such concerns? Are missionary personnel using dissimulation and subterfuge as ways of being "shrewd as snakes?" Or are they doing so out of a failure of courage and a desire for self-preservation? Should Christians today be willing to face the possibility of a painful death, knowing that such a consequence may constitute the only *ultimately consistent and dynamically powerful* testimony that would be necessary to bring, say, Muslims to Christ?

In a Muslim context where conversion to a different faith carries the death penalty, converts fear for their lives and often refuse or are unable to gather in assemblies. Do we then advise such converts to adopt the "Jesus mosque" strategy, to remain "undercover," and participate in activities as though they were still vitally connected to the Islamic faith? Do we seek to preserve the life of converts at any cost? Or do we advise them to obey the command of Jesus *not to "hide their light under a bowl,"* even if such exposure comes at the risk of their lives?

Ramon Llull (1232-1315) answered this question when he gave himself unstintingly to a mission among North Africa's Muslims—and paid with his life relatively early in his career. Some have judged that the benchmark

he established has led to the slowly accelerating success of ministries to Muslims in that part of the world. Perhaps this is what the Church of Jesus Christ needs: men of the kind that Wesley spoke of “*who fear God and nothing else, and who hate sin and nothing else.*” Such men would not hesitate to put themselves in harm’s way if need be.

Several years ago the mission agency Frontiers printed posters that my students hung on the walls of their dormitory rooms to inspire them to concentrate more devotedly on their missiological studies. The posters featured the faces of unreached people groups in limited-access countries, framed by the gripping statement:

**“THERE ARE NO CLOSED COUNTRIES—
AS LONG AS YOU’RE NOT WORRIED ABOUT COMING BACK...”**

It is likely, I think, that our ethical decisionmaking would become much simpler if it was based upon such a sentiment. Let us, then, put our hands to the plow, and not look back to the things behind.